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We consider the issues surrounding the selection of “type of sociology” in the CSCW area. We suggest that the social facts of the sociological institution have important implications for how effective sociology can be. Two particular aspects are of interest. First, how the rhetoric of sociological discourse obscures the nature of the discipline; and second, how this rhetoric is a reflexive feature of factional competitiveness. It will be argued that this rhetoric and factionalism can be said to be healthy features of sociology itself but when located in a new domain, such as CSCW, they can severely restrict and threaten the effective use of sociology as an interpretive tool.
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Introduction
When Comte first coined the term sociology, he had in mind a science that was “applied”. He believed sociologists, being experts in its workings, should preside over society, acting as its priests, their God being, in this case, society itself rather than some transcendental entity in the heavens. They would manage society's affairs, conduct its government and direct its political, aesthetic and intellectual development. These days this view appears rather quixotic, eccentric, almost bizarre. The prospect of dowdy, garrulous sociologists pronouncing sermons to others than a captive audience of sleepy students is faintly ridiculous. But sociologists still crusade — perhaps more so now than ever: just as Comte claimed that sociology was the Queen of Sciences so now do many sociologists avow that sociological matters are the bedrock of all things. Even the bastions of “fact”, the so-called hard sciences, are, according to this view, built on social agreements, the exercise of power (be it through forms of persuasion, rhetoric, or text)

and of course, gender. The facts, as the catechism has it, are “socially constructed”. Needless to say the experts in the nature of social constructions are sociologists — by and large. One has to be careful and recognise that those who proselytize sociology are not only those who claim some kind of professional affiliation to discipline as an institution; the sociologicalising of almost all cultural artifacts from fridges to space craft, from para-science to molecular physics, mathematics to medicine, philosophy to archaeology, is a crusade from all quarters: even those who have never even heard of Talcott Parsons let alone read the *Social System* indulge in sociological reinterpretation. So, although Comte might be appalled at what it has now become, dismayed at the curious relativism it avows (so opposite to his own positivistic approach — another term we owe him), sociology is — at least for many of its practitioners — an applied science of sorts.

One of the odd things about the new proselytizing sociology and its spread through academe is the complimentary absence of sociological reasoning and employment of sociologists in other areas. One imagines that sociologists are not so popular in the governments of the former eastern block as they once were; and if one looks to the west, it has been quite a while since a sociologist has been on the cover of the *New Yorker*. One reason for this misalignment is perhaps that in academe, sociological reasoning makes little or no practical impact: there a strongly held view is merely interesting, fashionable, even exciting; in the world of practical accomplishment sociological

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2 Parsons, T. (1958), *The Social System*, Tavistock Publications, London. Of course, for a number of years, especially in the late sixties and seventies, it was modish not to read Parsons on the wholly specious grounds that his thinking did not deal with matters of conflict. Fortunately this view is now fading away to be replaced by more scholarly understandings. Having said that, Parsons can be stodgy, and so few would be able to claim to have read every word of the “Social System”.


4 We are thinking here, of course, of Robert Merton.
understanding may be all too consequential. It is all very well agreeing in principle that the facts of physics are social constructions; but using such an understanding to redesign Chernobyl or Three Mile Island doesn’t bear thinking about.

Sociologists may find it gratifying therefore to find a domain of very real and practical accomplishment beckoning them. The call to use sociology as part of CSCW systems design is the case in point. Unsurprisingly sociologists have been extremely welcoming of this interest (not to mention quick to pick up jobs and consulting contracts. Ourselves included.)

To date, there have been a number of inquiries into the usage of sociological reasoning in CSCW design. There have too, been attempts to outline the varieties of ways ‘co-operative work’ can be conceived from a sociological perspective; discussions of sociological conceptions of ‘organisation’; negotiation and conversational interaction. But there is emerging — albeit in an insidious way with no fanfare or doctrinal pamphleteering — a growing certitude, a gradual tide of thinking that insists that if sociology is to be used in CSCW then it should have this form, should be done using this

method, should involve deploying these tools; and worse still should result in these types of findings.

Now of course it is in the nature of scholarship and all types of science that one wants to 'get it right'. One does not want to be able to say anything (despite the claims of certain French academicians that restrictions should be cast aside). Nor does one want to use the wrong method or fail to utilise the best tools for the job. But it seems to us that it is a very strange business to be getting involved with when one starts hearing at conferences and workshops — and sometimes much more close to home — about the way things must be done. This is sociology we are talking about; not some science which has strict rules of procedure and consensus of theoretical view (though perhaps such a science only exists in fantasy). Either there is some kind of confusion — those who are putting forth these views are perhaps getting overheated at the discovery of an audience who stays awake when they preach — or someone is being dishonest. We would like to think the former.

Consider, as a case in point, the claims made about sociological ethnography. For numerous individuals, ethnography is the means or the “method” for uncovering the nature of working and bringing to the fore those skills individuals use to achieve their daily goals11. Such findings, it is claimed, are requisite for the design of systems that more effectively resonate with needs and requirements. Leaving aside the details of their arguments, if one were to examine the sociological canon of ethnographic work one would not find it entirely clear how this might be so: just to take what comes to mind from the long and rich history of sociology, one finds Goffman's studies of how inmates in an asylum deal with their predicament through personal and social habits12; Wieder's examination of the ways in which ex-cons and staff in a halfway house instruct each other as to what is and is not acceptable conduct13; Skolnick’s (to our mind classic) study of the way police officers are compromised by tensions between “due process” and what they perceive as “moral justice” in their dealings with criminals14; and Blau's study of the changes brought about by new productivity measures in public welfare agencies15. The

list of contemporary studies could include (though nothing more than the mere fact that
one recollects them easily is implied about their quality) Lynch’s studies of biochemistry
labs (of which more later)\(^{16}\), on the same theme Latour and Woolgar’s work\(^{17}\); Anderson,
Hughes and Sharrock’s account of a small time fast food retailer\(^{18}\); Hockey’s participant
observation of the parochial world of Squaddies\(^{19}\); and this is to leave aside the
anthropological literature. Under the term ethnography one will find, then, great diversity
of inquiries; and moreover, what makes so many of these studies so interesting to read,
the way they evoke the situation in question, their own reference to previous
ethnographies, the interweaving of argument and description, and more, seem so diverse,
broader and various as to defy formulation\(^{20}\). Ethnographic tools, techniques and
presentational formats are, in short, something of a collage, a mish-mash of things, and
consequently it is difficult to know quite what to make of claims that ethnography can
help in “requirements capture” or “domain specification” (two amongst the various
possibilities) in CSCW for the simple fact that it is difficult to know what is meant by the
term ethnography.

Paradoxically, of course, sociologists often use the term as if it meant something in
particular, and many a graduate student has commenced his or her career with the
injunction “go do an ethnography”. How can this be? Is it that sociologists know, by dint
of their training, what is meant by ethnography? Is it something so basic to the
sociological enterprise as to require no specification? Although this question could
support extensive debate, all we want to say here is that the term is used in a very general
way to describe the study of social life by close observation. The actual methods used
during this close observation, the themes inquired into, the manner in which the findings

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visibility’, *Social Studies of Science* Vol 1, no 5, p 37-6; (1988), ‘The externalized retina: Selection and
mathematization in the visual documentation of objects in the life sciences’, *Human Studies*, 11, p201-234.


of Calculation in an Entrepreneurial Firm*, Avebury, Aldershot.


\(^{20}\) See Atkinson, P. (1990), *The Ethnographic Imagination, textual constructions of reality*, Routledge,
are exposited, are left open and unspecified. Each particular “ethnographer” chooses for him or herself\textsuperscript{21}. We are not wanting to suggest, along with Feyerabend, that “anything goes”\textsuperscript{22}. This is far from the case. But nor are we saying that it is tied down and fixed. Ethnography is not this or that; it is not always comparative\textsuperscript{23} nor always concerned with say, micro-sociological issues; it does not have to involve getting “inside people’s heads” nor does it have to be about gathering the actual details of “mundane conduct”. Nor finally, and this is to cut the doyen of ethnographers, Clifford Geertz, does it have to be about the interpretive understanding of diverse cultures (whether they be North African or Indonesian, or those of the environments of intellectual endeavour in the West\textsuperscript{24}). It can of course be any of things; but it doesn’t have to be.

So we are making a complaint here: there is not enough tolerance nor recognition of diversity in sociology; there ought to be more frankness about the discipline and what it involves. We don’t like glib talk about sociology, particularly about what are sometimes called its methods. But we want to do more than complain; we want to justify our irascibility. We propose to delve deeply into the things that agitate us; into their causes. The issues that we think need to be thought about go to the very heart of sociology; to the nature of what we will call the sociological imagination; to the rhetoric of sociological discourse and the nature of claims to what are called “facts” in that discourse. All of these matters, fact, rhetoric, imagination, fit into a particular institutional framework. We will argue that the \textit{social facts} of the sociological institution, the frameworks within which sociologist live and breathe, inhibit and affect sociology’s ability to deliver the “goods” in CSCW. The monopolistic claims we grumble about — assertions about the right way of doing things — are but the surface of things; the result of profounder matters.

\section*{1 The sociological imagination}

So, to business. Let us continue on the theme of methods. It is our view that when it comes to sociology one can hardly talk about methods at all. This is because sociology is not a set of methods so much as a \textit{way of reasoning}. We have said that ethnography

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Atkinson, \textit{ibid}.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Feyerabend, P. (1975) \textit{Against Method}, New Left Books, London.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Geertz is most famous for his work on Islam of course, but his essay on modern thought in academe is rather near to our own concerns here. ‘The Way We Think Now: Toward an Ethnography of Modern Thought’, p147-166, Geertz, C. (1983), \textit{Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology}. Basic Books, USA.
\end{itemize}
involves a whole range of concerns, expositional devices and observational techniques. It will have been noted that we have not said that the ethnographer can do whatever they want. To dress it up in fancy Garfinkelian language, the “adequacy” of any ethnography is measured against standards of training, competence and expositional technique. These have many commonalities with other sciences but are ultimately distinctly sociological. We do not need to know what these are at the moment but the point is that to understand ethnography, to be able to distinguish between good and bad, informative or “old hat”, between the exemplary and the “ordinary”, is not to understand ethnography per se, i.e., in and of itself. Rather, it is to understand how an ethnography measures up against what is perceived to be good or bad in sociology. This in turn requires understanding of the sociological enterprise in toto. What we are getting at is that activities like ethnography are vehicles for the exercising of that much lauded thing, the sociological imagination.

What is the sociological imagination? One finds the term used throughout the literature; often in throwaway fashion; it was, of course, and this is perhaps its most famous association, the title of C. Wright Mills’ book describing how sociologists ought to investigate. Surely there will be hubris in any attempt to define, first, sociology and second, imagination. As to the first, any definition of sociology is bound to be rebuked by some colleague or other. After all sociologists are as notorious for not agreeing as they are united in their claims to know better than the common man. As to the second, imagination is surely one of those things “about which one cannot speak”; one either knows what imagination is or one is some kind of Martian.

This may indeed all be true. But if nothing else, we would like to suggest it is one of the reasons why sociology is — how can one put it? — peculiar. Peculiar in the sense that the relationship between fact and explanation, or fact and theory, has an odd, a peculiar character. Now we don't want to go over the rather tired debate about the inseparability of fact and theory, a feature of so many sciences, as focus on what can loosely be described as how sociologists “see”. This is perhaps best elucidated by one of the most imaginative of sociologists: Harold Garfinkel. We are thinking here of his sadly unpublished primer on Talcott Parsons (of that title) in which he argues that sociological reasoning consists “of a systematically related set of rules of sense transformation” (undated, p10). These

25 Wright Mills, C. (1959), The Sociological Imagination, Oxford University Press, London and New York. Reference to that book is apt for more than reason of its title: it is a tirade against what Mills thought of as the sterility of sociology at the time and its failure to deal with the “real” issues. That he claimed required imagination. His answer was a kind of political correctness; as far from the truely imaginative as you could wish.
rules enable a sociologist to make any of the things that he or she sees in the social world — which is presumable pretty much the same as that which a non-sociologist would see — into an object, an event, an occasion, that can be interpreted, discussed, argued over, in a single phrase, “theorised about”. This theorisable object, the social event in question, though closely based on the original event, is in important respects different. It is somehow a sociological object.

Garfinkel illustrates his argument with a number of examples. One is a recounting of how in many introductory sociology courses members of a class would be asked if they had been robbed. Anyone who had, (there is, alas, always someone) would be asked to describe the event. That individual would, quite naturally, describe the robbery itself, where it happened, what was taken, and so on. But they would also describe their indignation, their anger, the shock they felt when it happened and would expect the class to sympathise. And indeed fellow members of the class would express shock and outrage and “understanding”. But the professor, especially one well versed in Parsonian theorising, would say of this event that sociologically it could be conceived as a transaction; a redistribution of ownership rights to property. Unsurprisingly the victim of the crime would be rather disconcerted by this transformation. But the professor would explain that the victim’s personal views were not at issue here, it is the event as a sociological matter that is of concern. Garfinkel’s point with this and his other examples was to show how a sociological “object”, whether it be an analytic representation of a robbery, or the grounds for a rent rebate (another example he discusses) or indeed any social action, is quite unlike that “thing” experienced by the parties involved in the event itself. Garfinkel argues that it is in the nature of sociological inquiry to do this.

The upshot of all this is that, as we say, sociology is rather peculiar. Although it is notions of science that drive sociology to conduct its inquiries in this way, the result is not the kind of relationship between fact and what can be said about those facts one might typically expect in a science. Needless to say, there is an enormous debate about what science might be that we cannot delve into here so the use of “typical in science” may be a little bit troublesome. But if the reader can bear with us for a moment our claim — or rather Garfinkel’s (let’s spread the blame) will become clearer.

The contention is that the exercise of the sociological imagination involves construction of things that one finds in society as well as ways of analysing those things. Sometimes one finds big things, those that indicate or are reflections of say, the nature of society as a
whole, and sometimes little things, as in conversation analysis. Irrespective of whether one wants to build a “theory” on the basis of these things, or whether one just wants to report and analyse those things, the case is that the sociological imagination constructs that which the sociologist wants to consider. Admittedly, that this is so, that use of the sociological imagination involves “constructing” the facts that it deals with is not so obvious — indeed it is deeply obscure. We shall say more about this in a moment.

In any event, there can be many ways in which sociological fact can be construed, each of which may claim varying degrees of “closeness to the data” and “completeness of representation”. Each method — or approach the terms are more or less interchangeable — will have its own particular manner for the testing of its facts. This makes the method empirical. Some will use quantitative measures; some qualitative description; some — the more contemporary these — video tapes. The elaboration of any method, theory or approach, the manner in which any number of these things can be interrelated, revised, adapted, corrected, and all manner of things, constitute “sociological practice”.

The long and short of it is that sociology is attenuated from the world. Attenuated in the sense that it is not the event as lived-and-experienced at some phenomenal level that is the stuff of sociological analysis as ways-of-seeing; as interpretation (and this can include interpretation of the world as lived-and-experienced). Furthermore, and following on from this, sociology will never be able to “complete its business”. None of these ways of doing sociology can be definitive. For there will always be new, sociologically imaginative ways of looking at the world. Take the example of the robbery above. Off the top of our heads we can list numerous ways in which the “thing” in question could be transformed. Garfinkel mentions a transformation in the Parsonian tradition. Garfinkel himself would presumably transform the social event into one “accomplished through its details” (i.e. ethnomethodologically)\(^{26}\). One will recollect that the person who recounted the robbery would often be dismayed by how the transformation reduced it of its drama. Well, one could transform the event with the drama in mind. Take the work of Goffman\(^ {27}\). Here the focus would be on how the controlling of meaning allowed the thief to disguise his true identity both before and after the event. If we want labels this would be called a dramaturgic analysis. While on the theme of drama one could use the perspective of Kenneth Burke to come up with an analysis that transformed the robbery into a bit of theatre, a real drama as they say, a shocking experience, a tragedy of


massive moral import. This would be a “dramatist” view. The work of Anselm Strauss is very popular in sociology papers in CSCW, so what about a transformation according to his position? This would make the robbery a “negotiated process” (unlikely though it may seem). Just to keep us up to date, a view informed by Bourdieu would transform the event into one where the physical ability “to steal” and “to be stolen from” is - and simplicity is not easy here — a function of an individual’s location in a social system of differentiated morality and physical behaviours. Finally, even the British Structural Anthropologists could offer a transformation: in England items owned by a member of a family cannot be stolen by other members of that family: they can only be “taken without permission.” Need we go on?

In any case, sociology, as an institution, does not want the use of imagination to stop. It does not want definitive “transformations”. What would happen to the sociological trade if someone came up with the view to end all views? Sociology as we know it, as we have been trained to do it, and which is now being “sold” (Is this fraud? we hear you ask) to CSCW, is a discipline that wants, or rather in its nature, proliferates possibilities.

So why then the complaint we made at the beginning? That there is some kind of insidious hegemony of reasoning, that what sociology is in the CSCW domain is becoming increasingly tied down? That in CSCW there is a sociological fashion emerging that does not allow diversity but dictates the approach that must be taken? The reason derives in part from another aspect of sociology, complimenting those features we have just characterised. We have not said everything about the use of the sociological imagination: for although sociological practice involves diversity, in the nature of debate one finds in the discipline, in the claims and counter-claims made by each particular

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31 It is surprising how far one can get with an emphasis on kinship structures. See for example Strathern on how western notions of kinship help determine morality and responsibility in ways which seem, when subject to an unusual ‘interpretive turn’, as bizarre (to us) as the patterns of responsibility and morals found in Polynesia. Strathern, M. (1992), Reproducing the Future: Anthropology, Kinship and the New Reproductive Technologies, Routledge, New York.
school, in assessments and critiques, in complaint and adulation, the exercise of the sociological imagination implies exclusivity. In this discipline one can use one’s (sociological) imagination how one wishes, but one better use it the right way.

2 The rhetoric of sociological discourse
That sociology as a discipline involves claiming that one particular program — one’s own or the school that one wishes to affiliate with — has exclusive rights to being the best of the bunch doesn’t seem to go along with our earlier claim that confusion lay behind the insistence that only certain types of sociology be done in CSCW. It is not confused to claim that one’s own view is the best, it is merely natural; one might even say “scientific”. But why we say confused is that although sociological claims may have the rhetoric of exclusivity, isn’t it just that: a rhetoric? Admittedly those new to the discipline, those who are just finding their way round, those who are easily enraptured may take this rhetoric seriously. For them, sociology may well involve faith, albeit of a very different kind than envisaged by Comte. One would hope, and this perhaps makes us quixotic, that most would see through it32. Yet this view of ours may be ignoring something of crucial importance: the rhetoric of sociology may consist of more than just claims about exclusivity.

We have suggested that sociology is a peculiar science because of the relationship between what can loosely be described as fact and theory, but it is still, nonetheless a science. Consider the many similarities it has with other sciences. The institutional frameworks: the existence of journals, of professional methods for review and assessment, aren’t these the same in all sciences? Isn’t it also the case that sociology shares with other sciences the language it chooses to express itself? Might it be here that the additional components of the rhetoric we spoke of exist? We have already mentioned exclusivity. There aren’t, after all, that many theories of relativity (at least to our knowledge). But what about the things that science is purportedly concerned with: the “facts” of inquiry. Is there a rhetoric here too?

We would like to suggest there is a tendency — no it is more than that it is so common place, so deep one almost forgets about it even as one employs it — a rhetorical manner

32 Although as Acourt notes, the way in which language is used, particularly elaborate, arcane argot, is one of the ways sociologists make themselves seem distinct both from the ordinary person and from one another. Acourt argues that this is another reason for sociology having only a little influence in the world’s affairs. Acourt, P. (1987), ‘The Unfortunate Domination of Social Theories by ‘Social Theory’, Theory, Culture and Society. Vol 4, p659-689.
that transforms the topics, the “facts” of sociological reasoning into something — how can say? — transcendent. The way we talk about facts does not just involve exclusive claims about the best way of interpreting them. It also dresses those things we talk about, the stuff of our inquiries, into things which are somehow independent of the practices that render them available for analysis.

Consider the case that sociology involves examining social settings “naturalistically”, from “within”, and that the “situated skills” of individuals are the topic of inquiry. Practitioners of this approach, otherwise known as ethnomethodology and its derivatives (most vocal amongst these is “Interaction Analysis”) claim to eschew theory: for them the elaboration of Parsonian structures of social action — i.e., sophisticated theory is anathema. They are after the facts: “..rather than supplying empirical ammunition for policy studies and politicized critiques (read theory) (the ethnomethodological agenda) is an effort to observe, describe, explain 'actual'.... practice in situ” (Lynch, forthcoming: 153).

As we shall show, there is a little bit of teasing intended with the selection of this quote. Before we explain that let’s just assume we can read it literally. From this view what is meant here? Are the facts the ethnomethodologist seeks the same as the facts that say, the psychologist seeks? The philosopher? The “user” of a computer system who is trying to work out why his or her laptop failed? Don’t these high ambitions consist of a sort of rhetorical claim about the true, the obvious, the natural existence of those things the ethnomethodological analyst looks for? The brute, the simple, the hard facts? Took as saying that if anyone (i.e., not just the sociologist) looks at conduct in natural settings they will find the facts of “situated practices”? (Or more accurately, the situated ways in which facts are construed).

What we want to say is that although this is how sociologists present these things, when it is all said and done, they are sociologically specific things. According to our view, “situated action”, like any other kind of action the sociologist wants to comment on, is a label but not just of facts. A label endowed with a whole set of implied meanings about approach, concerns and purpose; all of which we have wanted to bundle together when we have spoken of the sociological imagination.

Yet our claims are contradicted by the rhetoric of sociological discourse: sociology is not about the imaginative use of sociological reasoning, it is, according to the manner in
which it is written about and discussed, about the facts. Why are these claims made? Who are sociologists trying to kid? Are they trying to pretend that sociology is something that it is not? Or is it us who have got it wrong? Have we lost sight of the “scientific” goals of sociology?

To understand this we think requires some reflection on the nature of what facts might be wherever one finds them. Such reflections will lead us to recognise that the ways in which facts are talked about, the rhetoric that one finds in any particular domain where facts are referred to, is deeply connected to the purposes one finds in that setting. The question for us then will be to define the purposes “facts” have within sociology.

3 The nature of fact

We mentioned that a little teasing was intended when we quoted Michael Lynch. He, along with some of the (better) practitioners of ethnomethodology, have a rather sophisticated understanding of the nature of fact that we can use here. They realise that the oft-claimed epistemic difference between the “facts” spoken about in the every day world, the “common sense” world as it sometimes known, and the facts of science (including, of course, sociology), is rather too facile. That the all too common contrast made between “scientific theorising” and “everyday reasoning” expressed most simply as a contrast between fact and value is altogether misleading. Taking their lead from the later philosophy of Wittgenstein and phenomenological thought, especially Husserl, ethnomethodologists argue that “facts” of whatever sort are, and one struggles for the right words here — not all of us have Garfinkel’s extraordinary gift for capturing complex meaning (albeit often made obscure by anacoluthia) — “local”, “contextual”, “indexical”, “embedded”. In brief, facts are thoroughly immersed in and are inseparable from the contexts of their use. (One might go back to that catholic phrase, “socially constructed”, but for the ethnomethodologist none of this truth-conditional language is allowed. For them, facts are treated as accomplishments).

Now these contexts are not physical spaces, spots that one can put one’s finger on, nor locales that one can peer at through a video (although videoing can help understanding). To be sure facts have a place, a location, a role, but it is best thought of not as something

34 For elaboration of the nature of facts from more or less the same approach that we adumbrate here see Rundle, B. (1993), Facts, Duckworth, London.
physical but as analogous to a position in a particular “game”. There are as many games as there things that people do; there are therefore many kinds of fact. There are the facts that “everyone knows” and those “only heaven knows”; there are the facts of old wives’ tales and the things the doctor told you; there is what you learn at school and what you “read in the papers”; there are things that one is “bound to know” and things that surprise us; there are facts of interest and there are those you “couldn’t be bothered with”. And then there are the “facts of life”. What games do these fit into? Parents of teenage children don’t want to think about them; nine year old kids collect tortoises from the neighbours to try and discover them; for the student whose condom broke “they are a real drag”. There are then various domains where what the facts of life mean has a certain provenance; a certain set of implications. In other words, and to get back to the point, to understand a particular order of facts is to understand the purposes those facts are put to.

Thus the purposes of fact for say, the individual who is robbed, to refer to the example from above, is to justify his or her claim to the property taken from him; to explain and account for his or her emotions; to warrant the involvement of the state (via the police and the Courts) in the re-allocation of that property (if it can be retrieved). ‘The facts of the case’ are yet different for a Court. Here the issue would not be how one shows sympathy and understanding for the ‘victim’ but whether the victim is what he claims to be, i.e., someone who is entitled to be ‘shocked’ and ‘indignant’ and indeed a victim of crime.

And then there are the facts of scientific theory and practice — in all their variegated character. Most of Lynch’s sociological studies have been about uncovering how ‘facts’ exist in any setting. He has reported how scientists and technicians in biochemistry labs deal with the ‘facts’ of their trade. He describes how these individuals “render” biochemical phenomena as “just what it is”; as definable, measurable, quantifiable, “Galilean” objects. Documentary and analytic procedures in bio-chemistry science provide what Lynch calls, following Husserl, the “eidetic” (vividly clear) basis of scientific phenomena in that discipline35.

So how then do facts exist in sociology? What are the constitutive features of facts for this discipline? Thus far we have only circled around this issue: we have said that the analytic, documentary, and allied practices of sociological inquiries — all studies

ethnomethodology and its derivatives included — make social activities into the factual stuff of their inquiries. To understand any particular fact in sociology, i.e., what a fact is, does not involve simply looking at action; it means, it involves, it requires, participating in the game of sociological reasoning whereby things in the world are transformed into the facts of sociology.

But we most emphatically don't want to imply that the facts are made up by sociologists; that any facts will do; that sociologists are indifferent to facts. For the way facts are described, referred to and invoked in sociological analysis is that which both justifies a particular exercise of the sociological imagination and that which allows critical evaluation. The invocation of empirical materials provides sociology with its cutting edge; the basis on which analysis and interpretation can develop, refine and change; and grounds for discussion and argument, for dispute and consensus. It is what makes it a science.

Of course the use of that term flies in the face of the new proselytizing sociology we mentioned at the outset. According to the prevalent view there is no such thing as science. All facts are “merely” socially agreed. This faith, like those who avow it, is mistaken. Each and every science, and indeed each and every place where “facts” are referred to, are domains wherein facts are exactly what they are claimed to be: facts. But one needs to realise that in different domains one will uncover, find, locate — and dare we use that loaded word ‘discover’ — different things. One wants to be careful here and avoid sounding as if we are advocating some ludicrous relativism — one where it is not so much different values that make comparison and objectivity difficult as proliferation of things. We are just saying that one needs to be careful when one hears people talking about the facts. Most especially one needs to be wary when analysts, of whatever persuasion, start claiming that the facts speak for themselves. They don’t. They never have and they never will. In sociology especially the facts are nothing but what they are made to say in the process of the transformation mentioned above.

So, when one hears claims about fact one needs to ask: What are people doing here? What kind of program of inquires have they set in motion? In simple terms, what are they doing with these things they call facts? We are, and by way of morbid allusion, wanting to resuscitate Aristotle and get him to revise his task: categorise according to doings-with-things and not according to things-as-types.
4 Conclusion
This has led us a long way from Comte, social constructionism, and the apparent marginalisation of sociology in fields of practical action. But we want now to draw the threads together and make plain the weave of our complaints. What are the social facts of sociology?

We have suggested that a kind of confusion lies behind the things we complain about. A confusion not in the souls or minds of those we hear and read but one that derives from the practices of sociology being deployed outside their typical setting. We have wanted to say that if you look at sociology what you will see is not a systematic, coherent entity but a body of reasoning that provides empirically warrantable ways of seeing. Sociology is about interpretations first and foremost, methods second (if it is ever about methods and to our mind it hardly ever is). This is why the sociological imagination is that which is both taught at university and which remains the intangible heart of the discipline. So, to say again, it is about ways of reasoning.

The manner in which types of reasoning are articulated involves a rhetoric — as it does of course with all sciences. This rhetoric has features particular to the discipline. To begin with, a component is giving the impression that the particular approach or method, the transformation as we have coined it, is the best, the most appropriate, the most incisive; other ways of seeing are not as good and are derided. Indeed it is often the case that other ways are condemned in the most vicious terms (although the grounds for this are no more likely to be empirical as to do political correctness). Here is the exclusivity we complained about. This can be understood, that is placed within an institutional setting enabling understanding of its sense, when one remembers that sociology is a discipline in which different ways of reasoning compete. This is the rhetoric of the salesman, the hard pitch; this is Paul writing to the Corinthians. Furthermore, an especially powerful component of the rhetoric, a Pauline proof, if you like, is invoking of “the facts”. As we have seen, sociological authors would have us believe the facts speak for themselves — or more often these days they shout at us through the video. Finally, and perhaps this is most important, invoking of fact enables sociology to be an empirical science. This is how sociologists interrogate each other’s work and make assessments of some work’s justification.

It may seem quaint that it is part and parcel of the manner in which things are made available in an argument that the relevance of those things is made apparent or shown to
be spurious to that argument; but there it is. One of the advantages of this quaintness one might bear in mind in any comparison with other disciplines is that here at least, practitioners are given the chance to shoot themselves in the foot — rather than others dependent upon their work. They can do so by say, missing facts in their arguments or claiming that an argument holds true on the basis of facts which don’t, on close examination, actually provide that justification\footnote{For an example of sociologists being too clever for their own good see Halfpenny’s review of Gilbert and Mulkay. Halfpenny, P. (1988), ‘Talking of Talking, Writing of Writing: Some Reflections on Gilbert and Mulkay’s Discourse Analysis’, Social Studies of Science, Vol 18, p169-182. Gilbert, G. N. and Mulkay, M. (1984), \textit{Opening Pandora’s Box: An Analysis of Scientists’ Discourse}, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.}. Better that surely than discovering error with artifacts that might maim and hurt.

And so, this leads us to the rub. What of all this? Well, there is certainly nothing that the decent sociologist wouldn’t know (though many would not admit). And indeed we don’t think that there is anything intrinsically undesirable about these social facts of our institution. When we read a sociological paper, go to a sociological conference, review our colleague’s work, we pride ourselves on our ability to take the rhetoric with a pinch of salt (even though it makes for a bitter taste when the rhetoric recognised is in our own paper). Besides, often times we don’t have to face the rhetoric head on because we make a point of avoiding having anything to do with ways of reasoning we don’t think much of ourselves. The conferences, the journals, and the patterns of review reflect a kind of apartheid: the ethno’s keep to themselves, the symbolic interactionists to their patch, and the multi-variate analysts to the A.J.S. (with the errant conversation analyst thrown in). At any rate this doesn’t really matter just as long as the discipline as a whole remains pluralistic\footnote{Though this boils down to a claim that a pluralistic apartheid is an ethically desirable thing. One is not sure that this would be acceptable to the moral philosophers such as Rawls. See Rawls, J. (1971), \textit{A Theory of Justice}, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.}. Then the diversity which is so essential to the life of the discipline can thrive, continue, even extend itself. Over the years sociologists have rallied when this pluralism has been under assault \footnote{Though these assaults are more imaginary than real. See Platt on whether there was a systems theory monopoly of perspective and approach in 1950’s American sociology. Platt, J. (1986), ‘Functionalism and the survey: the relation of theory and method’, Sociological Review, Vol 34, no 3, p501-537.}. Think for example of the Mills book. On a practical level, such assaults are increasingly unlikely for the simple reason of demography. Sociology is just too big. There are too many voices for any one group to reach a point of monopoly.
This hope for sociology at large however, does not hold true where factions break off and create their own domain (it doesn’t matter which faction) or where the views of a faction are taken as representative in new interdisciplinary areas like CSCW. For here there is no guarantee that the rhetoric a faction has been using within the discourse of the discipline will be adapted, and even some parts abandoned, to reflect the new circumstances. If changes do not occur, what was once a rhetoric reflecting a competitive environment of diversity and eclectism could become its opposite: the rhetoric of dogma and paradigmatic constraint. This is the nightmare at the end of Kuhn’s vision of science: not a science that proliferates and excites, but one which suffocates and restrains. As Lakatos would have it, this is “mob rule”\textsuperscript{39}.