

Craig Calhoun, Riccardo Emilio Chesta

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(doi: 10.2383/89513)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2017

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# Sociology and Its Public

## Craig Calhoun in Conversation with Riccardo Emilio Chesta

by Craig Calhoun *and* Riccardo Emilio Chesta

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### 1. Introduction

In this interview, Craig Calhoun retraces his peculiar trajectory that, from his first interests in realist cinema and anthropology, brought him to become one of the most original contemporary public sociologists.

Discussing his multidisciplinary education between Columbia, Manchester and Oxford he reassembles his own particular intellectual path that mixes his youth activism in the peace movement and engagement in the Western Marxist debate of the 1970s, while at the same time studying Hegel, German classic philosophy and Continental social theorists.

But it is through these apparent digressions that his peculiar way of practicing social research took shape. From his first anthropological inquiries on the Tallensi in Ghana and on the historical sociology of working class movements, Calhoun's incursions into different disciplinary fields do indeed constitute his critical approach to social sciences that always tries to trace back the specific and contextual outcomes of empirical research to general historical-sociological dynamics.

In Calhoun's view, realist cinema and the art of documentary are not simple occasional curiosities or forms of escapes, but a way to observe and analyze reality common to the sociological gaze. The art of constructing objects of investigation as it is practiced in the documentary films of Frederik Wiseman is in this sense comparable to the act of choosing the lens as theorized in the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, the

two being similar moments of constructing social objects of study in their relative fields.

It is particularly in the British academic context that Calhoun encounters Bourdieu's theory of practices and thanks to which he composed his particular way of doing sociology that mixes the European critical tradition, British social anthropology, and American empirical research.

But far from being a linear and coherent strategy, this interview also shows how intellectual life is made of serendipity and unexpected encounters. In a telling anecdote, the discovery of Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* [1972] by the student Calhoun is described in terms of an intellectual revelation at a train station bookshop in Manchester.

Moreover, during the conversation Calhoun outlines how, since the first researches on Nineteenth-century working-class radicalism, he has tried to put together elements of Habermasian theory of the public sphere with Bourdieusian theory of fields, American sociology of social movements with Thompson's moral economy, in his project to reconstruct a culturally and historically grounded sociology.

In this interview Calhoun identifies the requirements for a critical sociology that, avoiding to be reduced to an abstract theorizing or a new academic specialization, can fulfill its role of scientific discipline and public utility. Fragmentation in sub-disciplines and increasingly atomistic analysis, as well as the diffusion of a "star system" and a mediatic intellectual, are indeed two opposite symptoms of a crisis in the professional scope and public mission of contemporary sociology.

Finally, without reducing social sciences to a mere form of academic expertise or a mediatic discourse among the others, Calhoun here outlines the idea of a sociological practice that should be able to critically and synthetically reflect on its own limits and possibilities, while applying its scientific instruments to the relevant social transformations of our time and to better inform the public.

## 2. Conversation

Department of Sociology, Puck Building, New York,  
30 March, 2017

**Riccardo Emilio Chesta (REC):** Let me start from a personal scientific question. What is interesting about your profile is that part of your educational training in cinema studies. You somehow described how your passion for documentaries, or realist films, shaped your sociological imagination. I would like to know how exactly it shaped your choice to become a sociologist.

**Craig Calhoun (CC):** I came to public sociology very early, interested in a way of exploring social issues that could be shared more widely than the usual sociological work was from early on. And then so, I would say, a path which I started with an interest in wider circulation of thinking about society became more conventionally academic and then returned to the enduring interest in a broader circulation. And then I am interested in documentary and realistic cinema.

I am also interested in more fictional work and the interplay between imaginative work and empirically-grounded descriptive work. And getting something on the relationship between science fiction accounts of dramatic changes of artificial intelligence and the actual corrections of what's going on. Not just that they predicted it but how did they influence. What was the relationship between the producers of artificial intelligence and science fiction? And how much does doing something creative depend on being able to imagine something that doesn't exist? As well as documentaries did. My engagement in cinema led me directly to anthropology and only indirectly to sociology.

There's a stronger tradition of ethnographic films such as documentary films in anthropology, the media and at the interplay between the two than there is in sociology. And the fact that most of anthropology has focused on the exotic distant, others encourage thinking about individually as well as analytically. I think that visual sensibility is good. It's not just that we should have films of sociological questions, is that we should do work that enhances a visual understanding, a visual source of knowledge. And that is part of not restricting oneself to what is expressed in words or in statistics.

That's also in relation to Bourdieu and his critique of the scholastic fallacy. Not merely a technique for communicating, but a technique for watching and listening and getting outside of the projection of academic ways of seeing the world into everybody. So, the kind of documentary films that particularly interested me involved lots of watching and listening. Shooting many more feet of film than you actually edited into the final film because you were recording what was going on to be able to see and to situate.

Frederick Wiseman often started by going around, hanging out, in a fact doing ethnography but with cameras, without filming them at the beginning, partly just to get everybody used to the camera in the room, partly as he was coming to see what he wanted to film. That is a very important moment in sociology that is not given enough attention, the moment of constructing the object of study, of figuring out what you want to look at, of choosing your lens literally in the sense of cinema but metaphorically in sociology.

People tend to discard that the standard canons of the scientific methods of research do not pay much attention to public formation. They tend that has to be as-

sumed and they ask what definition, what method, what theory... But actually problem formation is probably the most basic and it is also crucial to this project of a more public sociology that we think about that from the time of problem formation, that we not let just a question of communication after we have done a research, but that is part of how we think what is significant to study.

**REC:** In this case you address a critique to the proliferation of methodologies, technical gadgets in contemporary social research because basically they miss the ontological part, the premise, or the idea that the method is used depending on the way you decide to look at the object. This idea of constructing the object and the act of choosing the lens is clearly part of the epistemology of Bachelard and Canguilhem, and ultimately the foundations of Bourdieu's sociology. How did you basically decide to reconvert to the sociological field? Which authors were inspiring you?

**CC:** I'll answer the question, but let me first quibble with the question. You imply a completely intellectual transformation influenced by great theorists, and I was. But this was happening biographically in the course of my life and so the influences are not all just abstract or intellectual things.

There are many things when you ask about cinema. Well, if I'd been incredibly talented in it, I might have been doing that! [*Laugh*] But I was more talented in the social sciences than at the employment of cinema. So the cause is one of being interested in engaging the nature of the social world and how it works in a political and social change perspective on it. Of course I went to university in 1969, so it's in the later part of the 1960s movements and all the things that were going on, the peace movement and everything else.

The idea of social engagement is not anything distinctive to me. It was in the air, I was active in student politics and, as you said, with films. I fell in love very quickly with anthropology, and it was really an experience of falling in love. Taking a class, and just being enthusiastic, like "Yes, this is how I see the world," and my harnessing... my eager desire to see the world, to understand more through anthropology. There could have been something else I could have fallen in love with, but it was a combination of having a great first exposure to it, with opportunities to do more things in it and how it fit with my pre-existing dispositions and desires.

But it was very much anthropology, not sociology. I have always maintained that the differences between the two are more differences of style than substance, they could be much more closely related and in my formation they are very closely related. So I very strongly engaged with anthropology but with a specific version of anthropology – sometimes called British social anthropology – and also with social theory.

So most anthropology at this time, did not engage that much with social theory in a more philosophical end of things which also interested me. I continued with anthropology but became more interested in social theory. What drew me to sociology was partly this interest in social theory, including anthropological theory that has been able to explore a wider part of social theory. As it happens, that transit has not been as big a part of sociology as I would wish, so it was a rather specific angle to it and it was driving me also to philosophy.

The same interest in widely-understood theory would draw me to read Hegel and attend the lectures of Charles Taylor, that would draw me also to some parts of sociology and I was very much formed by some features of anthropology, like trying to look at the interrelationships of all the different aspects of the social contexts, so holism in the classic ethnographies, which I critique a lot but that is something powerful about that idea to see all the different connections. The comparative moment, which most anthropologists and most sociologists don't do, trying to look across and ask therefore why should it be this way, why should Europe and the US being different, why should Africa or this African society or that group within African society be different. So, from early on I was interested in that issue of similarities and differences across settings.

I was also interested in history, so I would describe my formation as being interested in cinema, in writing, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, history... rather promiscuously moving around these different fields. I've had a hard time settling on one of them. The only one in the beginning that I just identified as the one I really wanted to follow was anthropology but I kept moving around and trying to connect all of them in a way all through my career.

The kind of anthropology that I was drawn to – the teachers, the early big influence on me and then Max Gluckman – represents the kind of anthropology that is not done very much any more! So in a way anthropology moved in a different direction, and I was more able to continue the same interests in sociology and in historical interests.

How I got to this involved physical moves. I went to Columbia University but then I went to England. This exposed me to different things and including the extent to which, as similar as England and America are, there were differences in what was going on... differences in social movements and fields. So – as in the US before – I got very involved in England in the Peace Movement. That was a deep commitment for me. The Anti-War Movement, the Peace Movement.

I would not have described myself as Marxist. I went to England and I got involved more in socialism and marxism and it changed my identification, this affected my intellectual life as well. It's not just I read Marx and I understood it. I got engaged

in the question of “What produces a social transformation?” and the subordinate question: “Why is it that huge movements, where people seem to be passionate, can fade away?”

So, part of my experience of the 1960s is the end of the 1960s. That as enormous as the social movements, and the participation, and the cultural change, and the demonstrations of the decade are, they fairly rapidly fade away and we wind up with a growing conservative mood and some people changed their affiliations, some stopped being active. That made me interested in looking at other historical movements and the way the change worked.

Something that shaped all the work that I’ve been interested in is trying to combine a historical perspective with a sociological perspective. Then, I found a sort of *métier* at that point, shaped by an engagement in social movements and public life and shaped by the move to England and the project of understanding something to which I was not quite native.

**REC:** So, apart from this early period of engagement in the Peace Movement, would you say that you were basically becoming a sociologist in a period of disengagement?

**CC:** Or a period of great engagement! I would say a period of disenchantment with established institutions but a great deal of social engagement, a very passionate social engagement, and I was very passionate about learning all of this. I felt I didn’t have all the education I eagerly wanted to get. So, reading classical social theory like Durkheim, Weber, Levi-Strauss, Adams Pritchard... I was very energetically appropriating them in an intellectual training for myself, which meant that I was a sort of autodidact; that had great teachers, but that my training was not guided by the sociology curriculum – by what you should know in sociology – or the anthropology curriculum, or the philosophy curriculum.

I read huge amounts of each. I was able to go to classes with some of the great figures in each but I didn’t follow standard course study. I was pulling together things with one thing that would have taken me to another. So, my reading of Marx, in England, reading all *Das Capital* very carefully, early Marx, then reading Marxist debates, and debates that extended into non-Marxist tour having dealt with Marx.

The 1970s was a time when Marxism organized in an interdisciplinary intellectual debate as well as being related to political movements. Some people were strong scientific Marxists. Some were humanists, reading early Marx. Intellectually it was a very stimulating world. In this context, where Marx was the big guiding influence, I read Kant and Hegel, and a variety of full works, and modern figures like Charles Taylor or Habermas.

So, through the lens of trying to have an understanding of social action, social change and the durability of social structures in the real world, I was reading everything I could to try to understand this academically but I came to Habermas and to Bourdieu through that context of reading Marx.

I remember buying *Outline of a Theory of Practice* [Bourdieu 1972] at a bookshop next to a train station in Manchester as I was about to take the train back to Oxford, actually starting reading it in the bookshop, sitting on the floor by the B section of the books and thinking “Oh, this is fantastic! This is exactly what I wanted to read all the way to the train!” staying up late at night, reading it the next day. This immediate sense of recognition and enthusiasm.

Now, what was Bourdieu putting together? Marx, classical anthropology, and interests in somewhat historical perspectives, change and confrontation between different cultures. The same things I was interested in. But also, a year or two before, I had encountered E.P. Thompson who wrote the great book *The Making of the English Working-Class* [Thompson, 1963] which shaped me a lot, a book of Anti-Theory. Thompson hated theory. But it was an account that I found enormously engaging.

I ultimately decided in an important sense that it was wrong, and wrote my first book in a way against it. But it was a huge shaping influence and the social history of that time, which for many others was more theorized history – for Hobsbawm among others. Thompson gave me a sort of *problematique* in a French structural sense. A sense of the problem to the stance. So, relating my own social movements engagement to them... here is movement in action, the formation of a hugely influential movement, a change in history. If I can understand this more deeply, I would understand a lot.

I just pursued that more and more, not just reading Thompson but studying the whole 1790s-1830s in England and trying to get that deeply, following the anthropological intuitions and Bourdieu’s argument that you should try to understand one thing really well and let that shape how you read theory, how you pursue theory. So that was what I focused on, trying to understand as I went out and read philosophy or social theory or other things and try to see if they fit, if they helped me understand that.

**REC:** It is puzzling to me that someone like you, engaging with social movements, not only personally but also scientifically, then suddenly moves to an author that has been criticized – surely in a wrong way – until the 1990s for being focussed too much on structures rather than on agency or social change.

**CC:** That is true but there are not just two choices. That is, Althusser or Poulantzas were much more extremely structuralists than Bourdieu, and I was searching for something more middle-ground. So, the way I presented and read Bourdieu emphasizes the extent to which he was seeking the dialectic of objectification and



subjectification. Partly because that's what I wanted in it but it was throughout seeking that. It is a misreading to read it just as a structuralist. Though at some points he's almost just a structuralist but he also tries to do other things.

I didn't just become a Bourdieusian in a sense that I said "Oh, he was my favorite theorist!" I never quite liked people who say "I'm just a follower of one theory, I have my favorite theorist" and so on. So, to me Bourdieu was already compensatory to some readings of Marx. If I was most immersed in Marxism when I discovered Bourdieu, then Bourdieu opened up something in relation to Marx, including "embodiment", so that I wanted to think about agency and I wanted to think about movements I wanted to study. Or in "embodied knowledge", in things that people don't understand.

I was interested in how the sensibility of a large number of workers could be shaped when only a small number of them were doing anything like theory and the rest Marxist followers of theorists were engaged in something else. That was right, but they did have some understanding, some consciousness. My analysis in the end, somehow helped by Bourdieu, somehow by something else, had to do with attachment and how people struggled while being attached to their communities, to their crafts, their lives, and having them disrupted and destroyed by the coming of industrial capitalism.

So, very much in keeping with Bourdieu's interest in how the coming of the French colonial state and market disrupted the life of the Kabyle peasants. I was working on British craftsmen, English craftworkers for the most part, and how they experienced this. And this led me to a disagreement with Thompson and a partial disagreement with Marxism, although Marx also saw some of the same things, which was that these craftworkers were fighting to avoid becoming proletarians. They were not the proletariat fighting against the capital. They were fighting not to be forced into being capitalist proletariat, to maintain their artisanal societies and those local communities, and the resources in the struggle were in part the strength of their local communities, not a national class organization. That, I argue, will come much later.

So, in a sense I argue that Thompson was actually wrong. It was a fascinating book, but it was not the making of the English working class, it was the resistance of the English *artisanat*. That was influenced by Bourdieu's look at the Kabyle. The Kabyle were not fighting a Marxist revolution against France but they wanted to be Kabyle, to have some additional opportunities but without giving up their values in order to have these opportunities and then wind up at the bottom of the social order.

That was what connected me to Bourdieu. And what connected me at the same time to Hegel, and Kant. And the side of Marx and the early Marx that is in a way

most interested in “the social” and people’s attachments and connections. So, there’s this route that goes from Scottish political economy to Hegel and Marx back into other studies where an understanding of the dialectical fit of different parts of society together, the whole of its parts, is extremely influential. So my interest has for the same reason that I found mechanical scientific Marxism frustrating and actually wrong in important ways about movements.

**REC:** What really strikes me about this narrative is how your interests were not oriented toward a very specific scientific niche or specific sub-discipline. You move among different disciplinary sets (anthropology, history, sociology, social theory) but you also work empirically on different topics.

Let me pose you a question about the contemporary state of social sciences, in which the growing differentiation and specialization has of course some positives, since it creates more accurate knowledge with new cases and empirical evidences, but on the other hand it also produces the potential risk of a growing specific ignorance.

The fact is that we risk no longer being able to address issues or questions that have general importance. This is crucial when observed from the perspective of a young researcher. Nowadays academic constraints bring us to specialize even more and to have a specific and narrow technology of research that brings us to cut our sociological objects into always smaller pieces.

I would ask you how you think we can combine the exigences of an empirically and rigorously grounded research with the necessity of a broader attention to general sociological analysis in these specifically contemporary academic constraints.

**CC:** I’m not very disciplined by disciplines, but I have been enthusiastically interested in a variety of things from different disciplines and I have felt entitled to put them together the way I wanted. I won’t say competent because sometimes my feeling has been that “I’m not competent.”

I remember going to the first week of Charles Taylor’s seminar on Hegel at Oxford and leaving with the conclusion that I simply can’t do this! [*Laugh*]. Because I was basically a young Marxist with an interest in history, sociology and anthropology who wanted to know more about Hegel mainly because it seemed to be a precursor to Marx.

There is this intense discussion about the relationship of Greek philosophy to Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. And there are two problems. One: I don’t know much about Greek philosophy. Two: the class following Taylor owns fantastic linguistic abilities shifts so everybody talks in English, even about things I don’t understand, then they seem to speaking in German, then they’re speaking about the translation of Greek terms into German and I say: “Ok, I didn’t have a Jesuit education!” I thought: “I can’t do this!”.

My response was to read as intensively as I could, mainly in English. I still don't know Greek and I still do not read in German. So I did the best I could with translations but I said: "Ok, I have to educate myself because I wanted to understand instead of leaving the class." But in order to do this I have to know a lot more. So I have to read Aristotle, because it was about Aristotle. I read Aristotle before Plato, because that was the way I found it, and that fits with Bourdieu, that fits with other things.

Since then, I have read Plato, and I've tried to fill the missing gap, so my experience is of reaching out from what little bit I knew these new things then each time discovering that in order to understand that I had to understand a hundred other things. So you read Marx, Hegel, Aristotle... and you're drawn into that. I never had a systematic education and maybe it's a fantasy that everybody else does. In the sense which I read Greek philosophy and then the History of Christianity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, I didn't actually learn it that way. I read a few scattered things like that as a student in a World Civilizations classes but then my main experiences in having to read these things was because each thing that is read opened up new things I wanted to know, and if I didn't find the thing I was reading to be very good, I put it down and I didn't follow it up.

If I found things that I was reading stimulating then I wanted to read the other things that went into it and it turns out that, in the case of Marx, that Hegel was really worth reading, not in fact, Dühring. There are a variety of figures in Marxism who are not such great thinkers.

Proudhon, on the other hand, turns out to be very interesting. Not right, not better, not as serious a theorist as Marx, but a representative of a kind of failed tradition. So there's a tradition that is very important in the real history of social movements that you can see with Proudhon or a few others that has no great academic figure. Sorel is probably the closest to a great academic figure. But the history of a kind of somewhat populist, some kind of syndicalist, a much more grounded part of the European workers movements has no great thinker. It's not Durkheim, it's not Weber, it's not Marx, no one who gets in the canon represents that. The Utopian Socialists. There are these very interesting thinkers who don't make the mainstream.

I've not forgotten that part of your question. By going out from the thinkers who are in the mainstream, who are great, in some way Marx isn't excluded from the US mainstream. He's clearly part of the intellectual mainstream. You find others who are great and that you want to read, who are part of the classic canon, and then you have to fill in the pieces you're missing, but then you find things that never make it into that classic canon. That's interesting. Why don't they? They may have ideas that are very important even if they did not do the great work that some of the others did.

My experience of this, moving out of anthropology, from films and other things into doing this, is that I kept being exposed to gaps in my own knowledge that I tried to fill incompletely. I had very little sense of a coherent narrative of the formation of this. It was not until I began to teach that I began to think about “This is the German tradition, this is the French...” I was searching to fill gaps and I was searching outward from some texts into what they cited until I began to teach the History of Social Thought, at which point it was for students who were beginning to be social scientists and it was important for them to get the sense of where things went, more than I had myself.

So I felt that I knew a lot about these thinkers but in a disorganized fashion, with an unclear sense of that. So I spent a lot of time then as a young teacher, trying to improve my map, my genealogy of my understanding of how these things fit together, and sometimes still reading once I missed the things I have. One of the ways I’ve been helpful to students as a teacher sometimes, is by helping them to see that overview, how these things fit together. So, more than teaching, if I am teaching Bourdieu, I’m completely Bourdieusian, but if I’m teaching Habermas I’m being Habermasian. And I can tell you that there are things I like about Habermas and things I don’t, things I like about Bourdieu and things I don’t, and we can go on.

I have my favorites but my role as a teacher is in part to help students see how much there is out there which could be helpful to them and to see how these things connect to each other in an intellectual field and in a history of formation of thought. But that came later for me. The original catharsis, the original enthusiasm is for one after the other and then having to spend some time thinking of this.

Once, when I took Charles Taylor’s class on Hegel, I had to spend the whole semester reading things that influenced Hegel in order to follow the class. Lots of things I first read, like Aristotle’s *Ethica Nichomacea*, I read first to understand Hegel’s interpretation of the *Ethica Nichomacea*. So, out of order, it should be backward... and then again, later, in teaching, what I thought in a US course on Western Civilization was that I needed to figure out how the Pre-Socratic tradition related to Plato and Plato to Aristotle.

**REC:** Would you perceive yourself as an outsider or did you come to perceive yourself as an outsider?

**CC:** In a strange way, even though I was conscious of my limits, I often felt incompetent because I kept moving into discussions that I wanted to learn about that I didn’t yet know. Many people are happy in conversations where they already know almost everything and they can feel satisfied with their knowledge, while I am happy with conversations where I don’t know about and I learn a lot.

So I would move into a field that I didn't know about and I still do, like working on artificial intelligence now, as I am certainly not an expert. Moving to a field and asking questions, and learning, trying to read and to keeping up and making rapid progress, learning, even though at a price that I probably often look naïve at the beginning of a conversation. And that was how I put together my distinctive corpus. Eventually I found out that I did know something and the saving grace was that idea of knowing few empirical things well. Bourdieu writes exactly about that discipline.

For me first, I was set on course by Max Gluckman, one of my great teachers, who said exactly the same principle: "Alright, in addition to all of this theory eventually you will be old and you can only sit around to read. First, you should be doing something empirical." Really he meant doing fieldwork, but first, preparation for that. "I'm going to give you a topic," he said, "to write your thesis about Meyer Fortes and his studies of the Tallensi and you are gonna do a study of the Tallensi and you will know everything that is available to know, in print at least."

Eventually I went to Taliland<sup>1</sup> and I saw some things first hand, but mainly in print, about this one people in Africa. And I spent most of the year doing this. I wrote a very long thesis, which to my surprise was published. But the importance is not that we're great to know so much about the Tallensi, the importance is that I had something firmly in mind and when I read something I can say: "That makes sense with the Tallensi or not."

As I learn more, when I learn a lot about the British working class, or about countries I've lived in, I could say: "Does it make sense of this?" So there's always some empirical things that will allow me to say that I'm suspicious of this or that theory because it doesn't fit with what I know. Even if I know a little bit, at least it's a test, and then I can ask: "Is it true of someplace else but not of this place or is it not true at all?" So that's the way my thoughts worked with this small number of empirical anchors in this voracious reading of theoretical things.

On the way I became a sociologist, because sociology was the field that allowed me to do all of these best. Because you know, if you want to become a professional anthropologist you have different requirements, as well as if you want to become a professional philosopher you have different requirements, at the level of what you teach, how you do work. So I found sociology most congenial.

However, I also had an engagement in what was conceived as the sociological mainstream. I had the chance to study and work with some very distinct sociologists at Columbia like Robert Merton, Peter Blau and Robert Nisbet that represents three

<sup>1</sup> Ghana [Ed.]

different streams. Merton and Blau were certainly in the mainstream, in my later words. But it wasn't that I liked only the Marxist challengers and not the people who excluded them and constructed and come to the mainstream and left the Marxists out. I also thought that there was something interesting in that work and in this search for understanding the social against truly individualistic perspectives.

There's a lot offered by American mainstream sociology, it's a great intellectual tradition. Now, I only edited that book about it because it was the anniversary of that Association (the ASA – American Sociological Association) and the president asked me to, and the president happened to be Michael Burawoy, coincidentally! I thought it had a lot to offer and the way in which that sort of central gravitational pole relates to the enormous diversity or plurality is really interesting and this is also the story of my academic life.

So I got a job in a very mainstream sociology department and moved on and I was able to be, and probably looked, to anyone younger than me in American sociology like a pretty mainstream figure at my age [*laugh*] but not very typical in my formation.

**REC:** Did you get a job in a mainstream sociology department because of your empirical research?

**CC:** I think it was only because my empirical research was, they thought, an attractive thing; that I had done some. But I don't think they read any of it. The job was described as a theory job and they wanted someone to teach the students theory classes – not to become theorists but just as part of the ritual of becoming a sociologist. You take some theory, some methods. And I was hired to teach theory since I was a more attractive theorist than someone doing just theory.

I think they were investing in empirical research and that I was also doing empirical research that was as good and they wanted to know that I could also teach theory. In an ironic sense I wasn't. I made myself competent to teach theory by trying to figure out how to teach theory. Realizing that I had to organize this as a class. Ironically, although I knew a lot about theories, I hadn't really thought through the organization of the material I began to prepare to teach.

I was always trying to also identify this and push historical sociology, and to some extent cultural sociology, and these fields that were not yet mainstream – they are more so now – and to make sociology in general, and sociological theory more integrated around the understanding of large-scale patterns in social change.

**REC:** So, this is the core of your engagement in creating a sociology that is either culturally and historically grounded, empirical and critical, addressing broadly general and publicly-relevant dynamics. This is visible in the creation of research institutions and networks like the IPK-Institute for Public Knowledge and the NYLON

you co-founded with Richard Sennett. Was it initially an effort to change the way sociology is practiced traditionally in mainstream departments?

**CC:** Yes, at a very immediate level, it was an effort to try to create the setting in which I could do the sociology I wanted to do and have my students do the sociology that I hoped they could do. So at one level it was not strategically designed to change all of sociology, but to change sociology enough to allow for the things I wanted to study.

But at another level of course it was, I had that ambition that work in historical sociology would transform the whole field and public sociology would change this. I don't think I was very strategic about it, like saying "Ok, if you have this, what should you do as a program." I was expressing tastes but also programmatically pushing the field a bit with others to share some of these orientations, with mixed successes.

I have institutionally though, even before the period you mention, been involved in it systematically at Chapel Hill. I had to create – and for a few years led – a program in Social Theory and Cross-Cultural Studies that linked sociologists with anthropologists and historians especially, but also a few people in other fields, like philosophers and communication scholars. So it was a project among young faculty members, most of them were assistant professors and got together across disciplinary boundaries and I was more the animator of this probably because I was more interdisciplinary, but also the others were interested in doing this, so there was a sensibility that was shared by the young teachers that we didn't want to be just conventional in our disciplines.

Later, in varying degrees, some of them became more conventional in their fields, and others retained that orientation. Many of those who retained that not so disciplinary orientation were pushed out, did not succeed in academia. Some of them did and have gone on to great successes. I always liked my discipline and all the others. It wasn't that I didn't like my discipline and I wanted the others but I wanted to be enriched by them. I wanted my students to learn things that were not just part of the standard. That relates to the question about specialization but also to my sense of critique.

One of the really important ideas in the critical theory tradition is that critique should not just be disagreement with something, saying what's bad about it. First, it should include the positive object of trying to establish truth as a sound basis for forward movements. The Kantian sense of critique is not against it, it is in order to understand the conditions of possibility – which carries always Bourdieu's sense of critical sociology – but second it should involve trying to understand other positions and how that fits.

I've always disliked people who just say "Oh, I'm Marxist, so I never read Weber" or "I'm a Bourdieusian, I never read Habermas." I just think that's anti-in-

tellectual, and unacceptable. I've always wanted to sort of engage this. Critique ought to be able to say what's useful and what's not useful in different perspectives. Move beyond them, but incorporate that, in a sense that Marx says that we never abandon a phase of history, we incorporate it.

In this sense we should be able to integrate what's useful from different perspectives, save why we think they don't do something well and work on that basis. With a specific object of understanding. Theories are not just good or bad. They're good or bad for understanding something. A great theory to understand Fordist factories will not turn out to be a great theory for either pre-industrial artisans or post-industrial computer software engineers.

You need to understand the theory in relation to an object of analysis and to be able to say what's good about it and incorporate that and what doesn't work in the new setting or what was mistaken even in the old setting. So, I have been not interested in being part of a school. What I have been interested in was in being able to promote a sensibility that would cross-cut schools. The irony is that critical sociology is one of the worst examples of having a narrowing insider discourse.

Critical sociology, all the critical social sciences in general, critical theory in the Frankfurt sense, all should have a broader orientation. So it's particularly paradoxical, ironic and disappointing that critical theory has become an insider intellectual game. It's so important to be potentially connected outside to empirical research and to public action.

So, when I think of other more or less contemporaries like Burawoy: he has an interesting vision of public sociology with which I partly agree and partly disagree. A very interesting personal work informed by Marxist theory, but he wears his Marxism pretty lively. It informs, it gives him ideas, but he goes after his specific objects and explanations or he pushes his students to them, in a sense. And there's not really a very synthetic theory of Burawoy in that.

At the opposite end, someone like Axel Honneth sometimes has very interesting agendas and pushes, and I'm very sympathetic and he's trying to bring Taylor into that critical discourse. But very much pushing towards a systemic alternative, like "here's my systemic theory as an alternative to that one." I like some of Honneth's work but stylistically I'm not very similar to Honneth.

I have found many things interesting about the Boltanski and Thévenot kind of work: understanding critique, understanding judgment, doing all of that. I don't think that what Boltanski has done – on his own and with Thévenot – in trying to produce a study of critique, as distinct from critical theory, is ultimately satisfying. It adds some interesting insights that have been used, just to say, by Michèle Lamont – that use that kind of work interestingly – but it doesn't do the same work. His studies



of humanitarian action or distance suffering are really interesting uses and insights to that, but I don't think of them as adding enough of a perspective in a strong sense, a real theoretical perspective.

Clearly, they all fit and deserve the label of being part of critical theory and in different ways as having engaged a broader public, which I want to say is exactly the fault of the insider game version of critical theory. Sometimes the engagement with broader publics is very incompletely connected to the deeper work. So, Burawoy's public sociology, Burawoy's Marxism, and Burawoy's ethnographic studies – he's an advocate for three things – I don't think there's any essential connection among the three things. They're all good things I'm sympathetic with – Marxism, ethnography and public sociology – but I don't think there's a strong internal correlation or connection in how they get done, possibly the fact that ethnography makes for better reading than quantitative work is connected to public sociology.

But then public sociology is untheorized in my sense. It's an expression of something with which I largely agree, but it doesn't include a very sophisticated understanding of the public or the discipline and what the pressures are against, and for, the public knowledge. In a sense, I agree more than I disagree but it doesn't give you any different understanding of Burawoy's work on the factory in Chicago or paint in socialism to know the public sociology. It's an addition, one more thing. That's probably true in some of my work too.

**REC:** On this important point, jumping onto another question, the idea of referring to a public relates to the issue of the sociologist as a public intellectual. There are different perceptions between US and European society concerning intellectuals. Of course, Bourdieu in France, Weber in Germany, Gramsci in Italy, Unamuno in Spain are related to diverse contexts and periods. However, I have the perception that in Europe the role of intellectuals is in crisis.

Firstly, there's a rise of anti-intellectualism linked to specific forms of populism – paradoxically, the term “intellectual” in itself was born as a right-wing populist insult addressed to specific thinkers during the *Dreyfus Affair*. But secondly, there's also an academic tendency to transform institutions that produce relevant knowledge in market-oriented machines.

This process is transforming the role of intellectuals into “experts” and triggering further processes of growing specialization, technicization, and probably neutralization of specific disciplines like, ultimately, also sociology and the social sciences. In your opinion, how are the social sciences affected by it? And how could it be done differently?

**CC:** Great question. It is crucial to do something now, the intuition is right, intellectuals are in crisis. The distinction between a “specialized intellectual” and

“general intellectual” doesn’t fully help as much as I would like. It’s not wrong, but simply there are other things to think about. But something that it points to is what is the place of research-based knowledge, knowledge that has some foundation in serious research, serious thinking. How do we distinguish that, how do we give authority compared to mere opinion?

In different languages, in very different traditions this issue is posed. So, for example, Habermas on the public sphere asks what is the difference between a rational, critical public sphere where reason is informed in public opinion and mere opinion or an administratively managed public sphere. This is an issue that gets discussed differently by Foucault and by other thinkers. But what is crucial now is that we have lost the authority that has most underpinned knowledge in the modern era.

People do not automatically assume that professors that have done research have authority and knowledge, so there are very weak institutions for granting authority. Since the 1960s a kind of anti-authoritarianism has been paramount, including on the Left, sometimes informed by romantic ideas of authenticity and autonomy, but nonetheless anti-authoritarianism. I think it has been pernicious. It doesn’t mean we should have authoritarians, but it means that the defense against authoritarian governments is that there’s some other basis for authority in society and if we destroy all of them, we get terrible consequences.

Public intellectuals are suffering in this, but are part of the problem too. I would love to see more renewal of public intellectual life but it would not be just a revival of individuals as stars. Part of what happened to the classic European idea of the intellectual is that it has become a star-system of iconic huge intellectuals. On a global scale, that created a politics of translation which decontextualize this. So you would know everything by Habermas and nothing by the people who Habermas was talking to in Germany. In some cases there were more systematic efforts to translate the larger fields, such as Thomas McCarthy’s series on German Social Thought.

But in general, something got translated only in the first place because it was related to a star, and then it became even more star because of that. So, Derrida got a second life in France because he was a big theorist in America. This helps to undercut the intellectual fields of Europe by producing a mediatic star system of intellectuals. The recovery of a stronger intellectual discourse has to take more seriously the social, the collective intellectual fields, not just the iconic stars of these fields.

Now, to some extent, disciplines or interdisciplinary fields in academic life do some of that. They are more collective constructs. A weakness of the project of the public intellectual life has often been that it has celebrated the individual stars and left the socially organized. That wasn’t always so. There are often times where there

are lots of political and literary magazines in which people are writing to inform each other and there's a more collective group.

Sometimes we remember groups like the *Collège de Sociologie* group and not the individual so much. But this is a problem. This made public intellectual life much more vulnerable to a takeover by a merely mediatic intellectual world and to criticisms that people were just giving their opinions and other opinions were as good, and losing sight of the fact that sometimes opinions can be grounded in serious work.

Universities contributed to this in an opposite way by first being so interested in the production of internal academic goods: journal articles, dissertations inside the fields, the proliferation of sub-fields. So, academic specialization meant that academic work did a less and less good job of informing the public, which left that to mediatic figures. There have been some efforts to reduce this, not just Burawoy in sociology, but various efforts, including my project at the Social Sciences Research Council focused a bit on this, or the Institute for Public Knowledge. Creating milieus of discussion which do not necessarily turn on star figures and allegiance to star figures which can use the media but are not just creatures of the media, to be picked up or dropped according to media fashion, but have their own intellectual coherence.

So, I will answer on this level very personally and then a little bit more generally. What I am proudest of in my course, are my students, not my publications, and I have always thought of myself in a way – first and foremost, just to say – as a teacher and organizer of academic work. I do of course love to think. I also produce good writings – I'm just not modest – all three of these are valuable and I want to call attention to the other two.

Particularly my Phd students; I'm very proud that they're doing a lot of things, they will do more than I could have done individually, collectively doing this, and they're always part of different discussions and different fields, and I agree or I'll disagree with things they will write. But, as an accomplishment – being able to help them launch their career, help them broaden their orientations, help them think beyond some of the narrow compartmentalization of much thought – that is what I would like best than what I have done.

Secondly, developing the IPK (Institute for Public Knowledge) or my earlier work in North Carolina, my continuing work now at Berggruen, I am trying to create institutions. This is becoming extremely important. It's extremely frustrating, so I like it least. I like teaching, I like researching more than I like doing this, but it's extremely important to do this because the old institutional settings for intellectual life that can inform public life are falling apart.

The media legacy, the newspaper publishers crisis is huge. Universities are in crisis, and universities have for decades been responding to increasing difficulties, but

on the one hand adopting the star system and on the other hand setting higher and higher standards for purely productivistic internal discussions and not resolving that contradiction. But also becoming more expensive, focused on the hierarchical status – and I say this as somebody who just spent years as being as a university president! Doing exactly that... I mean, in good Bourdieusian fashion, I know that you can't just break with the established role, you can do better or worse, you can't totally in this way or that way, but you can't say: "Ok, I'm not going to do all the things that the university president did, I'm not gonna raise money, I'm not going to hope that we have a higher ranking, I'm not going to hope to have more students."

You do those things but you're trying to shift the balance. So, saying that, there is a tyranny of the hierarchy for its own sake that all university presidents ask: "Well, have you moved up? You have been president for three years, has the university moved up or not?" Obviously you want to move up, not down. But it's so easy to lose sight that that is merely an indirect indicator. It's not the goal. And academia has made it harder and harder for it to contribute to intellectual life that can inform public life and we need to find ways to do it.

Now, people will still have jobs and careers in universities, although the crisis in employment is also real and many people are adjunct or temporary faculty and that's bad. But those jobs would not create in themselves the satisfying intellectual context. So, it's very important to try to create, in the media sense, the places – they will be digital or electronic places now, not conventional magazines – where people can have these discussions that are not totally dominated by capital or other instrumental goals, the settings in which people can come together – the meeting places, for activities which sometimes include long meetings. I've been a fellow of an institute for a sabbatical year and you're working with some unexpected people. So the Center for Advanced Studies in Behavioral Sciences in Stanford is a place where Thomas Kuhn met Robert Merton, where people who sometimes should know each other gets a chance to talk a lot. It's all within an élite, a very academic setting, but it's a way of doing some of this. So we need more invention of such institutions, somehow, to accomplish this.

There is no recovery of what we are nostalgic about simply through the celebration of some iconic individual stars. And there's no way to get there through academic specialization. We have to break out somehow and develop some other structures for that. The stars anymore would be mediatically structured. It would be somebody who has become the top popularizer in this. And to be a popularizer is a useful thing. This enables me to say a last thing about.

The reduction to experts is one kind of reduction. The reduction to experts and particularly in critical social sciences is a funny thing. I am sometimes called an

expert, but it's a funny thing. In what am I an expert on? It's different from being an expert on artificial intelligence, someone who may know about machine learning. The attempt to remake social science as *techné* in order to be powerful or influential with government is a problem. Economics has gone through this, in doing this, trying to present: "You, government, or citizens, have an economic problem, need us economists to give you a technical advice." But technical advice is only occasionally useful.

Economics is full of smart people and it has good knowledge but it does not give good technical advice because the problems are not just technical. Economics does its best, offering critical understanding of why a certain policy measure doesn't work or why people keep repeating that even though it doesn't work. Or what's going on in China and how the world will be different if China becomes the most powerful economy. So it's not that economics is not as useful. There's a misunderstanding to think it's a form of engineering, in which it will be useful the same way engineering is useful to making sure your bridges don't fall down. So it's better, or people in governmental policy have to have access to specialized economic knowledge. But it's a mistake to think that it is as technical as civil engineering contributions to bridges and even more, sociology or other fields.

There is a huge growth in technical expertise, largely in the corporate sector and not in public life. And one worry I have about public life is that there will be large parts of the world that will be inaccessible to it because of the proprietors of data, ownership and control of knowledge. So you have great, smart people at *Google*, *Microsoft* and *Apple* working on all these problems and their work won't really be public.

Now, that enables me to go to the second point which is about technicians and it's a contradiction in terms to say there's a technical expert of critical theory. The other side is – there needs to be a division of labor – the visions of public social sciences that assume that one person does everything, does fundamental original research, is a master of social thought, teaches, writes articles that are accessible to the broad public and serves as governmental expert, is first a fantasy. Secondly it's an illusion encouraged by the star system, what the government calls stars, whether or not they are experts. It is somewhat the enemy of new ideas, because it tends to be the older established people who nominate all those positions. But it has also undersold the socially organized process so it would be a good thing for all sociologists to write better than they do. But we should not imagine that all sociologists should be writing for popular consumption. Some sociologists should be doing their serious work because their contribution is knowledge. They should be thinking about how there is work actually useful to the public. How their work is actually important, what questions it answers. They shouldn't do this just to have more lines on their CV, but there should be some division of labor with people who are better at writing for the

public. In the same sense, we celebrate originality and we denigrate synthesis. We think that synthetic work is not original. In a sense, we reduce originality to discovery in a natural science model, but even more almost a prospector model, like somebody going out to look for gold or diamonds and who finds them. Very little scientific research involves discovery in that sense, even in the hard sciences. It involves a much more organized, structured work in relation to work that has been done before and most of the experimental work is testing, not discovering.

For us in the social sciences, what we need to recognize is that we make relatively few discoveries – it's nice when we do – but we have an incentive system that is overwhelmingly focused on getting people to produce ostensible original contributions to knowledge modeled on the idea of discovery: "I found a new fact!" and the new facts are mostly trivial and unimportant. Or: "Other people have studied this in these settings. I studied it in Borneo. Nobody has studied the complex forms of organizations in Borneo before and I found they are the same as everywhere else." That's not an interesting fact! Or whatever it is, like: "People have been studying stratification, I have found 1.5% difference in this model." All of our incentives are geared to that. Very little to synthesizing what we know.

Now, synthesis is a big category and it has been devalued. Think of analytical sociology. Analysis is good, it's tied to the original. Lots of the work that goes on is synthetic. Synthesis gives shape to knowledge. It can be very original work, and much of what we call theory is in fact synthetic, it's putting together and organizing knowledge in an area. It's important to know empirically what we know.

In America we tend to leave synthesis to the writers of textbooks. Until recently Europe didn't do textbooks and synthesis had a close relationship to theoretically-oriented grand intellectuals. Here, it's to textbooks writers, or to outsiders, to journalists. We need to value more the development of good, synthetic understanding, putting together the different pieces. So we have high quality specialized knowledge, that we tend just to let sit, as isolated specialized knowledge, with low quality synthesis, low quality of putting together the pieces because we just left it to amateurs or to low status textbook writing which has to be understandable to 18-year olds who cannot deal with all the issues.

I was once the author of one of the top line books. That's valuable labor but it tends to be left to status figures that are less high, and that's not the kind of synthesis entirely that I'm talking about that can be helpful, because it has to be sufficiently simplified and it really is a market phenomenon, it's really meeting a market. Where, intellectually, how should we think about what's happening to social inequality today? Now, some people work on that. They work and write. Like Piketty, he is not reporting just some facts, he's trying to tell you how to think about it. We have

an enormous shortage of high quality synthesis compared to specialized facts. This is also part of the crisis of the public intellectuals that we need that in order to be able to contribute well to the public because it's very seldom the case that what the public needs is a fact. And in fact we need some of this and we need to be able to present it in shortened, accessible forms; synthetic understanding.

I'll take it back to films, as a conclusion [*laugh*]. There may be a stunning scene in a film that offers you great insights. The work for a film is not the work of the actors alone. It's the work of writer, director, editor. And putting all of that together to make it a coherent whole. There is a kind of discipline to a film. It can only be a couple of hours, so you have to leave a lot of things out. Every film of any significance – not just documentaries – involves shooting much more than you put in, in the end.

In a film of a novel you've left out 90% of the novel, but there's a discipline to that. It's not all bad, it's not just loss, compared to writing long books, because the discipline is figuring out what is important and how to put those parts together, to tell a story that people would care about and they will remember. In the end, they only remember one scene; often it's the case with films that people remember visually one scene. But that scene became satisfying because the film was put together in a way that worked.

In the same sense, in the social sciences we are imagining public – public sociology, public political sciences, public anthropology and so – as though it's only actors, as though the films would be the project of only actors, as the celebrities. Not the whole and how this is put together and synthesized. So, we need for ourselves a synthetic knowledge that often looks a lot like a theory but a very empirically formed theory and for presenting to the world what is the best understanding you could have of the immigration problem based on scientific research, not “what did I find in my research.”

The typical social scientist wants to tell you egocentrically the findings of their research. And so, in a field like migration – thousands of people working on it – your findings are probably only a small addition. What we want to know is what all of that field put together can tell us that is useful. So we need synthesis. And the less we value synthesis and give it credit alongside discovery and analysis, we won't produce a really intellectually serious social science.

**REC:** At this point I should ask you one last question. Who is your favorite film director? Or your favorite film?

**CC:** I suppose Bergman, but that doesn't mean I sit around and watch all the films of Bergman. I can go more contemporary. I have liked a lot of films of different genres. One of the films that made a deep impression on me is not even one of the best films by a film director that someone would like in general. I thought

Bertucelli's *Ramparts of Clay* [1971] was great. Now, it shouldn't surprise you that a Bourdieusian would like a film about Algeria [*laugh*], but it's a really good example to me of a work of film fiction that is offering a serious sociological analysis.

I don't really follow films now, I have to say, although I live in Hollywood, where there are people who have seen films before they appear in theaters! I have more favorite films than favorite directors. There are a few that I liked, that's why I say Bergman. Bergman is an intellectual filmmaker, a director filmmaker, an auteur filmmaker. However, if you would have asked me when I was a film student I would probably have said Truffaut.

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## Sociology and Its Public

### Craig Calhoun in Conversation with Riccardo Emilio Chesta

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**Abstract:** In this interview, Craig Calhoun retraces his peculiar trajectory that, from his first interests in realist cinema and anthropology, brought him to become one of the most original contemporary public sociologists. Realist cinema and the art of documentary are not simple occasional curiosities or forms of escapes, but a way to observe and analyze reality common to the sociological gaze. He therefore discusses the aspects of this multidisciplinary education between Columbia, Manchester and Oxford. Supervised by the British social anthropologist Max Gluckman, his sociological path mixes the Western Marxist debate of the 1970s, Continental social thinkers and Pierre Bourdieu's sociology in new empirical inquiries on a variety of objects and fields like social movements, intellectuals, knowledge, power and the public sphere. In the final part, he identifies the requirements for a contemporary critical sociology that, avoiding to be reduced to an abstract theorizing or a new academic specialization, can fulfill its role of scientific discipline and public utility.

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**Keywords:** *Theorizing; Critique; Disciplinary Boundaries; Synthetic Sociology; Intellectuals; Visual Anthropology; Cinema; Public Sphere.*

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