A response

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Professor Sampson’s paper offers a valuable snapshot of the professional sociologist’s craft. His methodological innovations will prove influential and his focus on durable inequality and the social ranking of places is instructive even if those dynamics are gravely complicated – as they are in contemporary London – by increasing inequality, the after-effects of the privatization and adjustments in the inflated market for dwelling space. Sampson’s concern to show where what he calls the prevailing ‘structuralist’ analyses of these matters might be productively supplemented by a greater concern with matters of culture is to be applauded.

I take the fact that he has drawn his epigraph from the inspirational fiction of Ralph Ellison as a warrant allowing my response to roam in different directions than the one he has himself followed. For those who are unfamiliar with Invisible Man (Ellison 2004), Ellison’s mid-twentieth-century novel was in a deep dialogue with philosophical, sociological and political concerns. A rare and stimulating conversation between humanities, literature, psychology and social theory can be traced back through figures like Ellison and Richard Wright to the towering influence of W.E.B DuBois. That intellectual breadth is something that can enrich the contested domain of social science even as the dominance of rational choice models and mechanistically applied quantitative methods stifle and undermine other strategies of inquiry and academic reflection.

Ellison’s picaresque tale centres on the currency of visible – phenotypical – difference and its special place within the US racial nomos – the spatial and legal order of racialized forms of power and inequality. He has much to teach us about those two totalizing categories ‘blackness and whiteness’ and the manichaean system into which the history of racial slavery organized them. Today, that arrangement is retreating in favour of more complex, multi-polar
arrangements in which African Americans are no longer the largest racialized minority and the USA’s traditional one-drop of blood rule has lost its old authority.

Ellison anticipated critical work on sight, science and social life undertaken by Martin Jay, Tony Woodiwiss, Jonathan Crary and others who distinguish between vision and visuality. He was a humanist concerned to challenge the commonsense obviousness of racial type and to emphasize that the eye had to be educated: trained, sensitized and habituated if it was to see the world and interpret bodies according to the inhuman logic of racial hierarchy. From Ellison’s perspective, race as political ontology, was anything but a natural outcome. He and his Cold War interlocutors could admit no such thing as what Professor Sampson calls ‘The human tendency to categorize racial and ethnic groups despite their lack of scientific separateness’ (Sampson 2009: 8).

That tendency had to be accounted for. It could be given a history. Its foundational significance for social life in the USA had to be explained not assumed. Indeed, rather like Fanon who explored these points a few years later and complicated them with a further reflexive fold in which the infra-human objects of an intrusive white gaze saw themselves being seen, Ellison emphasized the sociogenesis of racialized difference, inviting us to understand it as an effect of an alienation deeper than anything known within the tradition of Hegel and Marx. What is called ‘race’ in the US corresponds only to that alienation and the amputated humanity it produced. It is best interpreted through the apparatus of a dynamic nominalism as racism’s product rather than its catalyst or precursor.

The globalization of US intellectual power is a potent factor in what has become – despite all sorts of hand-wringing about public intellectuals – a timid and deeply conservative academic culture. I would suggest that there has lately been a marked contraction of the imaginative space in which the education sociologists provide can operate. These general problems have a particular significance for work on racial divisions and the city.

For a long time, the USA was, wrongly in my view, touted as the destination of race relations on earth. In British government and academic life we quarreled at length over how far ahead of Britain the US might be. There were disputes over whether that US future should be embraced or avoided – the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation in the mid 1960s was seen at the time as a means to avoid it. That idea of the USA as ahead of everybody else, is currently resurgent and has been common to contemporary political pronouncements on racial divisions.

This situation becomes more complicated because the last few years have witnessed US racial technologies being offered as the best way to understand and manage racialized politics and to govern the problems created by racial hierarchy and ethnic plurality. In other words, the world’s principal example of successful settler colonialism has provided foundational norms for discussion.
of the perils of cultural heterogeneity and the negative impacts of diversity and immigration on social solidarity and ‘social capital’.

The fact that racial hierarchy underpins the persistently segregated social and spatial order of the USA is viewed either as an accident or an unfortunate event: a natural outcome or the result of irresistible economic pressures. Condoleezza Rice follows Francis Fukuyama in describing racism as their country’s ‘birth defect’ a metaphor which suggests that, though it may not be easily overcome, it was an outcome of the nation’s establishment rather than its belligerent precondition. Their common inattention to the history of US racism and racial hierarchy promotes cultural divisions as the privileged explanation of local, national and indeed geo-political conflicts. This is something that haunts all those who, like Sampson slip into using race and ethnicity interchangeably.

Sampson does not advocate the export of US racial technologies to other governments and polities worldwide. However, there is to borrow from him, what might be termed an ‘implicit’ teleological flow to his presentation. He suggests not that Camden and Chelsea or London’s unusual degree of diversity have things to teach researchers and policy-makers in Chicago, but certainly imagines that influence happening the other way around.

I’m sure there are things to learn from that environment. However, the peculiarities of US city life get passed over too quietly for my liking. It is intimated that those patterns, particularly where they bear upon questions of race, ethnicity and migration are universal. I want to dispute that idea. Chicago was, after all, only founded in the 1830s. Residential segregation along racialized lines, the block system and the stark opposition of suburbs and ghettos are components of a particular historical and social achievement. It is not some spontaneous outcome of generic metropolitan development.

More significantly, it is not entirely clear whether Professor Sampson regards racial segregation as a problem in its own right or how he views the articulation of racialized and class-based divisions. We disagree over class which doesn’t fare well in his hands and also about racism, which appears only in a brief quotation from Larry Bobo. Both are touched upon in his presentation but have not been incorporated into its scholarly fabric. The problematic he favours as a means to manage the nexus of race and class relationships borrows the idea of ‘implicit bias’ from social psychology and it functions in his enterprise as a polite surrogate for the term institutional racism which has been at the centre of debate here if not since Hamilton and Carmichael, then since Lord Scarman who denied it was part of the causal chain of the 1981 riots.

With regard to the relationship between space and social order, Sampson takes his initial cues from the symbolic interactionism of Lyn Lofland. I prefer the conceptual approach laid out at about the same time by the French sociologist and phenomenologist of the everyday Henri Lefebvre in his classic *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre 1991) particularly the strategies suggested by...
his stimulating distinction between spatial practice, representations of space and spatial representations. My differences with Professor Sampson are amplified by the fact that my London and the version of the city that emerges from his sketch of its persistent cultural geography do not align. This may be because I have spent most of the last thirty years in Finsbury Park, an area that, thanks to Cambell Bunk claimed more pages in Booth’s *Life and Labour of the People in London* than any other. It’s a place which still draws the unwanted attention of Ann Widdecombe and other would-be media scourges of the hoodies, druggies and other anti-socials who cluster in the grimy shadows of the terror mosque that looms over the polluted penumbra of the Arsenal shop.

I expect that, like Sampson’s pocket of poverty in Chelsea, Finsbury Park’s continuity as a place of danger, disadvantage and disrepute could indeed draw the attention of a publication like *The Economist*. The area’s Andover estate was built to the north of Seven Sisters Road on the footprint of the slums that preceded it. However, that persistence conceals stories of discontinuity that demand sociological interpretation. Precisely because both population and built environment have been so transformed. How were the Irish, the Maltese, the Caribbeans and Cypriots succeeded by Pakistanis and Bangladeshis who were then, in turn, replaced by Algerians, Moroccans, Brazilians and Eastern Europeans? Certainly not without altering the way the area was seen and represented to outsiders.

Growing up in a bombed city where rampant buddleia and mountains of rubble were fenced off by endless stretches of corrugated iron, I have always regarded graffiti differently from Sampson’s other signs of disorder: public drunkenness, rubbish and broken windows. I make no apologies for seeing it still as something that can beautify and enhance urban environments by being ennobling art rather than disorderly confirmation of their dangerous and pathological character.

My memory tells me that graffiti, not all of it politically acceptable to me, was part of what enlivened urban space. Enoch for PM, Clapton is God, Remember Bloody Sunday, White Riot, Zulu Nation, No War But Class War and now those glorious multi-coloured embellishments of post-industrial community drawn from a global aesthetic rooted in another US export: Hip Hop culture, the new lingua franca of youth culture.

How *that* graffiti became part of the chain of signification that connotes decline, racial abjection and disorder is a story that cannot be divorced from the history of post-Black Power forms of cultural and political resistance, from migration stories and transnational interculture which changed the value and the meaning of the South Bronx.

I’m disinclined to recognize a sub-discipline that operates under the banner of ‘disorder theory’. Disorder and order cannot be absolute states. Though I appreciate Professor Sampson’s argument against the reification of disorder.
and the patience and care with which he directs attention towards questions of culture, meaning and symbol, these discrepancies lead me to wonder about the size and strategic worth of his targets when they are transposed out of the US conditions to which they correspond so closely.

Representations of poverty and inequality are made material in the complex cultural ecology of built environments. That discursive process bears upon the relative value of dwelling space and what he calls neighbourhood – another US term that has no adequate local translation.

In drawing attention to how fear and stigma diverge from what people actually see, Sampson, who is more concerned with the predictive power rather than the sources of the stereotypes that tempt residents (who have not benefited from any training as ‘neutral observers’) refers us to what seem to me to be familiar problems. Old chestnuts reappear shrouded in a novelty that derives largely from the fact that the style of sociological thought with which he is immanently in polite dispute, generally refuses concern with cultural factors because it is judged to be inadequately scientific. Making those cultural inquiries Respectably scientific is no mean achievement and I applaud him for it, but the underlying issue of how cultural factors that are independent of the agency of individual racists and openly prejudiced behaviour, came to impact on this area of urban politics and political economy was, as his Ellison epigraph revealed, recognized as a problem by African American analysts long ago.

Sampson uses the idea of ‘race’ in many circumstances where I, and even the dubious mainstream of British sociological writing, would speak instead of racism. Perhaps for him, the reification of race is the inevitable price to be paid for the de-reification of disorder.

Some thinkers for whom the city of Chicago occupied the greatest amount of interpretative space have been the most acute at driving this very point home. That degraded and degrading metropolitan environment was memorably explored by Richard Wright in Twelve Million Black Voices his historic 1941 collaboration with the photographer Edwin Rosskam. Wright an autodidact, philosopher-sociologist as well as a writer of literature, was the first African American chronicler of this new urban tragedy to reach for the concept of modernity in order to make sense of what he was seeing around him in the iconic kitchenettes and alleys of Chicago’s South Side. A combination of text and images sought to intervene in the process that yielded those persistent, tempting stereotypes, a process that included public and private interests, the media and the law as well as government.

Wright’s introduction to Drake and Cayton’s 1945 volume Black Metropolis set out the parameters of his own ecumenical inquiry which discovered the origins of twentieth century social problems deep in the colonial history of the USA. Sampson’s concern with durable inequalities tempted me into another long durée speculation endorsed by a reading of Patricia Seed’s brilliant Ceremonies of Possession (1995) a book which examines the varying rituals
whereby the wild nature of the New World was made over and became private property within the rules specified by John Locke and other English apostles of improvement.

Their understanding of nature, labour, freedom and property might also be recognized as part of a history of relationships and definitions which, though the conquest of Chicago – place of the wild garlic – came much later than the acquisition of Virginia and New England, might even now be an unspoken factor in the naturalization of inequality and the axiology of urban space, order and disorder, good neighbourhoods and bad.

That colonial nomos was racialized from its inception. It was legitimated by conquest and purchase and then consolidated in plantation society. It was bounded and fenced by the sharpened pales and pikes of English enclosure which had been exported to the New World and set to work there by improvers who made that exercise integral to their claims upon the earth. In time, those boundaries would eventually become the iconic white picket fences of US suburbia where, as the Kefalas study cited by Sampson reports, the fastidiousness of residents has to be explained in relation to what Loïc Wacquant has told us about the history of the ghetto and, I might add, the prison.

Racial discourse shows how the battle for civilization and against the encroachments of wild nature and social disorder persists in US cities. We still need to understand why some categories of people fall out of history and back into scarcity more easily than others. Talk of stereotyping and implicit biases will not account for that recurrent outcome in the absence of a theory of racism and its practical and institutional consequences.

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