

D I G I T H U M

A RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON CULTURE AND SOCIETY

<http://digithum.uoc.edu>**SPECIAL SECTION “Fictioning Social Theory: The Use of Fiction to Enrich, Inform, and Challenge the Theoretical Imagination”****Introduction**Olli Pyyhtinen
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Introduction

In the present post-truth moment the authority of science is being increasingly challenged. As a response to the rise in anti-scientific thinking and alternative facts, we have seen efforts such as the March for Science emphasizing the key role that scientific research and its results should play in policy making and in political decisions and actions regarding the economy, society, and the future of humanity and our planet. For all the mischief it has caused, the post-truth age has nevertheless catalyzed a transformation of the epistemology of science. By problematizing rigid dichotomies between fact and value, science and politics, and truth and opinion, it has forced scholars to rethink their ideas about how scientific knowledge is produced. It is no longer possible to hold on to the classical view of science, according to which facts merely speak for themselves. There are no brute, self-evident matters of fact, but every “fact” in scholarly reasoning is in need of interpretation to make sense. Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers (2000; 2008; 2011) has spoken of science along these lines as a “constructivist” project: scientific research does not merely discover and describe

phenomena out there in the world, but it actively participates in producing them. That facts are *made* instead of just found already existing there in the world is also suggested by the etymology of the noun “fact”, which derives from Latin *factum*, “event”, “occurrence”, literally “thing done”.¹ A fact is a result of a certain kind of practical activity involving work of fabrication. This does not make facts any less real; only that they do not pop out of nowhere, but emerge out of artificial situations.

Scientific statements are therefore distinguished from fiction only *a posteriori*, not *a priori*. Of course, this is not something that only just our post-truth moment has made visible, but the entanglement of science with fiction is centuries-old. According to Stengers (2000), *Discourse concerning Two New Sciences*, which Galileo wrote in 1637 after his condemnation by the church, marks an important event in the history of modern sciences in this respect, as it states the definition of uniformly accelerated motion under the guise of fiction. To animate his claims, Galileo stages an imagined dialogue between Salviati, the “Academician” who acts as Galileo’s spokesperson, and two laymen, Simplicio and Sagredo, who ask questions and pose objections. Stengers

1. The verb *facere*, of which *factum* is neuter past participle, means “to do”.

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suggests that, by using the power of fiction to make nature speak, Galileo came to establish the “inseparability between science and fiction”: as opposed to the dominant modern Western philosophy, which assumes a purified thinking and knowing subject, stripped of anything that would let it slide toward the domain of fiction, sciences demand that “they be very particular fictions, capable of silencing those who claim ‘it’s only a fiction’” (Stengers, 2000, p. 80).

This special issue taps into the discussions about the inseparability of scholarship and fiction by asking, how fiction could be used as a theoretical resource in social scientific thinking. Could fiction inform, enrich, extend, intensify, and challenge the sociological imagination? Besides rejecting any clear-cut separation of social science and fictional and artistic forms, the special issue also seeks to unsettle our certainty as to what counts as “fact” and what as “fiction” in the first place. Michel Foucault, for example, has problematized their dichotomy in a helpful way. In an interview dealing with the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault insists on the possibility of fiction functioning in truth:

I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is therefore absent. It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth, and for bringing it about that a true discourse engenders or manufactures something that does not as yet exist, that is, “fictions” it. One “fictions” history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true, one “fictions” a politics not yet in existence on the basis of a historical truth. (Foucault, 1980, p. 193)

The special issue explores ways of “fictioning” theory and social reality by engaging with literary and other artistic and fictional forms. It commences from the idea that while art has its own logic and deals with its own particular problems, using its own particular material and techniques – painters, for example think in terms of lines and colours, writers in terms of words, and filmmakers in terms of images – there exist points of mutual resonance between art and social theory, and the insights and discoveries of each can be translated in a fruitful manner to the domain of the other. We take here as our lead the conviction that sometimes and in some respects narrative and artistic forms may contain as much theoretical or philosophical insight as scholarship and, with its narratives, forms, symbols, freedom, and means of expression it may even get through where research may only repeat and stagnate with all its jargon and technicality (Serres with Latour, 1995, p. 24). Yet we need concepts, frameworks, and theories to tell what it is that is sociologically relevant and interesting in art and fiction, as the latter do not speak for themselves. Only scholarship can go deep enough to show in which ways art and fiction go deeper than it (Serres, 1997, p. 63). Accordingly, the special issue experiments with how fiction and theory can be used in a manner to re-interpret, interrogate, and enrich one another.

Rivalry with literature

Always since its early days, sociology has had an intimate yet complex relationship to fiction. In *Between Literature and Science* (1988), Wolf Lepenies vividly describes how, in the mid-nineteenth century, sociology and literature competed with one another for interpretative authority on modern civilization and the new industrial society. While especially in France and England the social sciences sought to secure a scientific status by imitating the natural sciences, their struggle for disciplinary identity and authority was evermore intensified by the proximity of and competition from literature. For example, the title Honoré de Balzac originally came up with for *Comédie Humaine* was *Etudes Sociales*. Gustave Flaubert framed his writing in competition with sociology even more explicitly. He regarded his work as a social science superior to that produced by sociologists, for he thought that an author simultaneously sees through society and eludes its ties and constraints. And Émile Zola, who characterized his novels as a “*sociologie pratique*”, considered his work as a more refined social science and ultimately himself alone as a practitioner of true sociology. Sociology thereby came to occupy a position as a “third culture” between the natural sciences, on the one hand, and literature and the humanities on the other (Lepenies, 1988, pp. 4–7).

In *The Sociological Imagination* ([1959] 2000), C. Wright Mills, too, famously acknowledges the similarity of the job of social scientists and authors. According to him, both sociology and literature – whether fiction, history, drama, biography, or poetry – try to grasp and understand what is happening in the world and within people themselves as members of society. Both thus shed light on how what is going on in the world affects the lives and fates of people. Nevertheless, while he admits that literature may treat the same topics as sociology and at best it may accomplish this “with dramatic sharpness”, for Mills it nevertheless lacks the intellectual clarity of an adequate, systematic, and critical social scientific analysis (Mills, [1959] 2000, p. 18). He thereby saw it merely as a preliminary step toward proper social science, suggesting that it is only due to “the absence of an adequate social science” that “critics and novelists, dramatists and poets have been the major, and often the only, formulators of private troubles and even of public issues” (ibid., p. 18).

Mills also suggests that people “yearn for facts, [...] search for their meaning, [...] want ‘a big picture’ in which they can believe in and within which they can come to understand themselves”, but they find none of them in contemporary literature (ibid., p. 17). He does not, however, say that these qualities are not to be found in literature, only that “men [sic] do not often *find* them there” (ibid., p. 17; italics added). Social scientists have not mostly found – or: sought – them there anymore either. As the discipline became institutionalized and professionalized, it was separated from literature and the humanities by clearer boundaries. Pierre

Bourdieu (1996, p. xvi) has suggested that “countless are those who forbid sociology any profaning contact with the work of art”, either by thinking that works of art evade all rational and theoretical understanding or by worrying that a scientific analysis is “doomed to destroy that which makes for the specificity of the literary work and of reading, beginning with aesthetic pleasure”.

However, things have not always been like so. In the nineteenth century, the division between social science and literature was not yet as fixed and clear. In addition to authors such as Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola, as was mentioned above, describing their work as a kind of social science, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, for example, made extensive use of literature in their works. It is characteristic of their style to frequently refer to literary and mythological figures, use aphorisms, make comparisons to literature, and include quotations from works of literature (Baxandall and Morawski, 2006). The work of Georg Simmel, too, is intertwined with art and literature in many ways. Not only did Simmel write poetry, aphorisms, and short stories himself and adopted literary tropes in his scholarly writings, but he also provided interpretations of works of art and used paintings, sculptures, drama, poetry, and novels as interpretive resources and sources of inspiration for advancing his own thought (see also e.g. Swedberg and Reich, 2010; Kemple, 2018; Beer, 2019). As Thomas Kemple shows in his article included in this special issue, Simmel addresses the crisis of modern culture in the spheres of both philosophy and imaginative fiction and develops his life-philosophy through his readings of Goethe’s drama, poems, and novels. Ultimately, by engaging with Simmel, Kemple proposes an understanding of theory itself as a literary genre.

Examining the relationship of sociology and fictional and artistic forms thus allows us to cast light on the present disciplinary order. It helps us unsettle the institutionalized disciplinary ways of ordering knowledge and thought, which appear as largely taken for granted today.² Instead of being invariable, inevitable, and natural, the disciplinary divisions are changeable, contingent, and constructed. Disclosing the historicity and precariousness of the boundary between sociology and literature and other forms of fiction and art enables us not only to acknowledge the vicinity of and crossings between the two domains, but also to make better use of the analytic potential of art and fiction.

Art and theory

Recently, the relations between social sciences and artistic and fictional forms have been sought fairly actively. Instead of seeing them as two separate cultures, scholars emphasize their fruitful

connections. In *The Art of Social Theory* (2014, p. 202), Richard Swedberg addresses the damaging effects of the separation:

The two ideas of art as a separate sphere of its own and of art as the incarnation of creativity and subjectivity block the interaction between social science and art. In my view the relationship between art and social science needs to be looked at from a different perspective and redefined in such a way that social scientists can begin to learn from art.

Swedberg insists on the importance of acknowledging – and strengthening – the role of imagination and creativity in social science. As he writes: “However deep your basic knowledge of social theory is, and however many concepts, mechanisms, and theories you know, unless this knowledge is used in an imaginative way, the result will be dull and noncreative” (ibid., p. 190). For instance, the views of sociology as an “art form” (Nisbet, [1976] 2002), the rise of “arts based research” (Barone and Eisner, 2012), and calls for a “poetic for sociology” (Brown, 1977) and “lyrical sociology” (Abbott, 2007) do testify to a more open attitude towards art within the discipline. In addition, while in the not so distant past, especially works of popular culture still presented something of a “seemingly barren intellectual wasteland” for academic scholarship due to their mass appeal (Wright, 1975, p. 2), today their legitimacy as points of reference, resources, and sources in and for scholarly writing is no longer questioned to the same extent. For example, in *Telling About Society* (2007, p. 8), Howard Becker acknowledges the great value of fiction for social scientists as a mode of telling about social reality, insisting on fictional forms being excellent “vehicles of social analysis”. Furthermore, the volume *Imaginative Methodologies in the Social Sciences* (2014) edited Michael Hviid Jacobsen, Michael S. Drake, Kieran Keohane, and Anders Petersen explores how conventional social scientific modes of thinking and writing could be challenged and reshaped by using literary, poetic and other resources. In their introduction to the volume, the editors go as far as speaking of a “literary or poetic ‘turn’ in social sciences”, though they themselves admit the inadequacy of such a metaphor (Hviid Jacobsen et al., 2014, p. 3). Be that as it may, scholars have not only engaged with particular works of fiction (see e.g. Bourdieu, 1996; AlSayyad, 2006; Hyvärinen, 2008; Pyyhtinen, 2014; Veijola et al., 2014; Hyvärinen, Oinonen and Saari, 2015; Abrahamsson, 2018), but also begun to consider the relations of fiction and social scientific research in more systematic and methodological terms.

Indeed, the reading of literary texts should not be exclusively literary (Bourdieu, 1996, p. xvi), but one can also pursue a

2. Elizabeth Goodstein (2017) problematizes our contemporary disciplinary order by looking at Simmel’s liminal position between philosophy and sociology in the academia of his day, when disciplinary divisions were only emerging.

theoretical reading of them and other fictional and artistic forms. David Beer (2016) has identified in a very helpful manner three ways in which social theory and art or fiction may interweave:

Firstly, theory may be used to interpret, analyse, and enliven fiction (Beer, 2016). Works of art and fiction figure here as materials or “data” for studies. This suggests, importantly, that novels, short stories, poems, cartoons, plays, films, and TV series, for example, may be just as legitimate and informative materials for scholarship as those provided, say, by interview data, observation, documents, or surveys. The work of Slavoj Žižek, who uses a lot of pop culture references in his works, mostly from films – such as *The Sound of Music*, Hitchcock’s films, or movies by David Lynch – provides an illuminating case in point. While they are a way of making difficult theoretical ideas and arguments more accessible, there also lies a more substantial point behind Žižek’s usage of the pop culture examples. Following Jacques Lacan, Žižek suggests that sometimes the truth has the structure of a fiction. What you cannot say in reality may re-emerge in fictional forms. He suggests that it is in fiction that we encounter the Real, which is often too traumatic to endure and live with. Reality itself thus offers a phantasmatic screen that “protects us from being directly overwhelmed by the raw Real”, and thus “it is not that dreams are for those who cannot endure reality, reality itself is for those who cannot endure (the Real that announces itself in) their dreams” (Žižek, 2006, p. 57).

It is important to note that, ultimately, Žižek does not merely provide a reading of fictional forms in the light of theory, but he confronts concepts and theoretical ideas with fragments from popular culture, elucidating for example Freud’s structural model of the psyche consisting of the id, ego, and super-ego by interpreting Hitchcock’s *Psycho* through it. According to Žižek, each of the floors in Norman Bates’ house corresponds to a level of the psyche: the ground-floor is that of the ego; the first floor, where Bates acts as his mother, belongs to the super-ego; and, lastly, the id prevails in the dark basement. Another crucial point with Žižek’s use of pop culture references is that he interprets and theorizes fiction not only in terms of its contents, but also as a cultural form. Not least due to their spreading out in society, fictional forms affect how we think and experience reality. In the book *Sixguns and Society* (1975), Will Wright, for instance, suggests that no American and few in the world can escape the influence of Westerns. Not only are Westerns enormously popular: everyone has seen one, and Italy, Spain, Germany, and Japan, for example, have made their own Western movies; but they have also become part of the Western cultural imaginary: “The Marlboro Man made Marlboro the best-selling cigarettes in the world; pintos, mustangs, mavericks are popular automobiles as well as animals and images from the Western; dude ranches do a thriving business, turning up even in Germany; western clothing is fashionable; rodeos are the most popular spectator sport in America” (Wright, 1975, p. 1).

Secondly, Beer (2016) suggests that fiction and art may also be used as documentary sources or interpretive resources. And there is indeed “fact to be found in fiction” (Hviid Jacobsen et al. 2014, p. 11; see also Rockwell, 1974). Works of art and fiction never emerge from a socio-historical vacuum, but they are made in a particular milieu. Thereby fictional and artistic forms also tell something about the time and social conditions in which they were produced; they are capable of capturing, representing, or reflecting aspects of the surrounding social reality. The aforementioned *Sixguns & Society* (1975) provides a classical example here. In it, Wright examines the social meaning of the Western as a cultural genre and an American myth and what it tells about the American society. Wright classifies the Western into four types according to their plot: the classical plot, the vengeance variation, the transition theme, and the professional plot. In the classical plot, for example, which is the prototype of all Westerns, the distinction between the individual and society is sharp. The hero is a “lone stranger who rides into a troubled town and cleans it up” (Wright, 1975, p. 32). His strength and exceptional ability make him independent and unique. As people recognize the difference between the hero and themselves, he is given a special status, yet he is not fully accepted into society. The people of society are decent and good but also dependent and weak, threatened by a group of villains trying to exploit the land and the people. Only the hero can fight and defeat the villains and save the society and, in result, he also becomes accepted by the society yet ultimately gives up his special status (ibid., pp. 137–43). For Wright, the classical Western addresses the question “how we can maintain our independence and still be part of society” (ibid., p. 137). This is not only a philosophical or theoretical problem, but one faced by most of us in our lives. The classical plot also relates in a particular way to American society, Wright suggests, as it responds to how Americans at the same time strive to become autonomous individuals demanded by the capitalist market and yet belong to society and adapt to its values. In that respect, for Wright “the structure of the classical Western reflects the conflict between institutional constraints and the cultural values of a market society” (ibid., p. 132).

Wright’s analysis of the Western illustrates how fiction may mirror society and the daily experience of individuals. This is to say that fiction tells not only about imagined, non-existing things, but may “help our understanding of the actually existing social world” (Beer, 2016, p. 410). It is understandable that social scientists approach fiction from this perspective, but there lies the danger that fiction is seen *merely* to mirror existing social reality, downplaying the power of imagination. Works of fiction and artistic forms are capable of providing a break from what exists by imagining realities not yet in existence. For example, the novel *Submission* (2015) by the French author Michel Houellebecq does this by presenting a quasi-dystopian political fiction about Islamized France. The novel has been duly criticized for bringing right wing ideology back to French literature, but ultimately

Submission is a satirical portrait of contemporary French society.³ The main protagonist Francois, a professor of literature and a J.K. Huysmans specialist, who lives his life devoid of meaning, vocation, passion, meaningful connections, and deeply held beliefs, is the embodiment of the blasé and indifferent modern individual. *Submission* thereby presents a critique of Western cynicism and value vacuum. It operates through hyperbolicism: taking current multiculturalism as its starting point, the novel exaggerates the deficiencies that Houellebecq identifies to suggest or “fiction” a possible dystopian future. Critical sociological research, too, needs to question existing reality and, as Foucault expressed it in the quote cited above, it may “fiction” or portray possible futures, “something that does not as yet exist”.

Besides imagining realities not yet in existence, sometimes artistic and fictional forms may actively participate in constructing and performing social relations and the social reality. Steven Shaviro's *Post Cinematic Affect* (2010) provides a good example, as it approaches films and music videos as “affective maps, which do not just passively trace or represent, but actively construct and perform, the social relations, flows, and feelings that they are ostensibly ‘about’” (ibid., p. 6). Shaviro suggests that “digital technologies together with neoliberal economic relations, have given birth to radically new ways of manufacturing and articulating lived experience” (ibid., p. 2). In the book, Shaviro uses the films *Boarding Gate*, *Southland Tales*, and *Gamer* as well as the music video for Grace's Jones song “Corporate Cannibal” to trace these changes. Ultimately, by looking at “developments that are so new and unfamiliar that we scarcely have the vocabulary to describe them, and yet they have become so common, and so ubiquitous, that we tend not even to notice them any longer”, his aim is to give “an account of *what is feels like* to live in the early twenty-first century” (ibid., p. 2).

Thirdly, fiction and art may also be used to enrich theory and the theoretical imagination (Beer, 2016). Whereas in the aforementioned first point of intersection theory was used to interpret works of fiction and art, and in the second one they were used as resources for interpreting the surrounding social reality, in this third mode of entanglement they are used as a vehicle and springboard for theorizing. This is to use fictional and artistic forms to think about theory: to interpret, elaborate, develop, enrich, energize, and vitalize but possibly also problematize and challenge theoretical ideas, concepts, and projects. Here fiction or art is neither approached as an object of study nor used as a documentary source or interpretative resource, but it appears more as a “companion” or “fellow traveller” along theoretical paths and

journeys.⁴ In such a case, stories, narratives, images, and fictional forms serve as much more than mere “illustrations”, nor does the scholarly text necessarily present a systematic analysis of them. Rather than being merely *about* the used materials, the theorizing thinks *with* them (Pyyhtinen, 2014).

For example, in his article in this special issue, Matti Hyvärinen argues that literary fiction contains plenty of useful materials for examining the problem of the mind. With its verbalizations of the inner life of fictional characters, it offers ways of accessing human interiority in a manner that is not possible with real minds. The reader of a novel may gain the kind of in-depth knowledge of the experiences and thought contents of the characters that one can never attain in everyday interactions or by means of qualitative interviews in research. Nevertheless, Hyvärinen emphasizes that fictional minds are never transparent, not even to “omniscient narrators”. Even in fiction there are minds that resist readers' efforts to understand them, in addition to being not entirely accessible to the fictional characters themselves. Hyvärinen suggests that it is best to approach fictional minds – as much as real minds – from the perspective of primary intersubjectivity, and therefore the problem of mind should be of great sociological relevance.

Crafting sociological stories

Besides using fiction to theorize, there may also be a poetics or fiction to be uncovered in sociological scholarship. Research is never simply about harvesting facts, but also a matter of enacting realities and producing events. This makes it a “poetic” endeavour, to draw from the Greek word *poiesis* (ποίησις), which means making, creating, and giving form. It brings something into existence that did not exist before. And scholars do this primarily through writing. Writing is therefore not only about neutral and passive documenting, but also a “method of inquiry”, a “way of ‘knowing’ – a method of discovery and analysis” (Richardson, 1994, p. 516). Sociologists are fundamentally also “storytellers” (Gordon, 2008).⁵ In trying to make sense of the world, they craft stories. Storytelling, to put the matter simply, is a way of making sense of something by weaving it into a more or less coherent narrative (Denzin, 2014, p. 94).

While almost all sociological writing involves storytelling on some level or another, it is in ethnography where this is perhaps the most visible and articulate. The craft of ethnography involves immersion in a social setting and providing a written account of it based on one's observations and experiences. Rather than

3. It is also typical of Houellebecq to incorporate elements of sociological discourse in his books. In *Submission*, he, for example, ironically refers to an (imaginary) essay by a young sociologist Daniel Da Silva, titled “One Day, Son, All This Will Be Yours”, which in the book's plot manages to legitimize the change towards a new model of society in France, which, until then, had remained implicit.

4. Cf. Kemple and Pyyhtinen (2016, p. 1).

5. Ronald J. Berger and Richard Quinney (2005) have coined the useful term “storytelling sociology” (see also Hyvärinen, 2016).

comprising analytic arguments, ethnographic accounts are typically written in the form of narrative “tales” (Van Maanen, 1988; Richardson, 1990). That ethnographic texts are stories also means that there simply is no one “best”, “natural”, or “objective” description of what happened in the field, but the events may be described in several different ways, depending on the theoretical point of view, on the selection of what is included and what is left out, and on the chosen frame, for example (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995).

While ethnographic storytelling, too, brings scholarly writing closer to the realm of literature, occasionally social scientists have also experimented with literary tropes, forms, and techniques more commonly seen in fiction. Philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour, for example, has repeatedly made creative use of the dialogue form. To give a couple of examples, a chapter in his book *Reassembling the Social* (2005a) consists of an imagined dialogue between a student and his Socratic professor (Latour himself). In addition, Latour has also authored an imaginary dialogue, where two characters of what appears to be a couple, a “He” and a “She”, engage in a dialogue on Ulrich Beck and Bruno Latour and their views on modernity (Latour, 2004).⁶ Yet another occasion is the well-known Tarde Durkheim debate, which Latour acted out with Bruno Karsenti (with Latour himself as Tarde and Karsenti as Durkheim) (Viana Vargas et al., 2008).

The dialogue as a form of investigation was also mobilized at the “Weber/Simmel Antagonisms: Staged Dialogues” conference, organized at the University of Edinburgh in December 2015, in which the author of this text had the privilege in taking part.⁷ According to the organizers, the idea behind staging a set of imagined dialogues between Weber and Simmel was to uncover the proximity and tensions between the work of the authors, to uncover some of the “unthoughts” of each, to bring their thought alive as a living force, and also to explore the possibilities dormant in the theatrical form for teaching the classics (Darmon and Frade, 2017). Interestingly, the dialogues undermined any clear and taken-for-granted distinctions between fact and fiction. While they were indeed imagined, they were also meant to be “real in the sense of not merely historically believable or plausible but compelling in thought, persuasive in inviting the reader-listener to draw and unfold its implications in the present” (ibid., p. 82).⁸

Scholars have also put other literary modes in explorative use. Latour’s *Aramis, or the Love of Technology* (1996), for instance,

gives speaking parts to non-human actors like the Paris subway, and *The Pasteurization of France* (1988) uses Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* as a model to narrate battles among microbes and scientists. The article “The Body in Tourism” (1994) by Soile Veijola and Eeva Jokinen presents another fascinating example. The paper, written in the form of travel diary, combines literary style and scholarly content in a highly creative and playful manner. It takes the reader to a beach holiday in Mallorca with the authors, who have carried tourism studies texts with them there in their suitcases and heads. While on the island, the authors engage in imagined dialogues with the authors of those analyses to “see what they could tell us in the time and space of tourism, instead of *here*, in the time and space of sociological discourse. How far from the academic corpus would these texts connect?” (Veijola and Jokinen, 1994, p. 125) The paper “The death of the tourist” (1998) by the same authors presents a sequel to the first paper. Asking where the body in tourism is, the authors experiment with a variety of forms of narration, from detective stories to campus stories and travel stories. Let it also be noted that the article has perhaps one of the most catching and surprising openings of any academic article ever: “I was lying on the beach. I had been murdered.” (Veijola and Jokinen, 1998, p. 327) Furthermore, “The Body in Tourism Industry” (2007) by Veijola and Anu Valtonen is yet another variation on the same theme. It, too, plays with narratives, as the introduction and the conclusion of the paper are written tongue-in-cheek to ironize the campus story genre.

Disrupting conventional forms and narrative structures of academic writing may be a way of enlivening sociological prose and making it more expressive. All too often, as any sociologist knows, sociological texts are laden with jargon or so-called “socspeak”, to the extent of being boring, unintelligible, and heavy to read. Ronald J. Berger and Richard Quinney (2005, p. 10) laconically suggest that “much sociological writing is, quite frankly, dull and turgid”. Mills ([1959] 2000, p. 217), too, lamented that “a turgid and polysyllabic prose does seem to prevail in the social sciences”, and he believed this to be a result of social scientists imitating the natural sciences.⁹ However, besides producing perhaps more enjoyable prose, adopting literary forms, tropes, and techniques may also spark creativity and imagination. “By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it”, as Laurel Richardson (1994, p. 516) suggests. Writing differently may allow us to think differently. It may unsettle, elude,

6. Latour uses the anonymous He and She characters in another dialogue, too, which he wrote for a collection in the honour of Donna Haraway and which explores the notion of critique implying an increase in proximity instead of in distance (Latour, 2005b). According to Latour, the dialogue was however rejected by the editor – something which one is of course tempted to read as a token of prevailing suspicion towards the use of poetic licence in academic writing.

7. Some of the dialogues have subsequently been published in a special issue of the *Journal of Classical Sociology* (ed. Darmon and Frade, 2017)

8. For other examples of the use of the (imaginary) dialogue form in social scientific scholarship, see e.g., Veijola and Jokinen, 1994; Richardson, 2014; Veijola et al., 2014; Kinzel and Mildorf, 2014.

9. However, Mills ([1959] 2000, p. 217) thought that bad penmanship does not pertain to the social sciences alone, but it is linked to a more general “crisis in literacy” in academia.

and perhaps even transform conventional analytic perspectives, explanations, and modes of knowledge production that have become too automatic, stale, and stereotyped. It may thereby increase our sensibilities and open up new lanes for theorizing.

Zygmunt Bauman (2000, p. 83) has maintained that “[t]o create (and also to discover) always means breaking a rule; following a rule is but routine, more of the same – not an act of creation”. For an author, according to Bauman, to create is to write in exile, in the “*refusal to be integrated*”. One must stay “nonsocialized”, as it were, and clear a space of freedom for writing (Ibid., p. 84). In his contribution to the special issue, Olli Pyyhtinen explores how the aspiration to achieve total freedom manifests in the six-volume autofiction novel *My Struggle* by the contemporary Norwegian literary author Karl Ove Knausgaard. Pyyhtinen examines Knausgaard’s writing as a practice of *parrhēsia*, telling the truth about oneself. Parrhesiast writing is a social act which nevertheless tries to escape sociality and remain nonsocialized. Pyyhtinen suggests that, ultimately, the freedom experiment of *My Struggle* fails but this does not diminish its value, as it is perhaps in how it fails that it renders visible how such mechanisms as shame and secrecy regulate social life.

The article by Soile Veijola, Emily Höckert, David Carlin, Ann Light, and Janne Säynäjäkangas breaks the rules and conventions of academic writing by experimenting with two literary genres rarely used in scholarly texts, namely postcard and letter. However, rather than amounting to an escape or displacement, a *décalage*, the collective writing experiment of the authors is best understood as an exploratory form of thinking together, in connections. Through a series of postcards and letters written by the authors and put through “epistolary inversions”, the authors reconfigure what a “conference” “as a temporary coming together of people to confer, that is, discuss things with each other – is, and what it could be. Countering taken-for-granted narratives and practices of conferencing as a social institution and traditional hierarchies of knowledge, they explore conferencing as a way of not only thinking-with but also living-well-between-ourselves, based on a “silence camp” organized in August 2016 in a remote place in Northern Lapland in Finland.

Coda

It is quite likely that the use of fiction and art as materials and resources will never become the standard mode of inquiry in the social sciences, nor will writing social science by experimenting with literary tropes and forms. Rather, the liaison of fiction and theory is probably bound to remain a kind of *minoritarian* practice, and that is rightly so, if it is to remain vibrant; there’s no imperialist motive behind the suggested cross-fertilization of sociology and artistic and fictional forms. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari develop the notion of the “minority”

primarily in relation to minor languages but also ethnic minorities and sexual politics. According to them, a majority is only secondarily defined by quantitative dominance, that is, by outnumbering the minority. More important is the establishment of a *constant* – a standard. A majority is characterized by the normative stability of a practice and the ensuing lack of dynamism and variation. Whereas minorities often emulate majorities and try to become like them, Deleuze and Guattari importantly suggest that minoritarian practices also are capable of producing *variation and change* within the field defined by a majority. A minoritarian practice is about creation and becoming rather than about the paucity of its numbers. Disrupting the rules of conventional sociological knowledge production and academic writing, too, is a minoritarian practice making the order established by the majority porous and shaky. The practice deterritorializes the order instead of making itself submissive to it; it triggers fluctuations; and it shows how things could be otherwise. To put the matter in one of Deleuze and Guattari’s favourite figures of speech, a minoritarian usage of language can make the major language stutter. What a minority does to a majority, be it in the realm of language or politics, or in academic writing and thinking, is force the majority practice to vary, to become something new, and it does this by making it *less*, not by adding to it. Writing different, more imaginative, and minoritarian sociology shakes up the grand sociological tradition and its conventions by operating in the margins and crossovers.

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