New Directions in the History of Education

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Abstract: The history of education has often been interpreted either in terms of its importance for education, or for its value as part of history, or for its relevance to the social sciences. However, there is also an inclusive tradition in the history of education that appeals to all three of these constituencies, with distinguished pioneers in Emile Durkheim and Brian Simon, but which has tended to be neglected. Current research in the field is beginning to recognise the multifaceted nature of the history of education, leading to new awareness of theoretical and methodological issues, and new treatments often of themes such as social inequalities, teaching, learning, and comparative and transnational perspectives.

Keywords: History, historiography, methods, theory, interpretation

Introduction

This paper looks forward to the future of the field of the history of education and to analyse fresh trends, with an emphasis on comparative and international issues. How far can we point to new directions and a vibrant research agenda emerging that engages in a critical way with historical perspectives, insights, methods and theories? And how relevant is this to the future of education in a comparative and international context?

As all historians well recognise, in order to look forward we must first of all understand where we have come from, and to understand change we must also recognise continuity. I have tried to look both forwards and backwards in my book *The Struggle for the History of Education* (McCulloch, 2011). This work provides a critical analysis of the historiography of education, with reflections on my own professional experiences in this field. It is certainly true that our lives and experiences do stimulate our ideas and questions about history to a large extent.

Initially, then, this paper will outline some important ways in which our history has shaped what we are today as a field and as researchers and teachers in this field, and the dimensions of this history which provide the sources of our strengths and of our characteristic weaknesses. This history may be described in terms of a struggle, a contest, about the fundamental nature and purpose of the field, one which is still unresolved and is at the heart of dilemmas about our future development. This struggle is closely connected to our intellectual location as a field of study, on the borders of education, history and the social sciences, which offer us rich hinterlands to support our work but which can be vulnerable to attack. In acknowledging some of our traditions as an international field, it is possible to propose an integrated vision that engages with all of these constituencies or tributaries of our work (see also McCulloch, 2012).

This leads us on to consider some of the promising new approaches to informing our research and replenishing our field. In one respect, this is about developing our connections with different theories and methods, and perhaps more fundamentally about bolstering our ideas on theory itself and on the principles of methodology. It also involves seeking new directions in our work, often in familiar areas but looking at these in fresh ways. And it is this search for novelty, for freshness, for boldness in looking forward that is the key issue for us today.

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A Site of Struggle

The history of education is often regarded, at least by newcomers to the field, as an uncontroversial and perhaps an undemanding type of study, far removed from the great debates of our time, perhaps of marginal concern. It could be seen as providing a reasonably stable body of knowledge which grows organically over time, which is always with us as a familiar and perhaps comfortable presence. Yet beneath its placid surface it can be recognised as a site of struggle. It can be an exciting and intellectually challenging field of study that is highly relevant to an understanding of broader issues in history, education, and society as a whole.

It is also prone to often fierce debates about identity and its future direction as a field. Indeed, debates about what it is for, and about its basic rationale and contribution, have gone on for at least the past century. It is beset with underlying uncertainties and insecurities.

These issues about contestation, identity, rationale and strategy are played out in different ways in different countries. The problems and opportunities facing the field can look very different if you are in England, or in the United States, or in New Zealand, or in Malaysia, or Japan, or China, or Taiwan. They are closely related in each case to broader educational, social and political issues affecting each country. And yet they have common roots, a shared intellectual heritage which we all inherit.

For many years, as is well known, the dominant rationale of the history of education was to support the further development of the national systems of schooling that had arisen around the world in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its main tendencies were to celebrate the spread and growth of education, to proselytize on behalf of the teaching profession, and to underpin further advances in the form of gradual, progressive reform, presenting these as symptoms and stimulants of gradual social and economic improvement.

It was this that was often described as the liberal-progressive model of the history of education, an uncritical exercise in nostalgia and myth making, written mainly by educationists for the benefit of teacher trainees. The historical value of such work was somewhat limited, and it placed little store by social science methods and perspectives, but it fostered a convenient and usable version of the past that teachers, educators and policy makers could use to support their own endeavours. In other words, it tended to be highly instrumentalist in nature, fashioning a usable past in the interests of contemporary institutions and policies.

By the 1960s, the liberal-progressive model was being decisively undermined, partly because it was so unhistorical but also because increasingly its optimistic narrative did not ring true alongside the deep-seated dilemmas of western schooling. In the United States, scholars such as Bernard Bailyn and Lawrence Cremin led the way in questioning the general thrust of writing in the history of education, and their critique was echoed and developed further in other western countries over the following decades (Bailyn, 1960; Cremin, 1965).

In its place, there rose an alternative, rival rationale that emphasised the historical claims of the field. According to this general formulation, the history of education should be viewed as an aspect of social history, in such a way that it would be concerned principally with discovering the historical connections between education and other aspects of society. In Britain, this key objective was expressed most forcefully perhaps by the leading social historian Asa Briggs, writing in the first issue of the journal *History of Education*, when he argued that the study of the history of education was best considered as part of the wider study of the history of society: "social history broadly interpreted with the politics, the economics, and, it is necessary to add, the religion put in" (Briggs 1972, p. 5).

One implication of this approach, at least for some, was that the history of education should concentrate on its mission to illuminate the past for its own sake, rather than become contaminated with concerns about the present. There were many historians of education who regarded themselves as both historians and educationists. Nevertheless, to the extent that history and education

represented competing rationales, the rise of the historical standpoint was a major challenge to a rationale that depended principally on the value of the field to education.

The third basic approach has emanated from the social sciences. There have long been significant contributions to the history of education by a wide range of social scientists. In Britain, for example, sociologists such as A.H. Halsey and Olive Banks have produced important historical work, and more broadly the insights of social theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu have stimulated many new approaches (see for example McCulloch, 2008; McCulloch and Richardson 2000, chapter 4).

Yet there have often been tensions that have developed as a result. Sociologists and historians have tended to have an uneasy intellectual relationship, the former being concerned with developing theory and articulating methodological concerns in a way that historians have often found strange and difficult. The cultural historian Peter Burke has characterized the mutual relationship of historians and sociologists as a "dialogue of the deaf" in which "each group tends to perceive the other in terms of a rather crude stereotype" (Burke 2005, p. 22).

These tensions have been mirrored in and around the history of education. There has also been an emergent tension over the past two decades between broadly social scientific and interdisciplinary rationales, and other established justifications for the history of education. Some historians of education, then, have asserted the historical contribution of the field, others its educational importance, others its implications for the social sciences more broadly. All of this has generated important and interesting research.

Yet we should also recall a grand, more inclusive tradition across these key constituencies to address concerns that lie across all three great domains. In doing so we can draw very consciously from the examples of two great figures from our past. The first is Emile Durkheim, the second is Brian Simon. Both Durkheim and Simon, in their different ways, emphasized the importance of cultivating the history of education within a broad framework involving education, history, and the social sciences.

Over a century ago, Emile Durkheim, the French sociologist and professor of pedagogy at the Sorbonne in Paris, expressed an expansive vision for the history of education in his lectures on the formation and development of secondary education in France. His rationale for the study of the history of education embraced education, history and the social sciences. Durkheim argued eloquently that it is only by carefully studying the past that we can come to anticipate the future and to understand the present, so that the history of education provides the soundest basis for the study of educational theory. History could also help us to understand the organization of education and to illuminate the educational ideals which the organization was designed to achieve, while in broader terms it helped us to understand humanity itself and the aspirations of individuals and groups.

The present was itself merely "an extrapolation of the past, from which it cannot be severed without losing the greater part of its significance". Thus, he insisted,

...only history can penetrate under the surface of the present educational system; only history can analyse it; only history can show us of what elements it is formed, on what conditions each of them depends, how they are interrelated; only history, in a word, can bring us to the long chain of causes and effects of which it is the result (Durkheim 1977, p. 15).

It was for these reasons, according to Durkheim, that we should carry out historical research into the manner in which educational configurations have progressively come to cluster together, to combine and to form organic relationships.

At the same time, Durkheim linked these concerns systematically with his broader sociological interests. He argued that historical and social studies were "close relatives" that were "destined eventually to merge with one another", and that education was bound up with both (Durkheim 1977, p. 331). For example, he defined education as the methodological socialization of the new generation, through which society renewed itself under the supervision of the State. Moreover, an

understanding of psychology was also necessary in order to comprehend the diversity of human intelligence and character (see also Durkheim, 1956).

For his part, Brian Simon, the leading historian of education produced in Britain since the Second World War, insisted that the study of the history of education should be designed to illuminate the nature of education as a social function, of primary importance in every society. According to Simon, "It should be one of the main tasks of historical study to trace the development of education in this sense, to try to assess the function it has fulfilled at different stages of social development and so to reach a deeper understanding of the function it fulfils today." (Simon 1966, p. 91). Simon's work emphasized the differences of social class interests: "Modern education systems, it seems to me, are an area where the interests and objectives of difference social classes, strata and even groups meet and very often clash." (Simon 1985, p. 27).

This approach to the history of education had clear implications for an understanding of contemporary policies and problems. It should, he insisted, "bring educational developments into perspective, and in so doing open the teacher's eyes to the real nature of his work" (Simon 1966, p. 92). It should enable the student to understand that educational ideas and institutions contained historical components, some of which might no longer be relevant or viable, and should be open to reconsideration; and he concluded famously, "There is, perhaps, no more liberating influence than the knowledge that things have not always been as they are and need not remain so" (Simon 1966, p. 92).

Theory and Methodology

How relevant, then, are these ideas, and the examples of Durkheim and Simon, to new directions in the history of education today? Over the past twenty years there have been significant challenges to the history of education in many countries, threatening in many cases its strategic position as a field and its potential for the future. Despite the growth in the active role of the State in education, and the long period of education have often found it difficult to make a substantial contribution to inform these changes. Changes in teacher education and the nature of educational research have led to strategic difficulties in many countries. Yet at the same time, there have been important advances intellectually in and around the field, pointing the way towards new developments in theory and methodology, and in some key areas of our work these are now bearing fruit in significant new work.

At the end of the twentieth century, the leading American historian of education, Jurgen Herbst, complained that there was little fresh input in the field, so that we are left endlessly repeating old mantras (Herbst, 1999). There are at the same time competing pressures towards specialisation and balkanisation. Nevertheless, contrary to these concerns, the field is now learning, slowly and sometimes painfully, to draw on the full range of our intellectual heritage. This is helping us to engage more fully and openly with theoretical and methodological approaches from across education, history and the social sciences. It is also beginning to have a significant impact on substantive areas of our research.

This is important for strategic as well as epistemological reasons, as we seek ways of defining and defending the position of history of education in the academy and in public discourse. But finding ways of sharing and highlighting our common concerns as historians of education is a key task ideologically no less than pragmatically, in binding together individuals and groups whose work has sometimes come to appear disparate and even incoherent. This is especially urgent in hard times such as we have today, to try to comprehend the economic and social crisis in many contemporary societies, as part of a broad and interdisciplinary vision for the history of education as a whole. Also perhaps where the humanities and social sciences themselves are in danger and coming under attack from different quarters, it is vitally important for us to consider the value and potential of such work.

Let us look first then at the developing relationship between the history of education and theory and methodology. One interesting feature here is an increasing willingness to address theoretical concerns in an open and explicit way. The history of education has often been uncomfortable with 'theory' in general, unwilling or unable to engage with theoretical and philosophical issues, in common with historians in general. In the 1950s, the sociologist C. Wright Mills claimed that although history was highly theoretical in nature, many historians showed a 'calm unawareness' of this that he found impressive but unsettling (Mills 1959, p. 145). Fritz Stern once commented that "most historians are reluctant to articulate their views about theory" (Stern 1956, p. 15).

Yet, as Peter Burke has recognised, partly in response to the challenge of postmodernism, many historians have overcome their professional reticence and have reflected more broadly on the general relationship between history and theory. According to Burke, this has led to some convergence between historians on the one hand and theorists on the other, in "an age of blurred lines and open intellectual frontiers, an age at once exciting and confusing" (Burke 2005, p. 19).

In the history of education, there has been much more activity in addressing theoretical debates over the past twenty years. This has been reflected in special issues of history of education journals to address theoretical issues, and emerging interest in the implications of diverse insights from Quentin Skinner, Walter Benjamin, Edward Said, Liz Stanley, and many others. The challenge posed by postmodernism has been especially strong in the history of education, where an 'empiricist' tradition based on 'Acts and facts' has been entrenched and difficult to dislodge (Cohen, 1999). Yet here too there is potential movement in current debates about the nature of historical truth, drawing on the potential for a 'social realist' approach to knowledge as Michael Young's more recent work proposes (for example Young, 2008). An epistemological debate formed in the social sciences about the social relationships of knowledge has important implications for the history of education.

In relation to methodology, similarly, the history of education had tended not to be conscious of methodological issues familiar elsewhere, while it generally privileged a 'top-down' narrative of policy changes based on reports and government committees. This had the effect of excluding voices and the views of many such as girls and women, working class youth, ethnic minorities, immigrant groups, and indigenous peoples in many countries around the world.

New sources and methods have been found partly through enlisting a broader range of documentary evidence, as well as by asking different questions of it. Personal documents such as letters, diaries and autobiographies have been examined more frequently and systematically. Novels are one source that has been somewhat underused in the history of education, yet they provide a key means of conveying the subjective experiences of schooling.

One type of novel in particular is perhaps especially important in this regard, the realist novels of the mid-nineteenth century (for example William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 1848; Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*; George Eliot, *Adam Bede*); as also with Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) in France. Charles Levine has noted that realism "tended to be the dominant narrative mode of a Victorian England in which perhaps the greatest of all virtues, greater than sexual propriety, was truth-telling". Indeed, Levine adds, "observing things as they are, with quasi-scientific detachment, displaces false representations with authentic ones, and forces readers out of delusions that lead to moral disaster" (Levine 2007, pp. 15-16).

There are many more recent works of fiction that provide interesting historical evidence, from *Goodbye Mr Chips* in the 1930s both as a novel and as a film, to the plays of Alan Bennett in our own time (McCulloch, 2009). Institutional source materials such as textbooks, school magazines, school books and log books have been used more widely (McCulloch, 2004).

Biographical methods have investigated the relationships between the personal and private on the one hand, and the social and political on the other, or what C. Wright Mills described as the 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959). Oral history has become a common feature of the field over the past twenty years, and this has been followed more recently by a vogue in visual history. These methodological devices have permitted more detailed attention to be given to the social experiences of education, including in the classroom, which until twenty years ago were no-go areas for historians of education.

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A promising new theme which should take this trend still further is that of sensory history, which has begun to be recognised for its potential contribution to the history of education. This involves highlighting the five senses of smell, sound, touch, taste and sight in historical research. Emily Cockayne's historical research on urban environments in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has helped to take forward our understanding of what she describes as the 'hubbub' of "filth, noise and stench" – a diverse range of "physical and emotional reactions to unpleasant things such as poor-quality food, smoke, dirt, dust, stench and putrefaction" (Cockayne 2007, p. 1).

In relation to the history of education, for example, Burke and Grosvenor have investigated the 'hearing school' in terms of 'an exploration of sound and listening in the modern school', the 'soundscape' of the school in the twentieth century (Burke and Grosvenor, 2011). Mark M. Smith has suggested that there is scope for a great deal of new historical research on the sensory worlds of children, and how they have understood the senses in the process of learning the social protocols and cultural expectations of their society (Smith, 2007). Peter Hoffer points out that this process has applied historically to adults as well as to children as they "enter the sensate environment to conform to learned priorities of sensation" (Hoffer 2003, p. 6). For instance, according to Hoffer, the receptivity of the senses, or the ability to describe what we have sensed, can be expanded with experience, so establishing a 'sensuous etiquette' in which the senses tell us where we belong in society and how we should behave in different circumstances and contexts.

As Smith points out, too, it was smell, perhaps more than any other sense, that served to create and mark out social territory, to identify the 'other', to justify various forms of subjugation and to serve as a barrier against meaningful integration into host or dominant societies. Smith's own research on 'race' and slavery in the American South in the nineteenth century vividly highlights the importance of 'sensory stereotypes'. He points out also that children's books, often published in the North but also read widely in the South, dealt with the senses in some detail and taught children the physiological and cultural functioning of the senses, which in turn could help to justify a given social order (Smith, 2008). In addition, Smith relates this sensory dimension to the resilience and everyday realities of school segregation until the Brown decision of the 1950s (Smith 2008; see also Smith 2014; and Classen 2014).

New Directions

Such theoretical and methodological developments have in turn encouraged new approaches in key areas of the history of education, often familiar terrain but now being addressed in different ways. One such has been the theme of social disadvantage and exclusion. Earlier work had emphasised social class conflict and the role of the organised working class, such as Simon in Britain and Katz in the United States (Simon, 1960; Katz, 1968). More recent work has reflected a wider range of concerns relating to social disadvantage and exclusion, including gender, ethnicity, disability, and sexuality, and greater awareness of what is often called of the 'intersectionality' of these.

In relation to social class itself, some attention has shifted to the nature of the middle classes, engaging with recent research by historians and sociologists. More recent work has investigated the middle class traditions of secondary education in England in terms of insecurity of status, fear of failure and anxiety regarding social decline, familiar neuroses of the bourgeoisie (McCulloch, 2007). Historical discussion of working class education has itself moved from a preoccupation with the political and industrial dimensions to an emerging concern with cultural identities, for example in Jonathan Rose's excellent work *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (Rose, 2001).

Histories of teaching have likewise shown a tendency to develop from a prevailing concern with professionalisation in the 1960s and unionism in the 1980s to a new interest in the nature of teachers' professionalism, that is, their daily experience of teaching. The work of Kate Rousmaniere in the United States and of Peter Cunningham and Phil Gardner in England are excellent examples of

this recent trend, which has been greatly stimulated by oral history (Rousmaniere, 1997; Cunningham and Gardner, 2004).

At the same time, there has been new awareness of the importance of learners and learning in the history of education. The history of literacy and reading has increasingly sought to illuminate the nature of readers and audiences and their interactions with texts. As Jonathan Rose has observed, "Twenty years ago the historiography of reading scarcely existed. Many historians at that time doubted that we could ever recover anything so private, so evanescent as the inner experiences of ordinary readers in the past. Where were such experiences recorded? What sources could we possibly use?" (Rose 2007, p. 596). More broadly, we are starting to shed more light on the social nature and importance of learning since modern ideas about learning started to be developed in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century (McCulloch and Woodin, 2010).

In terms of international, transnational and comparative agendas, again there has been evidence of a pursuit of new directions. Much research on education dwells on its characteristics as an aspect of domestic social policy. Much of my own recent research, for example, has examined the history of the raising of the school-leaving age in England, and its implications for the transition from childhood to adolescence and adulthood. Yet this kind of literature has also increasingly recognised the importance of situating national studies in an international context and perspective, as my recent book with Tom Woodin and Steven Cowan attempts to do (Woodin et. al., 2013a). The school-leaving age lends itself to international comparisons, and often serves as a marker of progress and international development. In the last few decades, the extent of compulsory education has become tied to key discourses in international arenas, and reflects increasing international interest in education, including by bodies such as UNESCO, OECD and the World Bank.

Within nations, comparative performance tables have stimulated a fear of being left behind in the global 'race'. Yet although it may seem relatively straightforward to make international comparisons over time on school-leaving ages, the reality may be more complex. This is because, for example, different enforcement rates may exist, and countries with a low official leaving age may in fact record high levels of participation and achievement (Woodin et. al., 2013b).

There is a smaller body of work that highlights the significance of education as part of foreign and overseas policy, especially in the export of ideas and practices to other countries. Yet there is also another dimension to this that has attracted attention only recently, which is the relationship between the country's changing place in the world and the nature of education and society at home. This also relates more broadly still to an awareness of the interdependence of nations and the international and global nature of many challenges in the modern world.

Globalisation has latterly become an emerging theme in the history of education, while authors such as Richard Aldrich have begun to develop historical perspectives on education and environmental challenges to human survival (Aldrich, 2010; McCulloch, 2015). In this context, increasing attention has been given to the history of the British Empire and the nature of its contribution and legacy in the modern world. Much of this general literature, such as the five-volume *Oxford History of the British Empire*, has included little material specifically on education (Louis, 1999).

At the same time, a substantial literature has also developed on the ways in which the ideas and practices of education in Britain influenced the character of education in different parts of the British Empire. This literature has generated interesting debates around the nature of cultural imperialism, the relationship between the 'centre' and the 'periphery', the extent to which imperial influences were beneficial, and the ways in which these influences were played out in different nations and areas. Latterly, there has been increasing interest in the kinds of resistance that developed on the part of colonised and indigenous groups.

Yet the educational relationships between Britain and her Empire did not run only in one direction. As Peter Burke has pointed out, there are evident dangers in a simple model of 'centre' and 'periphery' in which knowledge is diffused from Europe to other parts of the globe, in particular for the tendency of such an approach to take sufficient account of "flows of knowledge from periphery

to centre as well as in the opposite direction" (Burke 2000, p. 57). Over the last decade, there have developed the beginnings of historical interest in the reverse process, that is, how ideas and practices of education in different parts of the British Empire exerted influence in the imperial homeland.

This new literature, stimulated in part by Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), has potential for a great deal of further development to investigate the dynamics of education in the British Empire which were rarely stable and often unpredictable in their nature and effects. Said's work considered the "overlapping territories" and 'intertwined histories" of imperial culture, examining how "a post-imperial intellectual attitude might expand the overlapping community between metropolitan and formerly colonised societies" (Said 1994, p.19). He went on to investigate how images of Empire have permeated Western culture, for example in major works of fiction: "Cultural texts imported the foreign into Europe in ways that very clearly bear the mark of the imperial enterprise, of explorers and ethnographers, geologists and geographers, merchants and soldiers" (Said 1994, p. 229). This key insight has underpinned a new historical literature focusing on the influence of Empire on the imperial homeland.

So far as the implications for and of education are concerned, some interesting and important earlier work was also produced, for example, by Castle on national identity and the elementary school curriculum (Castle, 1993). This has been taken much further by Catherine Hall, whose work has developed key connections between metropolitan culture and the imperial world (Hall, 2008). Hall and Rose have helped to explore a range of ways in which "Britain's status as an imperial power became a part of the lived lives of Britons" (Hall and Rose 2006, p. 30). The powerful theme of 'Empires at home' has also been discussed in detail in a collection of work that grew out of an international symposium sponsored by the History of Education Society (UK) and held in Hamburg in Germany (Goodman et. al., 2009). In this collection, for instance, Ruth Watts investigates imperial influences on British education in the nineteenth century, drawing on postcolonial theory and broader historical literature as well as comparisons with other imperial countries (Watts, 2009). Recent doctoral work by Mari Hiraoka has considered the impressions made in England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by images of Japanese education (Hiraoka, 2015).

Conclusions

In conclusion, let us reflect on a few themes that have loomed large in this discussion. First, the theme of change. Our field has changed greatly over the past century. It was once the home of rather dry, smug texts that charted the rise of national systems of schooling. Now it is diverse, outward looking, intellectually reinvigorated by continual contact with educational, historical, and social scientific debates. It must continue to change, to look forward to the future. But it order to do so in a principled and coherent way it must do so by understanding its own past, and the continuities and changes that have brought us to where we are today.

Second, the theme of ideals. The history of education explores the aspirations of individuals and families, of schools and universities, to improve themselves and to build towards a better future. These hopes and dreams involve ideals as well as interests, social ideals that are testimony to the redeeming qualities of humanity. Let us as a field, while exploring the contradictions of education, find it in ourselves to draw upon its ideals also, to teach ourselves build upon our finest traditions and our best minds.

Third, the theme of partnerships. The history of education has drawn eclectically on a wide range of intellectual bases which I have characterised as education, history and the social sciences, and increasingly with an international and global canvas. Let us resolve to regard this as a partnership with complementary interests, rather than as a dysfunctional matching of unequals.

Fourth, the theme of the future, to which it is fair to add a question mark. We can never predict the future, but we can still try to shape it. Can we take forward the large intellectual project that faces historians of education today in different parts of the world? If we can do so, I believe that we

can help to realise in the twenty-first century the grand strategic vision of the history of education, taking forward a continuing struggle for the history of education, contributing towards the rise of new approaches to study that contribute to education, history and society alike, in the spirit of Durkheim and Simon; to an engagement on equal terms that can be central rather than marginal to a wide range of scholars; and analyses that tell us more about our wider world, and about ourselves.

Notes

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