

Contact Email for December 2016

Another year is drawing to a close. A lot of things have happened that will be of interest to Sociologists and perhaps other people. Our Annual Conference provided a lot of new information and the Applied Sociology Thematic Group gathered more members than usual. My discovery of the Conference was not at the Conference but in the Streets of Melbourne. I found several Book Shops where every book, large or small cost just \$10. This was pleasing because I live in a city that now has no Book Shops. I bought one \$10 book, which I showed to someone else at the Conference, who said, I have that book and it cost me \$40. You can win some of the time.

Sociologists tend to be concerned with the minutiae of life but the book I bought was about bigger things. It was called "A Universe from Nothing" and provides an introduction to the current state of cosmology. It deals with the big questions of What are we?, Why are we? and Where are we? Lawrence Krauss writes:

The spontaneous genesis of something out of nothing happened in a big way at the beginning of space and time, in the singularity known as the Big Bang followed by the inflationary period, when the universe, and everything in it, took a fraction a second to grow through twenty-eight orders of magnitude (that's a 1 in twenty-eight zeroes after it - think about it).

What a bizarre, ridiculous notion! Really, these scientists! They're as bad as medieval Schoolmen counting angels on pinheads or debating the "mystery" of the transubstantiation.

No, not so with a vengeance and in spades. There is much that science still doesn't know (and it is working on it with rolled-up sleeves). But some of what we do know, we know not just approximately (the universe is not just thousands but billions of years old): we know it with confidence and with stupefying accuracy.

To start thinking about the universe and its age and size makes humans something other than the mighty people we think we are. But what are we? Krauss again has a very surprising answer:

One of the most poetic facts I know about the universe is that essentially every atom in your body was once inside a star that exploded. Moreover, the atoms your left hand probably came from a different star than did those in your right. We are all, literally, star children, and our bodies made of stardust.

Last month I drew your attention to the Oxford Dictionary's "Word of the Year" 'post-truth',

meaning that objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. What can sociology do with the idea that we are made of star dust? One thing it does highlight is that despite apparent differences we are all basically the same if you look deep enough.

Alan Scott, Continuing Education Officer