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NON-REFEREED ARTICLE

Stranger in a Strange Land: reflections on my first fifty years in academia

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Abstract

The author reflects on engaged sociology over the past half-century, exploring the political contradictions, and social and political change. The essay expresses thoughts on his retirement, and the importance of collaboration.

Keywords

Sociology, Australia, Professional, Engagement

When I finished the first draft of [my PhD thesis](#) in 1974, I dedicated it to my grandmother, Estera Weyland, whom I described as a ‘stranger in a strange land’. She was a refugee survivor from the Holocaust in occupied Poland. In Shanghai where she had spent 5 years the refugee community saw her as a leader; she had established and managed the refugee kitchen through the long years of war and increasing Japanese control. She pushed back against a world of chastening circumstances, and she survived.

Both the thesis dedication and the Festschrift/conference title came from a book by [Robert Heinlein](#), itself taking the line from the Old Testament book, Exodus, chapter 22, verse 2. Heinlein was one of my favourite authors at the time and his hippy-era book about free love and libertarian individuality struck a chord. Heinlein went on to become a much more conservative figure, who despite his advocacy of sexual liberation, became increasingly and overtly anti-Communist in the 1970s. Here was a time of Euro-Marxism, Ayn Rand libertarianism and alternative consciousness and lifestyle communities. These various flows swirled together in the intellectual milieu in which I first found myself.

The offer of a conference and Festschrift by the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Professor Mary Spongberg to mark my departure from UTS took me much by surprise, both an embarrassment and a compliment; it also provided an exclamation point for my career over nearly fifty years in academia. One theme raised during the conference explores what it might mean to talk of being a public intellectual or an engaged social scientist. Whenever I hear these terms they have elements of self-aggrandisement, rather too ‘look at me’ and not enough ‘look at them’. However the role of scholars in an era of post-truth, alternative-news, and the surveillance university remains one of prodding the dominant discourses that seek to frame and constrain our lives and channel our commitments.

Max Weber, I learned early on, had drawn up the ground-rules for the role of the social scientist in modern capitalist societies, while his arch-rival in the mind-games zone, Karl Marx, had dictated the revolutionary practice. Individuals ‘chose’ the topics on which they worked, and the passions they brought to their projects. However the scientific community verified the approaches and techniques that we applied and our peers tested the legitimacy of our conclusions. Knowledge was more than hunch, prejudice, and obfuscating verbiage, though ideology permeated everywhere so that self-awareness and critical reflection were the most important tools we could apply. Meanwhile we had to recognise that knowledge was always produced within a political economy and we were no less determined (but not over-determined) by the dynamics in which we were located. Of course the denouement always made reference to two more Marxist tropes – we make history but not on grounds of our own choosing, and we seek to change the world, not only understand it.

My doctoral thesis, undertaken at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), explored the transformation of inner Sydney both within its historical context, and specifically through the period of the Green Ban movement of the early 1970s. I was guided by the late Alex Kondos, an iconoclast and Stranger himself, whose father’s surname was chosen for him by the immigration official (it means ‘short’ in Greek) in exasperation at the

far too long real family name. My main supervisor was the late Sol Encel, also a Jewish refugee from Poland, and engaged sociologist par excellence, a strong anti-Marxist, who found my radical edge rather undesired. I was balanced however by another recently appointed staff member at UNSW, who proved to be a strong supporter of fascism. In this group were ex-priests who'd married ex-nuns, prison officers, gay rights activists, feminists, and a stream of first generation immigrants or their children.

Sociology had been on the outer in Australia for decades; Sydney University would not offer courses in it for a long time to come. Sol was a political scientist, and my Honours degree had been in Government with Henry Mayer and Dennis Altman. However, I discovered something in the 'social', particularly the sociology of knowledge, which was mind-blowing, coming as I did from a refugee family living in a tight community of mourning survivors. It was possible through the application of carefully designed research to understand how social characteristics were played out in individual lives, in hierarchies of competing groups, and in the wider reaches of society. I was especially attracted by the work of Karl Mannheim, also a refugee sociologist who fled Hungary and then Germany, ahead of the wave of anti-Semitic fascism across Europe, finding a home at the London School of Economics after the rise of Hitler. Mannheim managed the synthesis of Marxism, phenomenology and the empirical approach emerging in the USA; he particularly discomfited those seeking unchallengeable truths, yet showed how one could approach the most satisfactory forms of explanation. His ideas had been influenced by another of my Stranger friends, Georg Simmel, with whose work I became closely attached when I first discovered it. Today Simmel helps me understand the intricacies of personality and ideology in the inflammatory writings of Andrew Bolt and some others of the mainstream and of the alt-right.

My career has been framed by five major locations – the UNSW period; 18 months travelling overland through Asia and Europe; three years in the north of England; eight years at the University of Wollongong; and then thirty years at UTS (that sounds so long – and I received as a going-away gift a Swarovski crystallised biro).

The UNSW period encompassed my doctoral project, when, as well as working on archives and interviews, there was also a deep engagement with the urban social movements of the time. My focus was Surry Hills, south east of the city centre, and looking back I think the work there was important – the original plans that would have essentially demolished the suburb and replaced it with high rise towers were abandoned and the 'village' concept emerged. More importantly, though, was the collaboration between migrant groups, the older Australians and the new 'gentry' attracted to the area. Initiatives such as the Surry Hills Neighbourhood Information Centre and Neighbourhood Action Centre (NIC NAC) survive to this day in transformation at the local library, while the lessons I learned I fed into proposals for urban planning reform and migrant services (such as the one that became the Migrant Resource Centre model). More recently the struggle over the future of the [Sirius building in the Rocks](#), marks another step in an ongoing struggle over class and the city. Way back before the building became a reality, I was involved in creating the social parameters, along with planner Zula Nittim and local activist Nita McCrae, that contributed to the

[Peoples' Plan for the Rocks](#). That plan set up the ground-rules on which Sirius was later conceived and built; now once more the working class tenants are being expelled and the building slated for redevelopment for profit. The ongoing and global social struggle to keep working class people in gentrified areas reflects the spatial expression of class politics in the city, and the ideological role of conservative political parties in embedding spatial inequalities.

My departure from Australia with a couple of small bags in 1975 took me by cargo ship to Indonesia and the beginning of a long overland trek. After three months in Sumatra, Java and Bali, having never left Australia before, there was a growing sensibility to cultural difference and human similarities. Having picked up some Bahasa, the traces of the 1967 coup and the mass murders of leftists that had taken place less than a decade before became more evident almost everywhere I travelled. The silences were profound except where someone slipped and railed against the dead for their communist politics, Chinese ethnicity, atheistic faiths, or social marginalisation. The corruption that bedevilled the society was widespread, yet the desperation of poverty gave it some perspective: a world that was composed of fierce competition for survival, yet generated enormous collaborative energy revealed in the social dimensions of every interaction. Sitting with friends on the balcony of a residence for Australian diplomats in Jakarta, they translated for me the radio announcing the movement of Indonesian volunteers into West Timor, saving it from the Communists and Fretilin. My Australian government did nothing; soon I heard the report of the deaths of the Australian journalists at Balibo.

Crossing the border into Pakistan on a hot day a few months later the tone changed – as a Jew I was now entering the Muslim Green Crescent in a way that Indonesia had not been. From here in the Punjab the next three months would be my first time in lands where my Jewish background alone would place me at a new form of risk. Travelling north, however, the ‘hippy’ bus took us into Islamabad after nightfall, after a long trek from Amritsar, through Lahore. The bus pulled up in a dark street, the driver an Englishman, hauling up the flooring, and carrying newspaper wrapped packages into a house. He returned and we headed off shakily into the darkness. He revealed that we had just smuggled pork from India to Christians; probably a capital offence. From Peshawar I travelled through the Kyber pass into Kabul, north to Mazar i Sharif then west again to Iran experiencing the rising crescendo associated with expected return of the Ayatollah Homeini and the yet unexpected overthrow of the Shah; then on through adventure and fright after adventure, until I reached England and found a job in Bradford at the University, in the prelude to Thatcherism, full of the Mirpuris who had left Pakistan for work in the textile mills of the city.

My time in Bradford led to a return to Wollongong where I was engaged to establish the Centre for Multicultural Studies. Here a few people of Marxist persuasion (mine was moving from Karl to tendency [Groucho](#)) worked to create a critical multiculturalism, informed by the struggles of ethnic and racial minorities in Europe, and in my case with a much extended empathy with the extraordinary range of cultures I had encountered. The Centre had a close relationship with the city and its organisations, helping to support the establishment of the Migrant Resource Centre, while undertaking action research on issues

like outwork (helping in the process to change the law that had criminalised migrant women workers).

In Wollongong I was recruited after 1983 onto the Board of the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), throwing me for the first time into the maelstrom of Australian media politics. Here someone whose experience had been community, academic and ethnic, found himself among the (moderately) heavy end of town, responsible for serious budgets, arguing real issues with significant outcomes.

Then came the thirty years sentence at New South Wales Institute of Technology (which in 1989 merged with other colleges and institutes to become UTS), where the cultural studies/Marxist dynamic was at its height; I arrived not long after my colleagues and their students had taken the President's desk and dumped it onto Broadway. Here really was the intersection of my passions – inter-disciplinarity, the concrete application of social science knowledge to real issues in social change, the tensions between materialist and idealist perspectives with which Mannheim had grappled, and the opportunity to make media that conveyed my concerns.

Two new projects were conceived in this extraordinarily fertile environment. The first drew on my experience with SBS and the media industry and involved my colleagues from history (Heather Goodall), social anthropology (Jeannie Martin) and cultural studies (Tony Mitchell); we undertook what would prove to be a very timely study of Racism, Ethnicity and the Media, just on the cusp of the Internet. We were able to show how intimately implicated the media were in the structures and processes of Australian society's patterns of racism. The narratives we described reflected the hierarchies of exclusion, while the defensive protestations we reported remain still today the unconvincing voices of privilege and power. The project remains the standard work in the field, even twenty five years later. Its findings still influence media industry change agents who find in its detailed engagement with Aboriginal Australia, gender, ethnicity and race a template against which they can test for progress.

The second project became all-consuming, an exercise to document the history, sociology, politics and scholarly perspectives on the emergence of Australia as a multicultural society. Originally planned with a small team of partners in government and civil society to take less than a year to complete in 1990, the goal of an online interactive archive of original and curated multi-media materials continues to today, originally on CDROM, now on the Internet. [Making Multicultural Australia](#) was originally hosted by the NSW government, and is now to be found on an Amazon server. It reflects for me somehow the orientation that Mannheim proposed in his exploration of realities and cultures: have people explaining and advancing from their own points of view and experience how they understand the diversity with which they have been engaged, a version of standpoint theory in practice. Prime ministers, premiers, bureaucrats, activists, scholars and artists all have their places, each able to be reviewed against others, the underpinning narrative reflecting different scholarship and contestations, where the audience becomes researcher.

Over the past decade, in a partnership forged with SBS documentary, the influence of sociology as a system of critical reflection and exploration has been introduced into broadcast and now streaming television. Here the ideas of sociology have had to be compressed into the world of ‘pitches’. The *Once Upon a Time* series, a duo of multi-part documentaries, explored crime, conflict and community in suburbs the names of which had become symbolic of ethnic criminality in Sydney’s inner west. Cabramatta had become the centre of Vietnamese refugee settlement, while Punchbowl served the same function for Muslim Lebanese as well as the longer settled Christian Lebanese. ‘[Once Upon a Time in Cabramatta](#)’ (2012) builds on this simple perception, ‘in the beginning all is chaos, and the first thing to get organised is crime’. ‘[Once Upon a Time in Punchbowl](#)’ (2014) begins from the social anthropology of the Mediterranean, ‘in a society of honour and shame, what happens when honour goes toxic?’ These bases provide a way of taking the ideology and utopia dynamic, in order to build an engaging but intellectually rigorous story that allows sociological perspectives to infiltrate the wider culture.

While in recent years I have taken on more institutional roles, as staff representative on the Council of UTS (where I was signally unsuccessful in trying to have the acceptable membership of Council expanded to ensure the presence of culturally diverse members) and the Advisory Board of the state government agency MulticulturalNSW where I advanced issues of disability and LGBTQTI participation in multicultural priorities, the intellectual and societal challenges remain as pressing as ever. Thus, in parallel with this institutional work and my continuing scholarly work, since 2011, I have written some 40 articles for [The Conversation](#), visited by some 250,000 readers.

With colleagues from some five other universities we initiated the Cyber Racism and Community Resilience (CRaCR) project in 2012, which would report in 2017 but this time during the heart of Web 2.0. Frustrated by the refusal of any government body to do anything about cyber racism, the project again built on interdisciplinary methodology, with the aim of increasing both scholarly and public knowledge and impacting on policy and practice. Significant submissions were made to Parliamentary Inquiries, using our research data to test propositions about the public acceptability of racism online. The project was chosen to be the Social Sciences Academy contribution to the annual forum of the Four Academies of the Royal Society of NSW in 2017, delivered in Government House in Sydney (definitely tendency Groucho). Its findings and proposals continue to seep out into the wider society.

Could my trajectory be summarised as ‘from 1970s Marxist critic to 2010s Royal speaker...’? I am slightly amazed at how the consistency of my scholarly practice emerges with very little massaging of the reality. The message and the critique addressed to the forces of power remain similar, concerned with social change and the push back against uncaring power. The scholar has a brain and if fortunate, some emotional intelligence. It should be clear that the main players in this narrative remain that vast community of scholars and practitioners, whose own perspectives and insights, arguments and findings, shape and fill the sea of the people in which, as Rumi would have it, I remain fortunate to swim.