

CURB occasional paper 1: Towards an ivorine tower

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Many sociologists, and social scientists more broadly, have become fans of the US TV series *The Wire*. Indeed, a number of colleagues have become devotees of the show's brave and comprehensive dissection of late capitalist urban life. This vision has also generated some degree of soul-searching within academia that has returned us to long-running concerns in the discipline about the public functions, role and application of sociological research and ideas. To put this more bluntly, how does our daily practice, within what are often portrayed as disconnected 'ivory' towers, connect with and ameliorate the harms and problems we find in society? In a recently published paper published in the journal *CITY* (Atkinson and Beer 2010) we drew on the angst and anxiety generated in us by *The Wire* and its 60 hours of politicised commentary on urban life, inequality, crime and political life.

Our feeling was that there was something both fresh and provoking in this series; something that impels us as academic sociologists to think about our role as teachers and researchers. In pondering these roles we felt a need to be mindful of our 'internal' efficacy (how we engage and develop students through our teaching and their own subsequent connection with an 'outside' world) and our external relevance and, ok we will say it, impact (in the sense of communicating research around urban and other social problems). Sociologists are perhaps more comfortable than other disciplines in subjecting themselves to such queries; from at least the work of C Wright Mills and his influential discussion of the position and worth of the subject, sociology has an embedded (some might argue pathological!) reflexive tendency which seeks to pose questions about our role amid identifiable social problems, inequalities and injuries. Yet might we argue that television of this kind and calibre raises a new kind of crisis and opportunity?

Our first suggestion was to point to the way that the intensive and extensive nature of *The Wire* suggests a mode of learning about urban problems for self-directed and interested 'mature' audiences. For anyone who has watched the series it is clear that it is not only a tale of cops and gangs, of cinematic violence and cathartic energy. The series is rather a sober and structurally intact vision of urban life in the archetypal city of late capitalism. Much of its force thus derives not only from its apparent realism but also the questions it raises about the futility of life in concentrated poverty, the tensions within organisations and their immovable bureaucratic systems, the end of

meaningful and abundant work and the abject failure of a war on drugs as part of a broader project of criminalisation and urban social collapse.

What might we say about our own teaching in the face of such comprehensive narratives? Many will know that William Julius Wilson has argued that *The Wire* has done much, if not more, to alert publics to the nature of such problems. As teachers we might constructively think about our own effectiveness without suggesting that such media forms are a substitute. Acknowledging the role of visualisation (including the use of images, film and creative data presentation) and helping students to understand the public value of sociology may be important in this process; including classes that develop a sense of their role after they complete their degree.

Our second key argument is that a self-conscious reflection on the role of sociology and academia will become a critical test of relevance and a means of avoiding complacency or public redundancy. Here we are making the point that it is essential that we i. adopt diverse community orientations in our work that are not only driven by public problems; and ii. challenge and work around career and institutional imperatives that locate value fundamentally within insulated publication environments. In other words, to 'get ahead' in 'our' game is often, and sometimes cynically, understood as reputation-building derived from peer-reviewed articles and books. While these outputs are clearly important they need to be supplemented by reflective thinking and action that offer alternative and deeper modes of communication (such as public interviews, resources for communities, including availability for advice, and the development of other externally oriented resources).

There is a risk that these ideas are seen either as already central to the identity of many sociologists or, worse, that these orientations are beneath the activities associated with academic work. This might on first sight appear to be an argument for a quite crude, rapid and available-on-demand form of public sociology. However, in our paper we also argued that these activities need to be matched by work that is publicly funded, politically disinterested and which offers reflection and critical thinking. The cheap option is to label such institutions as ivory towers. What we need more urgently is recognition of our public value and for social scientists to bite hard on the challenges offered, not least by the current period of social and economic crisis and its roots. Our proposal is that we need to become *ivorine*¹ institutions through which university-based research is fault-finding, germane and of utility to devoiced communities. The *ivorine* tower works to enable a response to the transforming infrastructures, demands and expectations of higher education work by balancing the previous longer-term and slower forms of exploration with short-term engagement practices that produce this kind of synthetic, or *ivorine*, organisational context.

¹ Ivorine was a synthetic substitute for ivory pioneered in the late nineteenth century as the real product became scarce. We use this as a metaphor for the normative positioning of the academy, seen to be akin to a search for a synthesis that generates a more ethically founded or progressive outcome.

The Wire has perhaps generated pause for reflection for sociologists of all kinds. In the coming hostile climate around economic value and worth triggered by the international consequences of the global economic downturn (and no doubt a continuation of neoliberal imperatives of commodification from Thatcher on) there will be a drive for emphatic commercial and policy relevancy. As sociologists with interests in social problems we might also observe how a decline in public funding will bring the prospect of a renewed reflection upon what we are about and by what means. We suspect that given this social backdrop, and the impending questions about value and worth, we would do well to think about how we engage as relatively impartial yet socially accessible and problem-based thinkers and researchers. Urban studies, and social science in general, needs to anticipate the challenges of our changing socio-economic context in which sociological commentary is found in diverse forms that may be a) perceived to be more energizing or b) connect more closely to styles of learning to which many students are more responsive and which are thereby possibly more effective. Our motivation in writing an article on the ivory tower was based upon a desire on our part to address our sense of anxiety about the various challenges we face and a hope that we might find a way of working on our own terms within the new structural restrictions we are likely to face.

Reference

Atkinson, R. and Beer, D. (2010) The Ivory Tower in the City: Engaging urban studies after *The Wire*, *CITY*, 14, 5, pp. 529-544.

An excerpt is available here:

<http://www.city-analysis.net/2011/01/15/the-ivory-tower-in-the-city-engaging-urban-studies-after-the-wire/>

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