MANCHESTER 1824
Manchester University Press

'What you gain should be some ability to take the standpoint of the other': An interview with LSE Director Craig Calhoun

CRAIG CALHOUN
London School of Economics and Political Science

ANDREAS HESS
University College Dublin

Abstract

In this interview Craig Calhoun discusses the complex relationship between sociology, national traditions and cultural peculiarities. Calhoun points to the tensions and potential contradictions that arise when sociological concepts that were coined at a specific time and refer to a specific place are applied to different conditions and contexts. Other problems come to mind: the dominance of the English-speaking world in academia, issues of cultural domination, even imperialism. The interview closes with suggestions as to how these issues can be addressed practically and the role that a more reflective world sociology can play in solving some of these questions.

Keywords: national sociology, social sciences, disciplinary history, comparative

AH[1]: *What do you think is the relationship between sociology and nation states?*

CC: Sociology almost everywhere has a fairly close relationship to national contexts. Some of that is just the parochialism of people talking to the people most near to them and being embedded in conversation, but some of it matters in intellectually deeper ways. Sociologists and sociology in different national traditions are more concerned with certain questions than others because of their salience in a specific context, because of a traditional history. Sociology and nationalism are in a certain sense complicit around the notion of society, so there has often been a critique of methodological nationalism, famously associated with Ulrich Beck, though others made this point before

 ISSN 0791-6035, EISSN 2050-5280, Vol. 23.1, 2015, pp. 118–128
http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/IJS.23.1.7

Beck. The very concept of society is deeply shaped by the idea of nation; both grew up together with the modern idea of nationhood. Sociology enters the scene in relation to this idea of nation, it doesn't become sociology in the strong sense of an institutionalised discipline until later when certain questions are asked such as, for example, what are the things that work and don't work? Are we oppressed by colonialism? Are we driven by class or by tradition? Are we changing because of industrialization? In these questions 'we' refers simultaneously to both a national sense of belonging and a sociological category.

Certainly there also exists a sociology that refers to other units of analysis besides nations,. However, sociology grew up in a context in which nations were becoming the dominant category. It's shaped by that, and so the idea that societies exist in a plural sense and with boundaries and much stronger internal integration than external ties, is part of sociology from early on. In some particular national traditions sociology plays a role in articulating both what that 'we' means – say, doing censuses and survey research and any manner of ethnographic studies to give an account of 'us', and also introducing critical awareness about biases in these accounts. When some Americans say 'we' they forget black Americans, and sociology tries partly to remedy that deficiency. So what gets called 'methodological nationalism' is more deeply a part of sociology than just methods.

AH: *But surely there are some nations that are more equal than others? Just look at the big four, the American, German, French and Italian traditions?*

CC: You mean that there is dominance? Absolutely. There is, if you will, a sort of hegemonic power and then there are other powers and there are certain pathways and traditions in sociology. So, yes, sociology is shaped by very asymmetrical relationships. Some dimensions of sociology travel more than others. Research methods travel more easily and are apparently more context independent than theories; theories travel more and are more context independent than the definition of empirical projects. But I think in all of these areas there is asymmetry. So there may be any number of differences; some may be to some extent neutral and accidental but are nonetheless bound up with histories of public engagement and specific concerns in different countries, including celebrations of national autonomy.

Take Eilert Sundt. He is not known as a major figure in world sociology but he played an important role in developing Norwegian sociology. Other important Norwegian sociologists might complain if he is given too much emphasis, and want recognition of different ancestors, bringing women into the picture more or emphasizing researchers without ties to theology. This is like the reckoning of national history. There are important dates and important events and important ancestors. In some countries there are revolutionary heroes; in other countries kings. Some are just local examples of a general type, different in content but not necessarily in form. In still other cases they are really different. Similarly, sociology pulls together distinct things that preceded academic disciplinary

organization. Think about the role of Catholic conservative thought in sociology. In France, this shapes a major sociological tradition. Trying to give an account of society, emphasizing 'the social', becomes a basis for potential resistance to some trends in economic and political modernisation. But this also connects to the role of the revolutionary tradition in French sociology. This distinctive mixture of conservatism and radicalism means the history is open to debate. But it also yields a distinctive sort of holistic account that doesn't figure as much in other national traditions.

National styles of sociological thinking can be somewhat different. But then you also have things like the dominance of American sociology after World War II and the disproportionate flow in which you had people going to get PhDs in America. Or you had people reading journals that came from America, or you had American foundations offering funding, and you get an influence so that in addition to the pattern of national traditions with somewhat local sources you get diffusion and disproportionate influence flowing from one centre. And these influences all interact with each other and result in different configurations and intellectual arguments. Being an advocate for American-style research becomes a position, let's say, in German sociology. But to occupy the position of being an advocate for 'American methods' means something different there from any position in American sociology. In America, there are people advocating different methods; no one is simply 'American' in quite the same symbolic way that it might appear in Germany. This generates surprises. Take, for example, Adorno when he returned to Frankfurt after the war and claimed a certain distinction because he had been in America. On the basis of his American experience he presented himself as more of an empiricist and master of quantitative research – even though he didn't really like either America or American sociological research very much. In a sense the same thing happened when 'French theory' was exported to the US. The change of context changed its meaning.

I think one issue is the ability to be parochial without being a closed shop. Very large sociological communities can still have parochial niches with lots of different positions and different argumentation in them. So for example Americans are as ethnocentric as members of other national traditions. American sociologists often have very inward conversations and make disproportionate reference to American empirical data, for example in the articles in the ASR and similar journals. They say they are seeking universal knowledge but they seek it in facts and issues that are specifically American. But at the end of the day American sociology is big enough and has lots of internal argumentation, so it hasn't become a closed shop in which any strong consensus position can completely dominate. It is hugely informed by other traditions but it can absorb them into different projects. For example, the introduction of German sociology happened more than once in the US. Simmel was important to the Chicago School before Parsons took up Weber. However, the famous importation of German theory with Talcott Parsons is part of a particular project in an already formed sociological field –

among other things he is arguing against the Chicago School. This alters what he makes of German sociology and also produces hierarchies that get tied up with professionalization. His kind of sociology was at odds with the more social problem-oriented sociological tradition of the Midwest and a certain kind of public engagement. It was an attempt to make sociology respectable in the universities of the East Coast. So in Parsons' synthesis, German sources take on the character of an American project. They became fairly quickly absorbed in the creation of an American theoretical canon, which was then re-exported back to Germany. And that's where hegemonic power comes in.

AH: *Could you elaborate a little bit more on this, particularly with reference to theories and concepts? You mentioned that some of these travel well while others don't. The famous example that comes to mind immediately is Robert Bellah's analysis of looking at the function of religion in Japan, which was then firmly rejected by Masao Murayama, one of the great intellectuals of Japan at the time. To be sure, he praised Bellah for making the effort but also pointed out that to speak of a Protestant work ethic or a Japanese equivalent thereof could be problematic.*

CC: Yes. Bellah was already unusual as an American who learned Japanese, learned Japanese history and engaged a specific argument that centred on Japan. This seriousness is worth emulating. Of course, Bellah's specific arguments could be challenged – for example by Murayama who thought he fit Japan too much into Western theoretical categories. He was sympathetic to the inquiry, but thought Bellah overdrew the analogy of the Protestant work ethic. But that's at the good end of the spectrum - somebody who is really trying to get inside another setting even if perhaps not succeeding as much as they might have wished. But then you also have the influential travelling of work which never makes a comparable effort at cross-cultural learning. Take the World Value Surveys, which operate in a much less context-sensitive way. They try to translate survey instruments originating in the United States into other languages in order to generate data. This can be useful, but also misleading if researchers then treat that data as objective, forgetting the complexities of cross-cultural understanding.

A Chinese case is telling. The very category of religion is in a certain sense a Western invention. That influenced what Bellah for example was doing, because part of the issue about the role of religion in economic life turns on whether Japanese 'religion' was it is religion in the same sense in which Protestantism and Catholicism in Central Europe are religions. The trouble in the translation of the World Value Survey into Chinese, is that the word that gets used to translate 'religion' is a term that is used for religions imported into China – notably Buddhism and Christianity. These were contrasted to the Confucian tradition on the grounds first that they were less Chinese, and second that (at least to some) they resembled cult-like phenomena. They came from somewhere else and proposed new doctrines for a society which already had a belief system. So using that term in the World Values Survey yields relatively low numbers of

religious people partly because you would have to claim to be Christian or Buddhist to be included; Confucians would be accidentally but importantly excluded. So there are very strong translation problems with sociological concepts that are intended to carry much weight. Bellah is, if you want, one of the good guys who are trying to work seriously. That may or may not succeed, but there are many cases of less serious translation that yield serious misunderstandings.

I don't think that many of the concepts that we use are neatly universal. First, they all bear marks of history, they have a philological context, they are embedded in traditions, and our ability to understand them and use them is embedded in those traditions. That doesn't mean they can't travel but that the travelling needs to be accounted for; we need to study how they get adapted as they travel. Concepts like 'religion' or 'class' travel and get used in lots of contexts, and they may mean more or less the same thing. Yet, they get translated into different languages and may bring new nuances or meanings, and, as a consequence, sociology often arrives at conclusions that are inadequate because it isn't attentive to those contexts. That said, untranslatability is not so extreme that you can't do cross-national sociology; it's just that it is an issue one has to be aware of. The very effort to think about concepts and conceptual history is informative: For example, how much is the category of religion marked by the perspective of states on religion, not to mention multi-religious states or empires? Speaking of empires, that is a context in which you need a category 'religion' that doesn't refer to any religion in particular – to be able to say the state will recognise these other religions. So, a practical sociological problem generates a conceptual category, which then can be treated as 'neutral' (although always with potential problems). Sociologists often think far too much in terms of operationalisation; there is often the assumption that if you are consistent in your operationalisation you have solved all the problems, something which I don't think is true. Consistency is a good thing in research but it's not a full solution to this problem. To say 'alright, I'm defining religion as believing in the supernatural', and I'll apply that definition consistently everywhere, may not buy much traction.

AH: *Can we talk a little bit more about the extra work that might be required? Take the example of Max Weber's famous essay 'Science as vocation'. The German word 'Wissenschaft' is rendered into the English 'science', a word whose connotations differ markedly from the original. 'Wissenschaft' in German refers to a big chunk of the social sciences, something that is not the case in the English context.*

CC: Exactly, and yet it's very informative to examine the translation. It's not just a simple error, it's a complex error and that means it's interesting to look at. If it were just a simple error you would just say no, the word should not be science, it should be something else. But in fact it turns out that there isn't another word that is exactly right in English. So what you end up with if you try to explain what it should be is a little dissertation on the meanings of

science as the formation of knowledge, its epistemological foundations, and you explain something meaningful about an understanding of commitment to knowledge and how it works. That accomplishes some disengagement from the hard sciences and the kind of empiricist observations associated with an experimental notion of science. The American who is trying to understand a social problem or a fact probably doesn't have any significant epistemological appreciation of the meaning of science in his own language let alone in German but took high school Chemistry and has absorbed an idea of what science is from that. Even if he has become a sociologist, his training as a sociologist in the US would usually not have included any study of the philosophy of science or epistemology; at most he might have gotten a pale reflection of a more empiricist than positivist understanding of science. Of course there are exceptions, especially among theorists. But it is ironically the case that 'methodology' has become more the production and learning of techniques than the study of intellectual approaches to empirical research and knowledge.

AH: *Let's dig a little bit deeper here and use the recent Scottish referendum as an example. As a sociologist I would be worried about the way nationalism has been used as a key concept to understand what's going on. I think it doesn't give enough credit to complexity. I was surprised, for example, that leading up to the Scottish referendum the 'nationalist' side was much more inclined to use democratic arguments in the sense of bringing the decisions closer to the people on which they impact, than their unionist opponents. Similarly in Catalunya or the Basque Country, which have been regarded as regions in which nationalism is rampant. So maybe some of the concepts that we use as sociologists may be also obscuring some of those more complex situations?*

CC: Absolutely. The discourse on nationalism, both everyday and in much of the academic literature, way over-generalizes. The first things that come to mind as examples of nationalism are often ethnic cleansing or other pernicious examples. The close relationship between nationalism and democracy is often missed., i.e. that the growth of the idea of the nation and the growth of the idea of society are linked to the idea of citizenship. There are people who are citizens who should be able to vote. It's their country. The idea of legitimacy is crucial here. There is an obligation upon the government to serve the interests of the people, the nation and what Gierke calls an 'ascending theory of legitimacy' as opposed to a 'descending theory' like divine right. It's in the context of the 1848 revolution that a number of different national trajectories in Europe become manifest, based on the idea that the nation carries a partially liberatory meaning. This idea of the whole people rising in action picks up a theme from the French Revolution, a rejection of the notion of citizenship as being limited only to the aristocracy.

One could go on and look into other kinds of sociological traditions – not just national, but traditions of usage of specific concepts. There are many concepts that are essentially contested, that is, there are different meanings as part

of different struggles over what certain terms should mean. Often we try to settle these by saying that this is the right meaning or that is the right one – and we lose the complexity and nuance of the discussions.

Back to the Scottish referendum, we have on the one hand the surprise of some people like you who say that the nationalists appear to be calling for a more radical democracy and a more egalitarian society. My main claim is that we shouldn't be so surprised because nationalists have often been doing that. The whole idea of democracy depends on the consent of the people – and nationalism offers a way of conceptualizing the people. This referendum is about the democracy of a relatively small-scale society, which even at that size is a society of strangers, people who don't know each other personally, don't have direct connections. It doesn't have to be 100 million or a billion to make citizens strangers to each other. But nationalism offers a way to embrace commonality among strangers. This connects it to democracy by constructing a notion of the people largely in terms of the nation. This is not necessarily only xenophobic or parochial.

In 1848, Europe's Springtime of the Peoples, nationalism was the liberal and liberating cosmopolitan ideology of the day. What's Byron doing dying in Greece? He's fighting for the Greek nation because he thinks all nations should be free and freedom is part of the national ideal. Now, since most of us don't spend much time being conceptual historians this gets erased and lost and certain powerful examples get reproduced as the pernicious 'other'.

The middle of the twentieth century was decisive for discussions of nationalism partly because of Nazism and the juxtaposition of civic versus ethnic nationalism. As a consequence we then get the distinction of patriotism from nationalism whereby patriotism is regarded as good and nationalism as bad. But it's not the case that these types so neatly correlate or are so sharply distinct: ethnic, nationalist, bad vs civic, patriotic, good. It used to be true, for example, that German passports reflected an ethnic understanding; they said that X was a German and therefore entitled to the benefits of German citizenship. French passports didn't use similar language and reflected a Republican notion of the primacy of citizenship over nationality. But the idea that France has no ethnic nationalism is readily belied by what we see in French politics, not to mention French food. The notion that Germany has no strong idea of what now is called constitutional patriotism is equally misleading – as is the idea that there was no civic nationalism in Germany a hundred years ago. There may be national tendencies, and government policies may exaggerate and reinforce them, but they are tendencies more than categorical oppositions. The reality is intertwined in different ways, and so though the typology can be convenient and does describe one dimension of variation, it is pernicious when overstated.

One can go further. In an English language dominated discourse the problems of nationalism are viewed primarily as the problems of other people.

English language writings about nationalism tend to say 'we aren't nationalists, only other places do that; we are patriotic'. Or take the American discussion and how it sees the UK; it contains surprisingly little examination of the multinational character of Britain. But even in Scotland and the UK the Scottish referendum tends to bring out ambiguities and ambivalences. People have trouble talking about this. Even people schooled in political rhetoric found it hard to say 'I love the Scottish nation and think it would be better off in the union'. And so it was only at the end of the campaign that someone like Gordon Brown found a voice for a Scottish national project that was not separatist in the same sense the Scottish National Party – and thus not separatist. Sociologically, one of the things we can learn is to be more aware of, and to put more work into, our conceptualizations. You can work with stable concepts to some degree, but never perfectly and you have to look at limits that are built into stabilization or misleading facts. In other words, if you stabilize the concept of nation or nationhood by making it something that mainly refers to anti-democratic sentiments or to ethnicity you undermine your ability to understand lots of your own history and that of many other cases.

AH: *Let's talk about export/import ratios of translations. Social scientists whose mother tongue isn't English are complaining bitterly about having to express themselves in English…*

CC: Sure and this is a big issue. There are longstanding tensions between trying to speak to insiders in a community versus a larger transnational and translinguistic audience. Often the cosmopolitan and cross-language version appears to be more prestigious while the local version has less standing. Universities and ministries of education have defined categories like 'world-class' or 'world-leading' as the high standards for which researchers should aim. But in operationalizing these categories they have incorporated measures like journal impact factors. These are not direct measures of quality, and they are biased in favour of English-language journals. This can produce a prejudice against the local as a focus of intellectual engagement, let alone the local language. Because of that demand you'll sometimes get interestingly paradoxical situations. Take for example the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It requires that its faculty learn Hebrew so that they become part of the Israeli community. However, it rewards mainly and foremost publication in English and rewards publication in American journals over British or other publication outlets. This example shows the hierarchy that's being inscribed into these international zones, by something apparently neutral like language or publication. International rankings reinforce this. And the issue goes beyond language. In principle, publications should provide level ground through an neutral peer-review process but in reality that is often not the case. Editors and reviewers have implicit theoretical and empirical frames of reference. They favour work that engages the debates active in their countries. And to be blunt: it is harder to get your article

about Ireland or Israel into the *American Sociological Review* than it is an article on America.

By the way, this also reveals the power of national and physical science models in the English meaning of science. Fewer of their concepts are tied up as much in national histories and contexts. The imposition onto the social sciences and the humanities of an idea that evaluations and rankings can be based on prestige of publications, citation indices and the like and yet be neutral spread on the back of the prominence of techno-science. It poses more difficulties for culturally, politically and historically contextual work. The illusion of objective rankings is biased in terms of kinds of work as well as languages and countries.

If one filter is what work is originally published in English, and in which journals, translation poses another. The politics of translation are very tricky, and almost everywhere translation is driven by a star system. So first common it's nationally asymmetrical. American textbooks, for example, will get translated into other languages but textbooks from other languages would never get translated into English. But secondly, there is a star system. To caricature only slightly, every book by a really famous French sociologist will get translated into English, including the ones that aren't very good. But no book by even a slightly less famous person will get translated, even work that was significant in national debates. And articles even less often. So you get these very filtered spreads of work from different contexts which bias ideas of what, say, the French or the Germans think. As a result we have national stereotypes of these things: if you want research methods, get an American sociologist, if you want theory get a French or German. Of course in reality, each country has specialists and often outstanding ones, in each dimension of inquiry.

AH: *Andrew Abbott made the distinction between a world sociology that knows differences, as opposed to a global sociology where it's just a big sauce. Any comments on that?*

CC: I think there is no intrinsic meaning to the word 'global'. We need to ask what kinds of connections or commonalities are being signified. But there is perhaps a meaningful distinction between referring to a kind of lowest common denominator or a more complexly connected whole. It is easy to caricature, say an ISA meeting, at which some international sociologists carry on a bunch of conversations that tend towards the lowest common denominator. But in such settings you also get the kind of discussion that locate work in different national contexts . . . I would not be quite as cynical about the sauce. . .

AH: *Actually, Abbott didn't use the word 'sauce', that was my interpretation of his distinction. . .*

CC: The general nature of the distinction I agree with. I think the ability to contextualise and to understand differences and the different settings from which work appears is very valuable. And it makes for stronger discussions.

It's not universality or the pursuit of some generality which is the problem; it is believing you have got it, when you actually haven't. It is important to be reflexive about this, and then to apply that sophistication and that search for the deeper understanding to a range of phenomena – including international comparisons. I agree about mixing vs. complete blending, but I'm not sure I am saying the same thing as Abbott because I don't know the original source. . .

AH: *I was referring to Abbott's Barbara Celarent communications from the (imaginary) University of Atlantis where he/she looks at various national traditions and circumstances under which an array of sociological studies were conducted. . .*

CC: Well, that actually brings out the point I want to make. It's a different project to try to look around for tools and analogies to help you understand something than trying to explain different understandings. The intellectual project of trying to understand national differences requires reflexivity to succeed. You get it wrong if you lack that. But the project of looking around for help in doing your work is also crucial. If, for example, I'm trying to study the issue of how people imagine better urban futures and do things like try to build green space, and I look around and I see them doing this in the Ruhr valley in Germany and I see them doing this in the US, and I read some studies from these different places, in the end it gives me different things to look for in my study in Dublin. We get a lot from a wider set of examples than what we get by referring only to our national context. And so in almost any country, including the large ones like the US, to read only in the national context is to greatly limit one's intellectual perspective. But this doesn't mean that you are necessarily setting yourself the analytic project of trying to explain the differences in national perspective or commonalities of national perspectives. It would be an impossible project to explain the understanding of nature and the cities in those different contexts as an introduction to every specific study. But it is possible to be attentive to some history and some ways in which the meanings are mobilized. And you can get a lot from contrasting examples without undertaking full-scale comparison. I just think we have to recognize that these are different kinds of projects.

AH: *What do you think is the role of translation in all of this? Could the LSE have a stronger role in this?*

CC: Just think about the difference it makes to have a conversation that enables you to have a deeper understanding of what someone is saying from simply having a translation of their statement, their speech. So translation is valuable and is much needed and totally underappreciated in the social sciences. Like most scientists we tend to treat translators as mere technical supports.

AH: *. . . the working class of academia. . .*

CC: In parts of the arts and humanities there is more recognition of the actual art, and not just the mere labor that goes into translation. You have only to read a difficult writer translated well or to read work of a really good translator like

Arthur Goldhammer. There are unfortunately a lot of places where the publishing industry systematically produces bad translations and won't pay the price for a good translation. The LSE is not going to become a major funder of translation projects and fundamentally change that, as much as I would like to. If someone dropped millions of pounds on us for this, I would be happy. But on the other hand what a place like the LSE does is facilitate connections between people from different backgrounds. We may become more able to understand what is being said, what is general and what is local in what is being said. I don't just mean that the Irish person and the French person who both studied at the LSE meet each other, which is of course a good thing but is only a start. I mean rather that through those meetings of people from different places one develops a skill that improves one's reflexivity about one's own tradition, and enables one better to understand others. Not having experiences of that kind is a limit.

Now, there may be a great genius who works only in the Black Forest or somebody who produces works of great brilliance and never talks to foreigners. But in general there is a benefit from cross-cultural communication. It's badly described in the way that many pro-cosmopolitan people would describe it as access to the universal. It's much better described as the ability to mediate among not quite universal traditions and to gain perspective, including to see one's own as just one of the traditions, which is very hard if you are always inside it. I know there are lots of versions of this kind of communication. You can study at the LSE or some other place where there are lots of people from different places coming together. You can travel; you can work in a country that's not the country you grew up in; you can study with somebody who is working in a country that's not the country they grew up in. There are various ways to have some of this, but the most important thing is that what you gain should be some ability to take the stand-point of the other in order to grasp what is contextually specific to that other and to yourself. With that you will be in a better position to talk about what's general, what travels, what crosses the boundaries, with less confusion and fewer false starts.

Note

1 The interview was conducted at the Shelbourne Hotel in Dublin, 2 October 2014.