



**TASA** The Australian  
Sociological Association

## Contact Email for February 2015

I have on my book shelves several books which seek to tell us how sociology should be seen and understood. Lewis Coser in his 'Masters of Sociological Thought' (1977) sets out for the reader what Auguste Comte, (who coined the term 'sociology') saw sociology to be, and perhaps more importantly the environment in which he struggled. He reminds us that Comte saw a hierarchy of sciences: Astronomy, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, then Sociology. Note that Mathematics, Economics and Psychology didn't get a look in. His view was that only those willing to submit themselves to the rigorous constraints of scientific methodology and to the canons of scientific evidence can presume to have a say in the guidance of human affairs. Comte praised Adam Smith but rejected Smith's and his successors, belief in the self-regulating character of the market. Laissez faire, Comte declared, was "systematizes anarchy" that set up as dogma "the absence of all regulating intervention whatever".

Sociology moved away from Comte's position by saying its methods are rigorous but different from the methods of physics and chemistry. Which takes me on to my next book, 'The Uncertain Sciences' by Bruce Mazlish (1998) where he looks at the study of humanity and challenges what some people at least, see as not having the certainty of the physical sciences. He finished his book with a great quote from Susan Buck-Morss about economics that points out that since its invention, the economy is now seen to act in the world: It causes events, and creates effects. She suggests that for economics to reach this status it had to take up representational mapping which allows people to see the whole as if from the outside, in a way that allows them, from a specific position inside, to find their bearings. Navigational maps were the prototypes, mapping the economy was an outgrowth of this technique. Sociology has not found such a dominant way to present its findings to the world, so we are seen by many as one of the uncertain sciences.

The third book is a new book I have been reading, 'The Science of Disk World IV, Judgement Day' (2014) written by three authors Sir Terence "Terry" Pratchett, OBE, an English author. He is best known for his Disk World series of about 40 volumes. Prof. Ian Stewart FRS is Emeritus Professor of Mathematics at the University of Warwick, and a widely known popular-science and science-fiction writer; and Dr. Jack Cohen, is a widely known British reproductive biologist. If you don't know the Disk World series, you may find parts of this book rather strange, however the rest is very good science. The point I want to draw out from the real science parts of this book is; that science is often thought to be a collection of 'facts' which make unequivocal statements about the world. Science does not deal in unchangeable facts. All scientific facts are provisional and to prove this they boldly mention that facts that they gave in earlier volumes of this series have now been superseded by new facts.

Far from being an uncertain science, sociology when it can provide rigorously tested data it is no different to the data on which other sciences understand their data, it is always provisional. Politicians hate this. How can anyone trust scientists? If new evidence comes along, they change their minds. However, it is the new evidence which provides new opportunities. Let's not be frightened of our data. Let us find a way for others to grasp what discover, to make the world a better place, knowing what we present is a step towards the next opportunity.

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