John Goldthorpe and the relics of sociology

John Goldthorpe has issued a stern warning against the renewed impetus towards comparative historical investigation in sociology (Goldthorpe 1991). He claims that sociology is distinguished by its capacity to generate 'tailor made' empirical data which are the only basis for valid generalization. He further implies that, since sociological interpretation must take account of the subjective motivation which drives social action, only research capable of eliciting the personal understandings of social actors (and in systematic fashion) can fully qualify as sociologically adequate data.

His term for empirical material which fails to meet these high standards is 'relic'. This term conveys an idea of obsolete, dead material available for limited autopsy but unable to yield a clear and unambiguous vision of its prior organic existence. Relics have a fragmented character, they offer clues about the past and may be assembled to construct patchy images of it, but they are always incomplete and will always leave more unanswered than answered questions. He implies that sociologists who deal in such material are tinkers not tailors, dealers in second-hand goods, at best accumulating an unsystematic and therefore unrepresentative collection of social memorabilia. His stated position largely restricts sociological investigation to the present; neither objectivity nor subjectivity are available unless purposefully and systematically investigated, generalization about historical events and processes will always fall short of the mark.

One suspects that few contemporary sociologists engaged in comparative historical investigation would disagree that the scope for generating systematic empirical 'proof' is much greater in research on the present than it is in the historical archives whatever their expansionary possibilities. However, the same argument is unlikely to deter them from continuing to address the fundamental questions of macro-sociology. Nor should it, for many of the most important questions of sociology are about social change and can only be investigated by innovative and exhaustive use of historical evidence.
There is another reason why they are unlikely to be discouraged by Goldthorpe's dismissal, for the methodological basis of his attack on historical sociology is flawed. His case is posed in false either or terms, either exact tailor made, purposefully designed data or ill fitting relics whose cloth, cut and seams are hopelessly out of fashion. The true epistemological reality is one of degree, with the advantage not always stacked in favour of contemporary research.

THE TROUBLE WITH TAILOR MADE DATA

What role should data play in theory construction? The purist may answer none – the process of generating theory must be distinct from the process of subjecting it to empirical test; theory and data must not infect one another. This model, drawn from the natural sciences, has played an influential role in quantitative sociology as practiced in the USA and increasingly in Britain too. But if new theoretical ideas do not emerge from the data, where do they originate? They come from the same place as all other ideas, from the theorist’s empirical experience filtered through the sociological imagination – a blend of perception, linguistic culture, disciplinary training and knowledge (dominant paradigms) and personal beliefs. Personal beliefs (knee jerk understandings of experience emerging out of a national, class, gender or race based socialization) should have been expunged in the disciplinary training. In practice it is rare for the sociological imagination to be fully cleansed of all such prejudice. Consequently the separation of theory and data serves not only to persuade or prove the validity of a theoretical interpretation, it also supposedly demonstrates that theory has an independent life outside of the mind which conceived it.

How separate are theory and data in this ideal type methodology? The process of generating an empirical methodology begins in the same place where theory originates, a mental space with a distinctive paradigmatic format. Though the data are supposed to be autonomous, their very form is dictated by theoretical concepts operationalized as variables using linguistic categories which may themselves impose specific cultural understandings. In Goldthorpe’s words, good sociological data are ‘tailor made’, but this intended positive qualification carries its own negative connotations. Data intended to be pure and free from processes of theory construction are in reality designed, cut and sewn to fit a paradigmatic language and form.

This is one of the critical problems of purposefully tailored data – it is all too often polluted by the theoretical terms of investigation. Indeed the tighter the frame of an inquiry (the better the tailoring, the closer the fit), the less the scope for the voice of the subject social actor to be heard, and the greater the probability of the researcher’s
theoretical prejudices being confirmed. The other, even more damaging feature of designer data is that they are artificial, ‘manmade’ materials which may have no necessary parallel in lived experience.

Most sociologists are more aware of these problems of tailor made data than would appear from Goldthorpe’s complacent presentation. Primary data collectors recognize the crucial importance of constructing an encouraging yet neutral preamble to maximize response and of asking the right questions. Subsequent users quickly learn where the originator’s imagination either failed or went over the top; no amount of imaginative secondary analysis will ever substitute for an unrepresentative sample, badly specified concepts or crucial missing variables. It is not just a simple matter of making sure that all the important issues are included, more significant is the total approach to the way the inquiry is structured — the what, who, when, and how of data creation.

These are among the central epistemological problems of sociology. Apprentice sociologists learn that they produce problems of interpretation quite on a par with those encountered by the young Goldthorpe as a history undergraduate in the fifties (see Goldthorpe 1991: 221). Nobody denies that investigators of the present have more potential control over their data. They define the parameters, specify the variables and the mode of collection — they literally make the data. However, as searchers after unobtrusive measures readily attest, this power carries its own dangers. Problems of validity and reliability, the ‘disciplinary catechisms’ of a sociological training, are not even mentioned by Goldthorpe in his eulogy of tailor made data. Yet they reveal why sociologists, even those researching the present with every opportunity to design their own evidence, often prefer to be tinkers not tailors. Unobtrusive or less obtrusive methods of gathering evidence are not without problems but they have one important advantage, which is precisely that they are not tailor made.

THE DESIGNER DATA OF JOHN GOLDSORPE

The limitations of ‘tailor made’ data are amply illustrated by the evidence generated in the Affluent Worker Study at the initiative of Goldthorpe and three collaborators in the 1960s (Goldthorpe et al. 1968). A principal object of this research was to test and if possible refute the Zweig thesis that the rising living standards of the immediate post war era would ultimately erode the material foundations of class association and thus politics (Zweig 1961). Goldthorpe and his collaborators actively engage with the question of whether the Labour Party can continue to draw on the support of the majority of the manual working-class electorate. In retrospect and probably at the time also, it may be thought that the data produced by this project
could serve as an empirical benchmark for the degree of class identity and thus potential action in a section of society, argued by its authors to represent the cutting edge of class formation processes at the end of the first decade of post-war affluence – Luton Car Workers.

Any contemporary sociologist of stratification seeking an understanding of the potential role of gender in processes of class formation and consciousness in post-war Britain and turning for secondary analysis to a data resource purposefully designed by Goldthorpe to measure current patterns of class consciousness and action will certainly be disappointed. The Affluent Worker Project is silent on the question of women’s political consciousness. Though the researchers interviewed the wives of the male workers in their sample, quite simply and remarkably, they failed to gather any material on how the wives of their male informants conceived their material interests in relation to their democratic rights at the ballot box. The section of the questionnaire used by Goldthorpe and his co-researchers at Luton to elicit class voting intentions is sandwiched between two other sections on children and household finance. In both outer sections, either husband or wife are earmarked as suitable informants, in the section concerned with voting, only the male is given the opportunity to express a political opinion or voting intention.

If the war between Goldthorpe and the feminists is anything to go by, he will surely have a convenient methodological rationale for this omission (Goldthorpe 1983). Less partisan judges will find it difficult to avoid the conclusion that women were omitted because this ‘tailor made’ data set was confined by a paradigmatic logic which excluded female experience. Driven by a theoretical vision of class consciousness and action as male preoccupations forged in the productive spheres of society, Goldthorpe and his colleagues constructed a set of empirical proofs which fed and nurtured their own theoretical assumptions instead of exposing them to a valid test of adequacy.

The Affluent Worker Project is a sociological relic produced at the hand of John Goldthorpe and with all the benefits of his sociological imagination and empirical skills. As an empirical record, it may be set beside the more casual documentation of working-class life and ideology in the collected published reflections of Ferdinand Zweig. An important feature of Zweig’s understanding of the course of class formation and identity in mid-twentieth century Britain was the incorporation of conjugal identity and of private material ambition in the structuring of social identity. In his sociological forays into working-class life and labour, Zweig was aware that women as well as men inhabited the material world of the working class and this gave his accounts of affluent workers and their status concerns, a quite explicit gender dimension (Zweig 1952). If Zweig had conducted a systematic investigation of the future voting patterns of affluent workers, we can be sure that he would have recognized the necessity to interrogate the
political ideologies and future voting intentions of working-class women as well as men. Though the data he generated are far less systematic than those produced by the Luton Study, in many ways they constitute a far more useful sociological relic than the tabular but tainted responses elicited by Goldthorpe and his co-researchers. It will be up to later researchers of historical archives to judge the strengths and weaknesses of either empirical source as a guide to subsequent developments in class politics in Britain.

Goldthorpe might, to use his own words, see the empirical account he generated in Luton as ‘tailor made’ for the purposes of measuring class consciousness among affluent workers. Other observers may doubt the adequacy of the fit. Even though there is no evidence that Goldthorpe was forced to ‘cut his coat according to the available cloth’ – there was no shortage of yardage, what was missing was a value neutral sociological vision of the minimum data requirements for a valid investigation of working-class politics. This remarkable shortcoming of the Affluent Worker Study serves as a striking reminder that all empirical data however constructed have potential ‘relic’ qualities and as such must be interpreted cautiously having regard to the processes and ideologies of their generation. In Goldthorpe’s own words

. . . historical facts should be recognized as no more than ‘inferences from relics’; and inferences which had always to be weighted, so to speak, according to the security of their grounding, which were often interdependent – that is stood or fell together – which were often of course at all times open to restatement, whether radically or through more subtle changes of nuance. (Goldthorpe 1991: 221)

THE VIRTUES OF GROUNDING THEORY IN DATA

The empirical findings of the Affluent Worker Project tell us more about the masculinist values of mid-century sociology than they inform the processes of stratification, politics and material life. By excluding women, Goldthorpe and his co-workers guaranteed the obsolescence of their data even as they collected them. Had they conducted the most preliminary of searches for possible gender effects in class voting behaviour, they would have seen immediately that the female vote had determined the outcome of the three successive general elections which antecedced their study. Harold Macmillan was prime minister of Britain throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s by grace of the women’s vote. In each of the relevant elections, a majority of men voted Labour; conversely, it was the margin of the female working class exercising their political power on behalf of the Conservative party that determined who governed Britain in the heyday of the affluent society. Remarkably not one
sociological study of political behaviour in mid-twentieth century Britain seriously engaged with gender as a force in class politics. Every published study produced the same old evidence tailor made to reinforce the dominant paradigm of male occupational class as the motor of electoral choice.

Goldthorpe and his co-researchers missed the opportunity to play a creative role in extending theoretical understanding of class politics at a watershed of the twentieth century because they allowed their paradigmatic assumptions to dictate the empirical content of their research. They created an empirical picture which reinforced a mid-century masculinist theory of social stratification when they could have broadened their enquiry to include women and thereby developed a more penetrating interpretation of current and future trends in class politics. Apart from anything else, they would have furnished a unique record of intra-conjugal voting patterns at mid-century. Instead, their tailor made report offered a temporary reprieve to an old worn out paradigm when a broader perspective might have paved the way for an extended theory of stratification and politics, a theory which might have made Goldthorpe an innovator in the field of stratification research instead of a defender of the increasingly indefensible status quo.

Here lies an important methodological lesson for sociology. Beware of allowing theory to dictate the parameters of empirical evidence. The development of theoretical knowledge in sociology must depend upon a willingness to engage the full range of evidence of social organization and not allow research to be dictated by rigid paradigms. Glazer and Strauss refer to this process as *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* and they make a virtue of the unity of theoretical and empirical categories (Glazer and Strauss 1967). Advocates of grounded theory may emphasize the cultural ignorance of the theorist and the ease with her/his alien meaning may be imposed on empirical observation without the author's cognizance. Alternatively, they may stress the necessity for the sociological intelligence to roam the empirical literature (past and present) in search of systematic patterns which suggest constant or contingent features of social organization. By this method sociologists can produce more authentic interpretations by allowing the fieldwork experience (be it participant observation or extensive historical/comparative survey) to teach them what is significant. Only lived experience, records of actual events and real social processes are put under the sociological microscope. In grounded theory, empirical experience has the upper hand, there is no pretence of pristine autonomy and neither desire nor opportunity to contrive an artificial representation of reality for the sake of testing theory.

This alternative to theory construction reverses the direction of creative influence – theory should emerge from the data, out of the theorist's direct confrontation with recorded empirical experience.
Though it may be contrasted with an orthodox view of theory emerging through a kind of spontaneous 'intellectual' combustion, in practice it is not so different from what all sociologists do as they struggle to make sense of social reality. In the course of its development, the sociological imagination engages the process of grounding theory in a continuous and unconscious fashion. It likewise applies emergent interpretations to new or old empirical events. Goldthorpe probably does it all the time. If sufficiently free from a paradigmatic prison and not overwhelmed by a vast numerical data set, theoretical understanding has an organic quality, it grows and elaborates in a dialogue with the empirical world and with critics in its own disciplinary circle.

Ultimately, the test of theory depends upon how many peers acknowledge that it is a significant area of inquiry and how many serious critics accept the validity of the empirical case made by its author. There is certainly no guarantee that artificially contrived tailor made data will be more persuasive than the record of 'naturally' occurring events, indeed in the former case, genuine theoretical insights are often drowned in a sea of methodological objections. More often than not tailor made data are judged inadequate to the task of testing even a specific theory drawn from a well defined paradigm. Frequently they prove more useful in suggesting new avenues of both theoretical speculation and empirical investigation.

The issue is thus far more complicated than Goldthorpe makes out. To establish his case that one (his) form of inquiry has access to an altogether qualitatively different and superior form of data, he oversimplifies the process of generating tailor made data and ignores its shortcomings. Furthermore, his claim that tailor made data enjoys the advantage of establishing the subjective meanings of social actors completely sidesteps the issue of exactly whose meaning gets recorded and how subjective meanings relate to the artificial questions and encounters that structure purposeful sociological investigations. When these methodological issues are brought to the fore, his case that the degree of data adequacy sets sociological theorizing about current events apart from historical theorizing looks more than a little frayed.

I do not intend to glorify tinkering as opposed to tailoring as the right methodological approach in sociology, indeed neither term is useful to describe what should constitute a careful sociological methodology. Purposefully designed data have their place in the methodological repertoire of sociology but they should only be used in full recognition of their strengths and weaknesses in specific conditions. The same applies to methodologies intended to gather more naturalistic representations of reality. The important point is to counter Goldthorpe's far too one sided rendering of the virtues of his preferred approach in sociology. Tailor made data are produced by
and reflect theory – they do not have a pristine autonomy or even an existence outside of the artificial process of their generation. To an important and potentially discrediting degree, they are data designed and constructed in the image of theory.

THE METHODOLOGICAL STANDARDS OF MACRO-SOCIOLOGY

Sociologists who delve into historical materials with a view to exposing general patterns or trends in social relationships know that they must be wary of their sources. If they are not they expect to be held to account by their peers. The vision of theory presentation and reception emanating from Goldthorpe’s account smacks of a passivity which few macro-sociologists or sociologically oriented historians would recognize. Goldthorpe depicts fellow sociologists as naive, willing to accept any set of empirical proofs put in front of them, incapable of judging the epistemological merit or empirical logic of evidence, and thus in need of his cautionary guidance. This vision is so out of step with reality as to be ludicrous. What theoretical account has ever entered the realms of sociological wisdom without being subjected to the most rigorous, sometimes ungenerous attacks on its adequacy? Why does Goldthorpe feel impelled to warn others of the dangers of historical sociology? Does he believe that he has some privileged capacity to judge the merits of Barrington Moore’s use of evidence that others lack? Furthermore, even if some part, even the bulk of The Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy (1966) were judged to be inadequate on account of its empirical proofs, who, other than Goldthorpe, would want to say that sociology or history would have been better served if the book had not been published in the first place?²

There is no question that undergraduate and graduate students all over the world, with the possible exception of Nuffield College (the Saville Row of empirical sociology?), have benefitted enormously from the insights of Barrington Moore even if many ultimately reject the argument either partially or totally. The same is true of all the others indicted by Goldthorpe. In truth, these contemporary works of macro-sociology have captured the imagination of the coming generation of macro-sociologists who recognize that the old sociological orthodoxies of male occupation and class are increasingly obsolete in a global community where the identities of nationalism, ethnicity, race and gender are far more capable of generating both social action and intellectual curiosity. This is the real source of Goldthorpe’s irritation with historical sociology, for he has heavy investments in the old orthodoxies, investments now in constant need of defence and reassertion.

All empirical materials which stand as potential sociological data
have what Goldthorpe terms a 'relic' quality. Even during the process of generation and certainly as soon as it is complete, data begin to fossilize and the possibilities of multiple adaptation and re-interpretation begin to diminish. It is for this reason that rigor in the interpretation of empirical evidence is as important in sociology as it is in history. Nobody should be lulled into believing the claims of Goldthorpe: Tailor and Outfitter to the discipline of Sociology, that his garments will be well fitting and hard wearing. The empirical records of the past and the present are there in their more or less relic form for us all to weigh, sift and evaluate. We do not need paternalistic advice on go and no go areas of legitimate sociology. All theoretical arguments exposed to the empirical record are subject to disciplinary scrutiny and, more often than not, it is data gathered in the here and now, which proves to be most limited for testing theories other than the paradigm which shaped its collection as the record of Goldthorpe's past research testifies.

John Goldthorpe insists that there is a real difference between history and sociology, a difference based in the when and how of data generation. Many contemporary historical sociologists or even just those among us who occasionally find it essential to interpret the evidence of the past in order to better understand the present will agree that there is a real difference between sociology and history, but one of approach not data. The data of society comes in both past and present forms; it is how we seek to use these data, the sorts of questions we address that determines whether an inquiry is sociologically oriented. For this reason there are many historians who have more in common with sociologists than they do with their disciplinary peers and vice versa. Goldthorpe may be among the latter. His idealized account of what each discipline should seek to achieve is remarkably similar – for both historians and sociologists, he advocates specific time and place bound inquiries defined by the limits of the data at hand. This reveals something of the conventional historian in Goldthorpe, a historian of the present even if equipped with allegedly superior techniques for gathering, assembling, or at least manipulating empirical data. His reluctance to admit the importance of generalization in sociology and his dismissal of comparative historical research sets him apart from Durkheim, Weber and Marx who established our discipline by making imaginative use of exactly the sort of data Goldthorpe dismisses as relics.

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Nicky Hart

Department of Sociology
University of California at Los Angeles
NOTES

1. For a critique of the Affluent Worker Project, see Hart (1989: 19–60).

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