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*Interview*

**Les Back: A Shared Sociology**

**Interviewed by Nasar Meer**

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# Keywords

boundaries, disciplinary identity, ethnography, race, research craft and scholarship

Much of Les Back’s work is ethnographically informed, based largely in the hinterlands of south London where he was born. This research began in the 1980s when he started a PhD emerging out of his experiences of being a youth worker. Since then he has con- ducted a wide range of empirical work largely based in Britain, although also including fieldwork in northern Alabama in the southern United States.

In addition to a string of research monographs he has published books on social theory and research methodology. His main areas of interest are the sociology of rac- ism, popular culture and, especially, music and digital culture and city life. He describes his work as aspiring to create a sensuous or live sociology committed to searching for new modes of sociological writing and representation. This approach is outlined in his books *The Art of Listening* (Back, 2007) and *Live Methods* (Back and Puwar, 2012).

Les also writes outside conventional academic format, including journalism, and he has made documentary films. An active blogger he contributes regularly to the on-line platforms like *openDemocracy, Theory, Culture and Society, Sociological Review, Discover Society* and *Sociological Imagination*. In 2011, he published an online blog called *Academic Diary* (http://www.academic-diary.co.uk) and recently it was published by Goldsmiths Press as a book (Back, 2016).

***(NM):*** *One place from me possibly to begin, is the biographical element in your work. I remember reading in the academic diary blog that on visiting your supervisor once she was quite despondent and pessimistic about the future, and even tried to talk you out of carrying on with your doctorate. Do you recognise that description?*

**(LB):** Yes, I do and that story is a moral tale relevant to our time too. But, first of all, it’s a huge compliment to be asked and involved in this conversation. I think sociology has provided me with intellectual space where the kinds of problems I care about are offered a home. I feel very committed to sociology because of that, regardless of whether or not I am considered a proper soci- ologist by the gatekeepers of the discipline.

So yes, in the mid-1980s, when I was doing my PhD, it was a very tough time. There had been very few academic appointments because there sim- ply wasn’t staff turnover in academic departments: in the 1960s people got jobs sometimes with just an MA and they stayed in them. For those people like me, who stumbled into graduate study and stuck with it bloody-mind- edly, it was almost like the equivalent of intellectual self-harm. I was also earning a living as a youth and community worker.

I was doing a PhD in social anthropology supervised by Professor Patricia Caplan, a wonderful, wonderful person who I think of only with gratitude and admiration. In my mind she is an exemplar of all that is good in an academic vocation. I remember vividly visiting her at home in north London for a supervision session. I climbed up the stairs to her office and I sat down before her with my draft chapter. I remember she put the paper to one side and said: ‘You know Les, I think you are a talented person, you have got insights and a passion for what you are trying to understand, but I don’t think you have any future in this business.’ That’s because Pat felt Thatcherism had dealt the university a fatal blow: it seemed like there was never going to be any movement on the hiring of faculty. She did the honor- able and difficult thing and articulated what felt like a painful but honest judgement.

It was a very bleak time, and I always say to young scholars and stu- dents now that the current generation of professors might have brilliant and tremendously creative minds, but they cannot foretell the future. Pat could not envisage at that point the 10 glorious years of expansion in the university sector and the world of sociology, where I think we had an extraordinarily privileged period of growth. There was more movement in the terms of hiring in the faculty, more opportunity for young scholars, support for research projects, and so on. I didn’t know anyone in the mid- 1980s who had got their PhD funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), and the department that I was based in at that point did not have a single research grant. By contrast, I have myself supervised 15 ESRC funded PhD students to completion at Goldsmiths.

So I think, in a sense, it needs to be remembered that there was a period of expansion that is now in the process of being stalled and I think the conse- quences of that are still unfolding. But the moral of this tale is, we should be hesitant to say to ourselves or our students ‘it’s all over – shut up shop and go home’ there is ‘no future here for you’. It wasn’t true in the 1980s and I don’t think it’s true now.

***NM:*** *So to some extent sociology found you then, because you trained in anthropology?*

**LB:** Yeah, I am a member of what is commonly called in British Social Anthropology ‘the lost generation’. I think John Holmwood (2010) is exactly right in his characterisation of sociology as an ‘exporter discipline’. Sociology

– as a discipline – has always been a permeable intellectual space for all kinds of interests. Where I would disagree with John is that sociology’s border is two-way: people find themselves within the discipline of sociology without necessarily intending to, and as a consequence of this, involvement expanded the parameters of what sociology can imagine itself to be. I think that is a positive quality that should be celebrated.

Although, I think some of the custodians of the discipline – particularly in relation to the distribution of resources and funding – are now asking con- servatively ‘Why are we supporting boutique interests and niche catwalk ideas? What have they ever contributed to the discipline?’, I think that posi- tion is very short-sighted and bad for our collective intellectual health.

***NM:*** *Based on what you have said, do you think that sociology may have a discipli- nary centre?*

**LB:** Well, you know, we kind of make the discipline, through the books we collect on our shelves and the intellectual inspirations that we draw on. Everyone kind of constitutes and curates the discipline of sociology on the bookshelves of their studies. I think the whole thing about constituting the centre of the disci- pline feels like a diversion to be honest. Why are we worrying and arguing about what counts as sociology? Usually, that comes down to academic power strug- gles and vanity projects. I think the bigger, more important question is to ask what are the key sociological problems of our time?

***NM:*** *The way in which you have framed the activity of sociology is to deem it to be something that is very problem-driven; do you want to talk me through that a little bit in your own work?*

**LB:** Let me go back over this and say what I mean. The key problems of our time are homeless, in disciplinary terms. They can’t be confined to a single disci- pline, but neither are disciplines liquid or vacuous. Disciplines matter because they are populated by ideas and precedence that have particular kinds of his- tory. And yet the move to try and define the discipline, and there are several over the last 50 years of *Sociology*, and formalise what is and what is not sociology, is I think a waste of time. I really do. I think that sociological ideas

are precious resources but the key question is what intellectual work we do with them. What kind of analysis do they help us make?

***NM:*** *Can I take this back to your own work? If we look at your bibliography, we see a ‘turn’ in it, I would argue, in shifting from the political to the methodologi- cal. Would you recognise this and, if so, is it a conscious move by you or a reflection of where you think the practice of sociology needs to be?*

**LB:** It is a very astute observation. I think my participation in the world of ideas was in the first instance as an active and continually engaged (and mostly employed) researcher. I have always been a researcher. The fact that I weath- ered the terribly bleak years in the 1980s into the 1990s was because I was a jobbing researcher: I worked on different research projects. I didn’t have to defend my intellectual journey from social anthropology into cultural studies via education and through the back door into sociology. I didn’t have to explain it because I was being paid to use my craft as a researcher and putting those skills to work.

You know, in a way you are right to say there is a turning point but it was not one that is engineered. So, the turn is of a different quality actually. It sounds corny but I am genuinely grateful to sociology for providing an intel- lectual space where things that really mattered to me could be legitimate. The experience of racially divided cities, paradoxical negotiations, cultural combi- nation occurring with the most brutal forms of racism – sometimes on the very same streets, that is what compelled me. You know, we have just passed the 35th anniversary of the New Cross Fire in which 13 young people had their futures stolen from them. Another was added to the death toll of victims two years later when a young person who was at the fire committed suicide, una- ble to live with its memory. In 1981, I walked past the fire-scorched building at 439 New Cross Road every day. The victims weren’t what the journalists and sociologists referred to distantly as ‘West Indian youngsters’. No, they were people who you lived next door to and went to school with, and their absence was haunting.

Confronting that experience meant trying to understand the complex, unfolding cultural history of race, class and gender in the urban fabric: these things are what I am trying to make sense of in classic Millsian terms. C Wright Mills is one of the key sociological figures, and was a bit of a border intellectual in his own time; he thought of sociology as a bridge between pri- vate troubles and public issues and the relationship between biography and history. When I read Mills I thought that is it!

***NM:*** *Is something lost in that? In so far as, when I think of your empirical work, which is, quite rightly, there through all of your work but not necessarily badged as empirical work, it kind of connects, the micro and the meso, but does that vacate a space beyond that?*

**LB:** It does, and I really don’t want to be misunderstood. What I am saying to you really is that the invitation to sociology is most urgent for me, in that interface between the micro and the meso, in the way that you put it. The action for me

is unfolding in those historical structural processes in these most everyday, mundane, landscapes in which we live in social, intimate, up-close terms.

What I would also say is that there is tremendous value and importance in the macro scale and the long view, the longue durée, as Braudel would have it. In a way, collectively we have lost some of our ambition to understand that long-unfolding historical process. I think we have lost a connection to history and in a way the discipline and the wider society suffers terribly from cultural amnesia. Perhaps that is partly a result of the distrust in the grand historical scope and hubris contained in claiming insight into the big story. I wish there was more work like that going on. I know I am not the one to be doing it – but it’s not that I don’t think it is important, because I admire it. I think at heart I am a frustrated historian.

***NM:*** *I guess one issue that comes to mind concerns the extent to which you cannot help but be embroiled in the politics of locality and the way in which pres- sures bear down on communities. So, as a sociologist, you see that and tell that story. Has that been a struggle for you – to stand in and apart from people whose stories you are telling?*

**LB:** I think it is very difficult to find the right kind of voice when it comes to both our proximity to the struggles that are unfolding in people’s lives, and our capacity and need to speak to them. I often think the only way to navigate a space between hyper-political posturing or credentialism and committed public engagement is a kind of rigorous contextualisation and humility in terms of our capacity to speak to those kinds of questions.

***NM:*** *How is that different from the public sociology that people like Burawoy are trying to frame or name as an activity for public intellectuals?*

**LB:** I am reminded of Gandhi’s answer when he was asked what he thought of Western civilisation: ‘I think it would be a very good idea.’ Public sociology in practice is a very delicate art. I admire the sentiment of what Michael Burawoy says and what he has continued to argue for. My quibble is, what about the fine- grain practicalities? How to know you are making the best judgements in any given situation. That seems to me like something we do not talk enough about.

I also think publically engaged sociology isn’t necessarily critical. It seems to me that we are increasingly cast in a reformist role tinkering with minor changes in order to claim quantifiable value and ‘impact’. I think there are other ways to think about the off campus practice of sociology.

I have learned so much from doing sociology in public, including making sure you involve the participants as well as you can, acknowledge them as peers and sometimes to stop and think – what is it that the participants want from us? One of the things I have written about is a scenario when a rather pompous professor of sociology pontificated to a conference gathering: ‘people are experts in their own lives’. That sort of radical posture sounds good but when you think about it, am I an expert on my own life? I don’t think so. Why then should we expect that of the people we are listening to?

***NM:*** *To what extent is* The Art of Listening *(2007) an attempt to compel sociolo- gists to think about that?*

**LB:** When you commented about the turning point in my own work I think it coincided with the writing of that book. I lost all sense of caution actually. It was a real intellectual and political crossroads in my thinking. In a way, it’s not that I became less interested in theoretical or political or empirical ques- tions, and more interested in questions of craft and method. Instead, I realised that all of those things were tangled up and I needed to find a way to disen- tangle them and be less timid and anxious about arguing for something rather than always waiting to deconstruct what everyone else was saying, or the prevailing wisdom in the field. It is a more assertive book about what I think is valuable in the opportunity to do sociology.

***NM:*** *How much of a home has Goldsmiths played in your thinking?*

**LB:** Goldsmiths has been very important to me in many ways, personally and professionally, but I haven’t been there for my entire life. I continue to have formative experiences at Goldsmiths but some of the key figures who influ- enced me have never worked at Goldsmiths or maybe had been there a very short time, people like Paul Gilroy or John Solomos. They were connected to this nexus between London and Birmingham.

Being in the Midlands, living and working there, being shaped by the intel- lectual milieu that spanned the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and the life of the city more broadly was incredibly important. I was a researcher in Birmingham for a long period and I really loved it; I met so many people in such a short space of time and got a different take on what was important and how to understand Britain’s postcolonial context: the importance of faith and an understanding of the different kinds of colonial patterns of citizen migration

– how they converged on a place like Birmingham. It really opened my eyes and unblocked my ears in all kinds of ways.

***NM:*** *Can you carry that through your own migration to Goldsmiths, and then being a chair in a very successful department, and talk through your work on New Labour and multiculturalism, take me through some of that.*

**LB:** Well, I came back to London to work at Goldsmiths over 20 years ago now. The Sociology Department was headed by Nikolas Rose and it was graded a 3A department in the metrics of the time. In the official rankings, the fortunes of the department improved progressively until the last exercise when we were taken down a peg or 20. As much as we have timidly accepted the corrosive competi- tiveness of this system, metrics are no measure of intellectual vitality. You can’t tell if a person has interesting ideas by their H-Index or whether a place contains intellectually interesting people by their department’s REF score.

To come back to your question about New Labour and multiculturalism, I feel I have got a bit of a better handle on it now, largely through the work of other people and their insights. Rather than breaking with authoritarian pop- ulism, Blair and New Labour finished the Thatcher project. Many of us felt lost for words at the time. What year is it? Is this 1970 or is it 1990 or is it

2000? The way in which the language of assimilation and integration started to return in a new guise was hard to reckon with. Also, any mention of anti- racism after 9/11 and the new geo-political situation of info war gagged dis- cussions of racism. The question was how to think about the politics of faith in the midst of this, the war on terror and everything that had licensed sur- veillance, the huge growth in police powers, instances of stop and search, etc. You had to think ‘Hold on, I thought we were in a new century’.

I guess, in a way, the things I have wanted to write about and make sense of recently have tried to get a handle on that question – what is happening? How is the shape of racism changing and shifting? John Solomos and I were both very inspired by the writing of historian George Mosse (1985) and one of the things that we developed on the back on Mosse’s insights is the idea that racism is a kind of shape-shifting, scavenger ideology. I suppose much of what I have been trying to write about recently is concerned with how rac- ism is shifting, how its shape and its targets are changing and the new hier- arches of belonging that are being established in cities of multiculture.

***NM:*** *Were we distracted by the optimism and the enthusiasm for cultural hybridity?* **LB:** Our society suffers tremendously from the affliction of forgetting. Our intel- lectual spheres and intellectual cultures also suffer chronically from amne-

sia. Questions of cultural hybridity had a kind of affective grip at the time because they offered a way out of the straightjackets of cultural pathology that confined the postcolonial migrants. Whether it was ‘cultures in crisis’ or ‘between two cultures’ and all that stuff; those ideas about cultural hybridity and syncretism had a real political edge because it was a way out of the vice of cultural pathology. I think that context has been forgotten. That was the politics of the intervention around culture.

There are lots of people who are writing about cultural hybridity that suf- fer from not seeing those forms of expression as profoundly situated within the structural limitations of economic division, surveillance and racially coded policing and all of those deep structural inequalities. The danger here is of operating within a ‘thin culturalism’ or a ‘thin understanding of hybrid- ity’ in that it doesn’t connect with economic and political power.

The second thing I would say is that I never thought that the drift towards a profound ‘never going back multiculture’ was ever going to happen with- out conflict. It has been 20 years since *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture* (Back, 1996) was published, it was my first big project; going back to that book and thinking about it again, I think I was always exploring the para- doxical combinations of hybridity and how sound-proofing around culture never holds, and how more complex forms of tradition are carried in combi- nation with emerging forms of improvisation or change. That is just how people live. It was always paradoxical, it was always in my mind a matter of trying to make sense of the structural damages of power and also trying to find ways to attend to and record the complexity of how people lived. The

relationship of the past and the present coalesce as people move into the future.

***NM:*** *There’s a certain kind of tension that hangs over your answer, and certainly sociology more broadly – what we might call rational choice versus interpre- tation. I guess it’s more obviously visible in the shift to econometric thinking, do you see this too?*

**LB:** I think the thing that you are saying is very true; there is a kind of quiet victory for those modes of assertion and measurement. I think some people are working in good faith, and they think that big data is the best way to know the scale of social life now. And then there are other people who don’t really believe in that but nonetheless are playing that game. I have seen that up close a few times, where the intoxication with ‘big data’ and large samples can be expressed loudly, yet in whispers at the sidebar of the seminar it is disclaimed: ‘But it doesn’t really mean anything.’ This is a cynical academic posture.

In my mind, it is not the old chestnut of an ethnographer knocking num- bers and counting. I have worked closely with quantitative sociologists like Aidan Kelly and we argue a lot about the issue of evidence, the state of soci- ology, the power of modelling, and what makes a compelling analysis. It always makes me smile that Aidan managed to model 83 per cent of the vari- ance in grade-point average (GPA) scores in the sociology results for the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (Kelly and Burrows, 2012). Imagine that? A statistical model for the behaviour of sociologists! Life is more than an assemblage of variables, but also an assemblage of variables can make us think differently about life too.

***NM:*** *It’s a strange kind of paradox for thinking about sociology as an exported discipline; as it has been exported, why have we imported the worst features of economics?*

**LB:** Well, we have in some ways. I would say, in my mischievous moments, we have also equally imported other things worth celebrating like Franz Fanon, the most anti-methodological thinker of the 20th century. Fanon says it out- right; just makes fun of methodology and methodologists. We have Judith Butler and Paul Gilroy, and, of course, there is WEB Du Bois who was in and beyond sociology from the very beginning. I often use the example of John Scott (2007) who edited a book of biographical portraits called *Fifty Key Sociologists* as an illustration. Actually, when I looked at the title page and list of contents for that book, it is a pretty good list of thinkers relevant to contemporary sociology. It is not a narrow one and seeing the traffic of ideas as only going one way misunderstands the opportunity that we are confronted with. It misses the opportunity that is before us now.

***NM:*** *So where are we now? Is sociology at a crossroads or are we just on our own?* **LB:** I have been more than slightly indiscrete in my own recent writing. I think the sociological imagination in the university is narrowing and being limited by

the audit culture and the injunction to prove that we are useful and worth our

salt (see Back, 2014, 2015a). More often than not, the ‘impact agenda’ put us on the side of the powerful. At the same time, it seems there are more oppor- tunities within the world of sociological social media, online magazines and publications, for ideas to circulate and be shared beyond academic sociology. There can be some unpleasant dimensions of this, or what was called ‘flam- ing’ in the early days of the internet, but I find the digital sharing of ideas and writing exciting and hopeful.

You know, some people say: ‘Well, when hasn’t sociology been in the period of crisis?’ ‘Why do sociologists talk about their own crisis all the time?’ ‘Crisis’ is almost a kind of inherent, vocational reflex: crisis, crisis and another crisis. It gives us a sense of urgency but it is often an artificial one.

The sense that we are in a perpetual crisis makes sociology a self-loathing discipline, and it is against the spirit of what I suppose I wanted to try and do in my own writing, which is to argue for sociology, not just as a library of books, but as a sensibility and an attentive vocation. We are struggling at the moment in academic sociology with metrics and the audit culture, which is tied to estab- lishing hierarchies of a value. As a consequence, sociology is becoming more timid and more conservative. I would like to be proven wrong in that observa- tion but I do think there is a kind of narrowing of the intellectual arteries and I don’t think it is entirely out of petty malice. It is a consequence of the way that we have to work and the way that we have to try and argue for our value – both at the most micro institutional level as well as at the macro political level.

Does that mean that the sociological imagination has been dealt a fatal blow? Absolutely not! Does creativity endure? Of course it does! There is so much brilliant work being done that needs to be celebrated and read with a sense of wonder. Like the fable I mentioned at the beginning of our talk, it is premature to suggest that we are wasting our time and that there is no future. This will sound weak I am sure, but I am really past caring. I think one way to survive the current academic conjuncture is to cultivate a kind of intellectual generosity. Our current academic climate by contrast seems to both encourage and reward cruelty. Like many of your readers, I am an avid listener to Laurie Taylor’s Radio 4 programme *Thinking Allowed*. Laurie’s great gift is his capac- ity to bring the very best out of his guests. He has cost me a fortune in buying books from a wide variety of fields that I wouldn’t have otherwise known about. I am thinking of books like Marek Korczynski’s brilliant ethnography *Songs of the Factory* (2014) or Rachel Hurdley’s wickedly seditious study of the homing strategies of university office workers ‘Pretty pants and office

pants’ (2015).

After listening to the programme I often feel compelled to Google the email addresses of the featured sociologists. I email them just to say how amazing their work is, or sometimes to beg a few pdfs from esoteric journals not available in the Goldsmiths library. I think authors recognise sincere appreciation that isn’t seen as a ‘networking opportunity’. They always reply favourably more often than not with emails loaded with bountiful attachments. It shows what I mean by a shared sociology, or what I call the best values of scholarship.

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