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Three sump concepts: an exhortation to critical social scientists

John Welsh

Department of Political and Economic Studies, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT
Do we not find that the repetitive deployment of certain phrases and words in academic language entails a conceptualisation of meaning into objects that are thereafter encountered daily not as thoughts or ideas but merely as a socio-cultural force? Is it not necessary to identify and illuminate them, and to contrive some sort of resistance to their potent, though unrecognised, illocutionary effects? This article concerns the everyday cultural practices of academic life. It is an attempted intervention into the mundane language use of academics in order to impact critically upon the ongoing and constant articulation of certain culturally latent assumptions into political effects. I argue that within the social and human sciences ‘sump concepts’ are those extremely common concepts that recur in analysis and explanation due to their easy accessibility and to the function that they serve in reproducing certain discourses of social power. In particular, they constitute territorialisations of language, linguistic creations that close off polyvocity, contingency and possibility through identity-thinking into sutured and reactionary conceptualisations. I present a selection of three sump concepts that have become thoroughly imbricated into the discursive culture of academic life – Bottom-Up, Evolution, and Concrete – and that are complacently resorted to on a daily basis in social science research and in social discourse. By exploring their potencies, purposes and pitfalls, I demand a more cautious and considered deployment of these concepts in our academic discourses, and advocate for a critical practice of negative dialectics.

Introduction

In the history of the social and human sciences, Sump Concepts have been those encapsulating concepts and elaborating metaphors that get deployed in analysis and explanation, and to which many are drawn for want of a better word. They are those territorialisations of the flow of thought that drag the expression of cogitation back, with more or less compliance, into the orbit of bromide and unoriginality by the powerful gravity of that imperative to be communicable. Just as water under the suasions of gravity

CONTACT  John Welsh  john.welsh@helsinki.fi

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follows the path of least resistance into the sump, so, given inadequate resistance put up by
the pen and the nervous system, the articulacy of the scholarly mind trickles into the sump
of expression. However, the sump is not a meaningless or entirely random topological
feature, but a functional structure. There are practical contours in discourse formation
that incline the wayward down into the sump, contours that emplace a functional
reason, and it is with this functionality that we must ultimately be very concerned. It is
not that the sump concept is useless, inaccurate or unsophisticated. Accuracy is irrelevant,
sophistication is not the be-all and end-all, and, most importantly, they can in fact be
highly useful. The question is simply of what use they serve. For we ought to be in no
doubt, their effects are as profound as they are ubiquitous.

What follows concerns what one might call the 'culture of academia', the practices of
everyday life to be found in its vocational, professional, intellectual and even material
context. Sump concepts might be defended, and are implicitly legitimised, by social scient-
ific discourse, but their effects are the function of cultural practice woven deeply into the
lived experience of academic labour. In particular, it is on the importation and transpor-
tation of certain metaphoric expressions from one discourse to the next without adequate
reflection on this movement that my critique is focused.

Sump concepts are not to be conflated with Grundbegriffen (Basic Concepts), those
concepts of especial historical and social significance in the Western tradition, nor are
they concepts of strategic and popular contestation. Whilst concepts such as Liberty,
State, or Value, are evidently of fundamental importance in the cultural and social
sciences, they are not necessarily sump concepts. That a concept has become the focus
of intense and prolonged intellectual consideration or political contestation, or that it
has generated a strategic discursive framework, does not make of it a sump concept. In
fact, the opposite is more likely the case. Though these elements may be present, it is
the decisively sump-like quality of the concept in its use and deployment that is at issue
here. Meaning, it is the imbrication of a concept with significant social and political
effect into everyday cultural practice in a manner neither apparent nor recognisant on
the part of the practitioner. Admittedly an inelegant descriptive attribute for a concept,
and doubtless compromised by an unscholarly ring, I have selected the term Sump for
its rhetorical potency, rather than academic originality, and because of its allusion to
the re-territorialisation of meaning.

What unfolds below is something of a rehearsal of those critical analysis of concepts to
be found in the canon of critical theory, but the originality here stems not from any the-
ourising of a new concept, but from the identification of its operations in discursive prac-
tice. I am then concerned rather with the application of extant theoretical analysis to some
under-considered empirical exempla of concept formation. In fact, it is with the 'metapho-
ric transportation' of concepts into social science discourse that I shall chiefly be con-
cerned. ² For those initiated into the poststructuralist discourses of deconstruction from
Nietzsche to Foucault, this kind of conceptualisation is very familiar. However, the orig-
inality for which I aim is not that of theoretical invention, but rather the twofold aim of
identifying particular instances of how certain conceptualisations are imported into the
discourses of critical social science and passively accepted in academic discourse, and
then of indicating the particular consequences of these conceptualisations when imported

²The term ‘metaphoric transportation’, or transport of metaphors, I owe to reviewer comments.
in particular instances. Though this argument is derived from highly articulated theoretical positions, the agenda here is the exploration of praxis.

What is of practical interest is that sump concepts fabricate epistemic conditions for the creation of positive and ‘fundamentally interested knowledge’ in particular ways (Foucault 2013: 227), and as they do so they therefore establish the terms upon which we come to understand the phenomena that we attempt to apprehend through their predications. It is in this way that they predicate what they purport to investigate, and insinuate into the social, cultural and historical sciences on which they are deployed a kind of instrumental rationality. The sump concepts are akin to the ‘cultural lexicon’ of ‘the key words we use to construct and appraise the social world itself’ (Skinner 2002b: 158). They therefore constitute elements of the apparatuses of control that fashion, maintain and reproduce our political and social order (Foucault 2007, 2010). As such they are far from harmless; they are enunciatively strategic. What is then called for, if we wish to engage in strategic counter-conduct to this kind of concept transportation in discourse formation, is that we engage in struggle over concept formation, so that they can be ‘turned against the heavy arms of the State’ as ‘weapon’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2013: 239).

I do not simply want to indulge in a curmudgeonly whinge, nor to preach smarmily, but to exhort practitioners of the art to consider whether or not their use of sump concepts is justifiable, or whether in fact they are falling into complacency or reaching the limits of their lexical recall. I would like my exhortations to be taken neither hubristically nor sententiously, but as an honest appeal. I ask of the critically minded to what extent their careless use of these concepts is compatible with their own explicitly critical agenda and to what unbeknownst politics they might be contributing in actuality by their repeated use of them. The aim is to add an ‘extra edge of consciousness’, as Raymond Williams said of his historical and cultural Keywords (1983: 23–24), but not by an exploration of ‘meaning’ per se. Instead, it is a matter of reflexively turning the microscope onto ourselves as thinking subjects, academicians and makers of discourse, agitating in favour of a ‘critical social consciousness’ averse to the consolations of totalising unities (Adorno 1997: 323). Here we are concerned with practices in political language use, in order to open the door to a ‘critical ethics of public communication’ that can be taken up by others and channeled into ‘conditions of practice’ (Corner 2007: 676). The idea of praxis is especially important here, because the word ‘critical’ implies both demonstrating connections and correspondences that are hidden and suggesting appropriate interventions. In this sense, critical thought, speech and action are coordinates.

The objective then is an interrogation of the all-too-easy unities and coordinating tendencies in discursive practices, and the consequent operative rationalities that inhere to them and operate through them. In this direction, the concepts I shall treat here are as follows (for those who wish to skip ahead): Bottom-Up, Concrete, and Evolution. These concepts have been chosen for their evident ubiquity in social science discourses, as well as the apparent paucity of explicit treatment they have received regarding not their content, but rather their formation in discourse. Whilst the power relations implicated in the discursive formation of concepts has been treated from as far back as Nietzsche’s On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense (1899 [1873]), what remains less easy to find is consideration of the ‘metaphoric transportation’ entailed in the deployment of concepts in particular empirical cases. These three concepts, though obliquely and implicitly covered by the canonical poststructuralist critique of polarities, binaries and geometries
(Bottom-Up and Concrete), or exhaustively treated as a Basic Concept (Evolution), the particular circumstances and effects of their ‘metaphoric transportation’ into other discourses has been little attended to.

**How ‘closure’ operates in sump conceptualisation**

Before we consider our sump concepts, there should be some words regarding the mechanism by which they are fabricated, sutured and propagated. It is probably important to lay out, at least as implicit backdrop to what follows, the onto-epistemological thinking behind the formation of the sump concept, as well as to give some indication as to how they carve out such formidable presence in our collective discursive existence.

The functioning of sump concepts is best positioned somewhere between Frankfurt Critical Theory and the geophilosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Eschewing the imperative to synthesise coherently from the respective idioms of Transcendence and Immanence, I shall simply indicate from where I have drawn my understanding of how sump concepts operate, why a practical engagement with concept formation and transportation is so important and what it is that we can do about it. This adumbration should also help the reader to anchor my subsequent arguments into familiar discourses of canonical critical theory.

For Deleuze and Guattari, it is the notion of territorialisation that is central. As philosophy is ‘defined as the creation of concepts’ (1994: 41), to think is then to conceptualise. It is therefore not concepts themselves that are to be avoided, but how those concepts are brought into being. Concepts are those incorporeal entities of ‘knowing’ the world that emerge or are drawn out from the ‘plane of immanence’, that indefinable sea of fragments from which concepts are coalesced and brought into relation with the world (territorialisation). As the concept is defined by components, and is combined out of a multiplicity that is articulated into a fragmentary whole (1994: 15–16), they are what Deleuze and Guattari called ‘hecceities’, that is to say, they are heterogenous intensities bereft of spatio-temporal coordinates (1994: 21). Nevertheless, the concept is a ‘contour, the configuration, the constellation of an event to come’ (1994: 32–33), and so have a figuratively geographical quality to them. However, at the risk of returning us to the subject–object distinction, this protean, imaginative and positive thinking regarding concepts does bear a similarity to the negativity of early Frankfurt theorising on the contours of the concept as a constellation.

Whilst for Deleuze and Guattari the concept is not discursive (1994: 22), it is from the early Frankfurt critical theory of Marcuse and Adorno that another articulation of conceptualisation can be taken that is discursive, an articulation that anticipated much of the poststructuralist aversion to unities and simple subject–object and Cartesian binaries, and one that is more pertinent for a consideration of concepts in the formation of discourse. As with the syntagmatics of terms such as 9/11, NATO, or ASBO,3 sump concepts are examples of ‘closed language’ (Marcuse 2002), and particularly that type of closed language forged in conceptualisation of phenomenal elements (Adorno 1997). The critical significance of ‘closed language’ alluded to in the theorising of Marcuse, Adorno, Benjamin and others, works out from the basic practical assumption that ‘language moulds

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3Anti-Social Behaviour Order (UK).
its speakers, which generally prevents speakers from stepping outside their language and observing that there are … other ways of being in the world’ (Barbe 2007: 509). This means that, following Nietzsche and Benjamin, ‘the preservation of independent thinking requires the defiance of society’s language’ (Held 1980: 210). The alternative is that

the elements of autonomy, discovery, demonstration, and critique recede before designation, assertion, and imitation. Magical, authoritarian and ritual elements permeate speech and language. Discourse is deprived of the mediations which are the stages of the process of cognition and cognitive evaluation. (Marcuse 2002: 88–89)

This means that the manner in which concepts are not only formed, but also transported from discourse to discourse without either critical reflexion or re-constitution in the new discursive context, is highly significant for understanding their potency in shaping discourse and coercing cognition by both their form and the manner of their deployment. Marcuse again,

It is the word that orders and organizes, that induces people to do, to buy, and to accept. It is transmitted in a style which is a veritable linguistic creation; a syntax in which the structure of the sentence is abridged and condensed in such a way that no tension, no “space” is left between the parts of the sentence. (Marcuse 2002: 89–90) [My italics.]

Sump concepts, as one of these remarkable ‘linguistic creations’, therefore have implications for the operation of instrumental rationalities of power, such as by virtue of the very impenetrability of their syntax (as in the abbreviations above) or through the bundled semantic connections that will be entailed in their syntagmatic and spatial structure. The social force in these linguistic creations therefore makes sump concepts into ‘order-words’, which

… issue commands and arrange bodies in standardized ways. They are our very own deb-raining machines. These machines don’t whirr; rather, they mumble, with a sort of insistent, impersonal voice. Order-words are machines of social control that watch over the transformations that bodies undergo as they enter and exit institutional and interpersonal relationships. Order-words restrict becomings but also cannot completely clean out your brain box, either; they mumble – ‘get in line’ – but add, ‘why bother?’ (Genosko 2002: 41)

This means that in the unthinking repetition of the sump concept, whereby its metaphoric transportation entails neither reconfiguration of semantic connections, nor reformulation for deployment in context,

… the meaning is fixed, doctored, loaded. Once it has become an official vocable, constantly repeated in general usage, ‘sanctioned’ by the intellectuals, it has lost all cognitive value and serves merely for recognition of an unquestionable fact. (Marcuse 2002: 98)

However, all is not lost. This kind of ‘closure’ in these concepts leads to the internalisation of dialectical contradictions or of polysemous multiplicities into unitary forms, in this case words or ‘linguistic creations’, and as such contain the potential for their own negation, transcendence and practical intervention through critical reflection and contestation. The reason for this lies in the principal means of the constitution of concepts: identity-thinking.

It is through identity-thinking that the unity of concepts is constituted, and by which the openness of a polysemous semantics is curtailed into a closed discursive space that carries meaning with it, rather than having meanings engineered afresh in the new
discursive context. Concepts are the nodes around and into which this closure is structured. Sump concepts operate by means of this kind of identity-thinking. Regarding the creation of objects of knowing (i.e. concepts), when Nietzsche spoke of the ‘arbitrary differentiations’ in separating and connecting one object to another, the ‘one-sided preference, first for this, then for that property of a thing’, and to the equation of the unequitable in the creation of concepts (1989: 248), it is to the manoeuvres of identity-thinking that he referred.

The problem in the ‘metaphoric transportation’ evinced in sump concepts, with which I shall be concerned below, is that the identity-thinking they entail necessarily misrepresents objects by subsuming specific phenomena (an infinite variety of aspects of a thing) under general and abstract classificatory headings within which the phenomenal world is cognitively and conceptually assembled. But while this highly compelling, not to mention tempting, way of representing reality has the benefit of allowing the manipulation of the material environment, the ordering of its conceptual content, and the creation of the ‘principle of equivalence’ (Adorno 1997: 146), the price we pay is an inability to appreciate the specificity of a particular phenomenal entity, especially in a new context. Put simply, whilst negative dialectics (as we shall see) seek to say what something is or can be, identity-thinking says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, thus what it is not in itself (Adorno 1997: 149). In the final analysis, the irredeemably different and the irreducibly qualitative are indeed reduced and quantified; the disparate is made into parity, and the unequal are equalised, for the greater glory of Man-in-Nature. This is how sump concepts ‘fix, doctor and load’ meaning which is then accepted when its conceptual product is imported into another discourse as inflexible and invariant ‘closed’ or ‘sutured’ object of concept formation.

In the sump concepts below, the extant lines of identity that are imbued into them are left intact after their importation, for to challenge, break and re-establish them requires effort and discomfort, but most of all, it requires recognition that such an undertaking is even necessary in the first place. The result is unquestioned iteration of identity, rather than re-composition of new and purposive lines of identity toward our critical ends. As with Deleuze and Guattari, for Adorno ‘the appearance of identity is inherent in thought itself, in its pure form’ (1997: 5). We cannot help but ‘identify’ when we perceive and define objects, when we relate objects back to our own subjectivity and to other objects. Therefore, to think is to identify, with the implication that ‘conceptual order is content to screen what thinking seeks to comprehend’. This is the complacency entailed in the adoption and use of sump concepts, whereby the accepted conceptual order substitutes for critical recreation of that order. What can we do about this, and what might I mean when I call for greater critical vigilance in our use of language?

Speaking briefly in the most abstract sense, concepts do not comprehend their objects in their totality, there is always a remainder, an under-determination in conceptualisation, and therefore ‘the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived’ (Adorno 1997: 5). The epistemic and metaphysical reduction of objects to that aspect of them which is represented in a given instant, where all that is other than thought is eliminated, and the subject consumes the object. The result is that the appearance and the truth of thought comingle, closing off and unifying in the form of concepts. It is the ‘untruth of identity’ on an object’s own terms, and opens the door for the exploration of alternative lines of identity in objects.
It is perhaps through a *Negative Dialectics* that a consistent and persistent passion for nonidentity, and subsequent re-identification (re-territorialisation), can be expressed (Adorno 1997: 5). In simple terms, we can say that ‘the force that shatters the appearance of identity is the force of thinking’ (149), but thinking critically outside the terms set by the conceptual order, with the intention that ‘disenchantment of the concept is the antidote of philosophy’ (13). Sisyphean as it might be in practice, it is this non-identity thinking within negative dialectics that I propose be integrated into a critical social consciousness oriented toward those concepts that embody the sump-like resort to identity-thinking that are widely apparent in discourse, exploding and liquidating and opening up in the name of critical political praxis. But what is non-identity-thinking, and what is its principal critical mode of *Negative Dialectics*?

It is often objected that dialectical thought ‘leads to closure rather than openness’ and an indefensible movement toward an elusive ‘completeness’ (Holloway et al. 2009: 4). Seemingly, detractors of the dialectical mode have had Hegel or Marx primarily in mind here (Foucault 2010: 42). In contrast, with a critical hypersensitivity toward Hegel’s hypostatisation of ontological categories, negative dialectical practice possesses an almost pathological reflexivity and restlessness, and to think dialectically here ‘means to think in contradictions’ and in antinomies (Adorno 1997: 144). It rejects even the possibility of any ‘unequivocal synthesis’ (Buck-Morss 1977: 63), and resists any attempt at unanimous interpretation. It would be more accurate on the contrary to say that negative dialectics as a practice constitutes ‘a critique of the fact that critique itself, contrary to its own tendency, must remain within the medium of the concept’, a paradox that extends to philosophical activity as a whole, and that ‘it lies in the definition of negative dialectics that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total’ (Adorno 1997: 406).

What I have in mind here is a loose kind of *Sprachkritik*, a kind of dialectical exegesis that draws from a ‘logic of disintegration’ oriented to the conceptual order (Buck-Morss 1977: 64), in this case reproduced in the transportation of closed linguistic creations, and which seeks to invade the gap between its actualisation and limitation. It is therefore ‘more critical interpretation than theory’ (67). What Adorno had in mind is to expose ‘the contradictions which riddled [bourgeois society’s] categories and, following their inherent logic, push them to the point where the categories were made to self-destruct’ (64). This logic of disintegration is key to the formulation of non-identity thinking as the core concern and specific device of a negative dialectics that is fundamentally ‘suspicious of all identity’ (Adorno 1997: 145). This sort of dialectics is more a ‘style of thinking’ than a method as such (Dowling 1984: 19), which ought to reassure the reader that such elusive tactics as paradox, contradiction and ‘ruse’ are not merely self-absorbed amusements (Adorno 1997: 141), but are in fact integral to the critique. What I shall attempt here is a loose critical activation of negative dialectics, an indication of an agenda, and thus a modest opening of hostilities against the intellectual fortifications of linguistic, conceptual and political closure that manifest in the transportation of concepts from one discourse to another in the social sciences.

So, when I talk about being dialectical regarding sump concepts, what I mean is ‘to break the compulsion to achieve identity, and to break it by means of the energy stored up in that compulsion and concealed in its objectifications’ (Adorno 1997: 157). Social science guns for explanation and prediction, and through these yearnings is driven energetically by the political imperative for social control (Aronowitz 1981: 28). It is to this end
that sump concepts seduce academics into reproducing the conceptual order by the uncontroversial easiness of their extant form. Therefore, negative dialectical critique needs must engage with the energetic compulsion to explain. It is by challenging the coherence, identity and explanatory force immanent to these sump concepts that they can be broken, a more open and plural position in the discourse promoted, and emancipatory potentials given at least a chance.

**Bottom-up**

The metaphoric conceptualisation of *Bottom-Up*, and its complement, *Top-Down*, in the social and cultural sciences ought to be very familiar, as it is everywhere, and as such its examples hardly need referencing. Is it a relic of our antediluvian rise from four legs on to two that we have made of the upward motion all that is ‘higher’, loftier, all that is better, purer, more desirable and less attainable? Is it that, in good old Aristotelian fashion, we are merely expanding morally on that attitude of our bodies by which we take on food at the top and expel the feculence down at the bottom? Is this a humanist indulgence of the slogan ‘man is the measure of all things’ that unfortunately transports us so quickly into the rapacities of homo faber?4

Of course, ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ in turn produce and are produced by a whole universe of meanings enshrined in the geometry of our material world and thus are at hand as the ready-to-go social metonym par excellence. These conceptualisations have become almost impossible to escape in our compulsive need to explain social phenomena, and to do so succinctly and popularly. Political geography, international relations and sociology have been enthralled for eons to spatialised figurations, metaphors and to the vocabulary of spatial extension in particular: scales, layers, levels, spheres, radii, pyramids and so on (Agnew 1994, 2005; Brenner 1999). They litter the discourses of social science.

As yet another physical and dimensional metaphor, the Bottom-Up sump concept permeates a vast range of discourses, academic and political, but it is across the landscape of all those Realisms in particular that the concept has found its most fertile soil. Let us consider but one regional terroir. The process-structuralism of the New Institutionalisms, especially of the Historical variety, has been particularly guilty as regards the Bottom-Up/Top-Down conceptualisation. An entire breed of such Establishment constructivists in the social sciences, which has drawn its pedigree from the stables of Harvard Yard, has now spread its lexical fertiliser across the whole of the social sciences. The legion descendants today are too numerous to mention, so let us shoot straight for the headwaters.

In her flagship work *States and Social Revolutions*, Theda Skocpol alludes to a ‘pyramid of soviets’ constructed through ‘elections from the bottom up’ (1979: 247). This is predicated upon a polarity to which we are inducted earlier in the work.

… no longer from the top-down with emphasis on the state, the dominant class, and the international context, but now from the bottom up with emphasis on the structural situation of the peasants in the agrarian economy and in local political and class relations. (Skocpol 1979: 111)

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4I am of course aware that my very own conceptualisation of the ‘sump concept’ is contributory to this discourse, and that I am therefore guilty either of complacency, hypocrisy, or brazen cheek.
What are the effects of this conceptualisation? Reading this exemplary passage, are we then surprised at the devastating marginalisation or vilification of the State in mainstream social science discourses since the 1980s, when we consider how right here, embedded in the very conceptual language being used, the State is reified as something neither abstract, transcendent, phenomenal, nor immanent, but something possessed of a clear and locatable physicality (somewhere above our heads, apparently)? This, before there is even any explicit theorising upon it. Regardless of how Skocpol wishes to present the state, the regurgitation of the concept from the stock of sociological metaphors has a definite preceding effect.

Charles Tilly’s efforts to elucidate the ‘interplay of top-down and bottom-up power’ in the sociological history of the capitalist world-system clearly demonstrate a synthetic framework predicated on an explanatory polarity (1999: 344). The basic coordinates to much of Tilly’s work predictably juxtaposed the social forces of non-political capital or production emerging from market exchange as ‘bottom-up’ and political coercion via the State as ‘top-down’ (1999, 1986: 305; 1990: 127–8, 131, 141, 160). It is not hard to foresee the effects of such an implicit modelling on the perception of the relation between ‘State’ and ‘Civil Society’. Regardless, when we are informed that ‘in the closer examination of improvised articulation lies the synthesis between top-down and bottom-up conceptions of power’ (Tilly 1999: 350), we are also being informed of the decisive place of synthesis in this mode of thinking, a mode not so much ‘by reference to the ground’ (Foucault 2002a: 53), as by reference from the poles inwards, but nevertheless still unsatisfactory.

Likewise, in his exploration of social capital, Robert Putnam might describe the ‘top-down’ versus ‘bottom-up’ debate regarding how we apprehend and present the ‘domains of social-capital creation’ as a ‘false debate’ (2001: 413). However, the problem is that this possibly valid criticism contains in it a deeper anti-critical operation that social scientists rarely acknowledge, as its effects lie outside of the epistemic parameters of procedural social science. Namely, he does not reject the coordinates (here the ‘national’ and ‘local’ spheres of social organisation, corresponding respectively to top-down and bottom-up). Rather, he affirms them in his conclusion that only a complex and nuanced synthetic position within these coordinates is the correct position to take regarding the problem at hand. He assumes he has deftly collapsed the polarities of the ‘false debate’, but what is crucial is how he neglects the effect of the syntax implicit in the metaphoric language he imports. In his references to Skocpol, it seems likely that he has simply appropriated and perpetuated the conventional resort to this metaphor prevalent in historical institutionalist analysis. One might question whether it is right or fair to take these excerpts out of context, but context will not save him here, for it is the raw syntagmatic character of the metaphor itself that affects the conceptualisation, and for that context is irrelevant. However, even in terms of the context of his discussion on social organisation, his sympathy for ‘complementarity’ in relating the national to the local in the organisation of social capital betrays a reified and unreflexive sociology of categories that assumes too much, problematises too little, and leads us back to the pitfalls of twentieth century social science.

But this particular sump concept is not confined to the plain of normative social science. Radical and critical literatures too can harbour the concept. For instance, taking the discourses critical of the neoliberalisation of academia as an example, we are told that ‘neoliberalism is best understood as a top-down impositional discourse’ (Larner 2003: 511). The neoliberal university is posited as ‘a corporate model of top-
down management’ (Thorpe 2014: 221), which thus has ‘to be reinvented on the spot and from the ground up’ (Zuidhof 2015: 54). From above and from below, even the critical are bound into the geometric conspiracy to imprison us in its polar dimensions. My objection here is not with the identification of positionalities of authority and command in the academic sphere per se, which is arguably a legitimately critical move. My objection is not predicated on the claim that some other species of dimensional metaphor is more appropriate, such as a molecular one (Deleuze-Guattari), a decentred political technology (Foucault), or a generated aesthetic relation (Rancière). My point arises from an ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ (Ricoeur 2008; Jaeggi 2008) that this particular metaphor has been imported merely through habit, familiarity and prefabricated availability, rather than the result of careful selection intended for a specific and conscious purpose in critique. This suspicion arises from the great prevalence of the metaphor in this literature, which is hardly ever explicitly and reflexively addressed. It is entirely plausible that such an iterative deployment of the metaphor reinforces and reproduces a view of academia as a pyramid or some other top-down geometric form. This is a schema entirely compatible with post-war social science, Fordist production regimes, corporate hierarchies, bureaucratic models and thus occludes and deflects critical analysis from thinking about academia beyond the mainstream institutional(ist) terms. I actually suspect that the need to move away from this conventional understanding dominant in the literature is imperative at present, that it constitutes a severe impasse, and that this sump conceptualisation through metaphor is part of the problem.

When we read such incongruous expressions such as ‘bottom-up governmentality’ (Barnett 2005: 10), it becomes apparent that this particular structural conceptualisation has even drained into post-structuralist literatures. Needless to say, it seems inappropriate to insert the notion of a Bottom-Up/Top-Down framework into the social ontology of Foucault’s biopolitical population, an entity for which any kind of structural dimensionality is explicitly incompatible with its stated fluidities and modulations. This is especially puzzling given the pathological aversion and explicit opposition of Foucault himself to those modes of thinking by ‘reference to the ground’ that are enunciatively constitutive of particular power-relational objects in discourse (Foucault 2002a: 53). In this vein, the constructivist constellation of Bottom-Up/Top-Down enforces a particular quadrillage of intelligibility in place of a polysemous plane of possibility, and throws us from the horizon of expectation into the iron maiden of explanatory metaphor. Sadly, we just end up with a diagrammatic tracing rather than rhizomatic polyvocity (Deleuze and Guattari 2013), which perpetuates a given set of epistemic conditions bereft of critical dynamic, proper disjunction or any kind of transcendence.

As we noticed above in the Putnam case, in terms of anti-critical force what we have in this conceptualisation then is biunivocity. The usual technique engendered by the Bottom-Up/Top-Down polar construct in social science researches is the inevitable and

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5Whilst some might argue that Top-Down is precisely how power relations and subordinate positionalities are experienced in academia, this is to assert something of a circularity. Though I do not want to contract the description of others’ experience, I would ask why the experience of being subjected to authority, domination and command is best described as coming from above, placing one below. Can such power not also push out to the side (marginalisation), subsume and overwhelm one (enslavement, conative investment), or indeed aesthetically place one in impossible and paradoxical positions (the ‘ban’, labour camp).

6Biunivocity designates a type of relation that exclusively links two terms to one another, and where one of the two dominates depending upon the circumstances, point of origin or purpose in establishing the polar relation.
reasonable synthesising of the two fabricated positions. This is not however a critically defensible manoeuvre. To synthesise within the dualism of given polar coordinates is not to find a cunning ‘middle road’ or a sophisticated exit from the crudities of biunivocity, but merely to reinforce the polarity of those coordinates further imprisoning us in the limits of their epistemic grid (Walker 1993: 32). An ontological framework of Top and Bottom is then an undialectical dualism, a polarity that reinforces the coordinates of stratification and static positivism, even as its utterers fling their prestigious weight into attempted social critique and progressiveness.

The fact that ‘Bottom’ is always succeeded by ‘Up’, and ‘Top’ succeeded by ‘Down’, seals the argument. Not content to rest with the static topological coordinates established, the collocated word-bundles contain a necessary and repetitive vectoring, a motion towards the contrived centre in the discursive totality that ‘closets itself inside its own terms’ by the generation of the coordinates themselves (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 77). A prejudicial equilibrating synthesis is fixed in advance. In this way, synthesis is not encountered as an option, choice or willed conclusion, but as a force one must accept. This is not a transcendent synthesis in any dialectical or sublative motion, as there is little or no antithetical freedom, but is the inscription of an illegitimate (restrictive and exclusive) ‘disjunctive synthesis’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 110).

The biunivocal structure of Bottom-Up/Top-Down establishes an epistemic condition that comes to function as a doxic ‘plane of obviousness’ that repeatedly short-circuits the moment of disjunctive synthesis proper and its possibilities for polymorphous perversities (Holland 1999: 32). It is a sabotaged moment for the realisation of ‘the domain of free syntheses where everything is possible: endless connections, nonexclusive disjunctions, nonspecific conjunctions, partial objects and flows’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 54). The biunivocal is then a defining element in the closing off of a non-representational domain of free syntheses, a preclusion of ‘unlimited semiosis’ (Holland 1999, 2), a rendering of aleatory and ‘open-ended series containing manifold possibilities for identification’ into an axial tracing of either/or (Holland 1999: 41; Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 75–76).

Interestingly, in the biunivocal relation of Bottom-Up/Top-Down there is a sneaky elision over any recognition of the asymmetry in the relation. In the case of Bottom-Up/Top-Down, there is often an asymmetry where Bottom-Up = Good and Top-Down = Bad. The structure enforces a symmetry that not only belies the fundamental asymmetry of the power-relations to which it purports to report, but that also frustrates any critical dynamic of transcendence through playing out the contradictions. Symmetry is stasis. Here lies the reactionary potency of this sump concept.

In the final analysis, the Bottom-Up/Top-Down concept is at best an unimaginative prop that substitutes for either more discursive elaboration or lexical precision. It allows a dubious bracketing in the procedure of thought and communication of that which ought to be explicitly problematised. But this is done so as to allow the intellectual journeyman to continue on to the one and true matter at hand – explanation and prediction in the simian service of control and domination over man, woman, beast and nature. But before returning to the topic of the human ape, let us turn to our second concept.
Concrete: hard and soft

This conceptualisation concerns the well-trodden metaphors of Hard and Soft, the Romulus and Remus of the great empire of empiricist thought in social science.7 Quite why material reality, and therefore all that is more real, must be ‘hard’ as opposed to ‘soft’ is a curious thing. One can only assume it stems from that same stone kicked by Dr. Johnson that time. But one development is clear, the metaphorical seepage of the metaphor into social and cultural science discourses is most certainly real.

As a matter of fact, one often comes across a somewhat Anglophonic paranoia over non-turgidity in the social sciences generally, a social science that only understands the real in terms of physical media. We shall return to this momentarily, for now let us just note that we seem to make of the ‘turgid’ and ‘hard’ all that is more worthy and credible, as well as prestigious in the hierarchy of academe. These proclivities are replete in social sciences generally, but even in critical literature we hear in muted tones of association about hard facts, hard evidence, and even recently about ‘hard reality’ (Lapavitsas 2015: 29), whilst even critical utterers apparently remain oblivious to the potential consequences of their language use. However, when not exempla of purely sump-like complacency, these instances are little to do with correspondent truth and everything to do with prestige, legitimacy and power. I do not want to get sucked into the jostling spats of The Two Cultures problem (Snow 1961), but it is in the question of ‘the hierarchy of the sciences’ (Cole 1983) that the issue of this conceptualisation has been most clearly touched upon before, and in which it is evidently manifest. It also supplies us with a possible reason for its persistence in an academic social science that has, for the most part, been co-opted into the mode of ‘police science’ (Rancière 1999, 2015; Foucault 2002b). In this discourse, ‘hard’ natural science is contrasted to ‘soft’ social science (Storer 1967), with a series of graded pretensions moving outward from sound science and terminating in the moist gossamer of the Geisteswissenschaften. Naturally, the former are credible and ‘real’, whilst the latter are not and are not therefore buttressed by any credible epistemological foundations.8

Of course, the hard/soft conceptualisation provides the fundamental motor for an unacknowledged circular reasoning here. It perpetuates a process that begins with the metaphysical leap establishing the basis for a positivist-empiricist ontology/epistemology, whereby real = physical = material = hard. This is never reflexively critiqued, which then serves as predicate for the assessment of non-positivist-empiricist modes as less real = less physical = soft. As ‘soft’, they are then less real and so less credible. The modes and procedures of such incredible thought are then unworthy of consideration as challengers to the regnant positivist-empiricism, rendering the latter impervious to reflexive criticism. The circle is complete, and the entire critical canon is cast aside for the airy persiflage and waste of time that it is.

With the attempt to caste Politics, History, Law, etc., as ‘sciences’ turning out unsuccessful since the deconstructive 1970s, an alternative strategy has emerged. A tremendous premium has now landed on successful integration of the hard/soft conceptualisation into

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7 I should just add that this is not a philistine’s invective against concrete. Concrete is possibly the sump concept about which I feel least bilious and most likely to give people a break. I always liked concrete: growing up in urban Yorkshire, holidays to the Normandy coast, and a certain antipathy I have acquired to the more tiresome petty-bourgeois sensibilities that so despise its rugged honesty as a building material.

8 The puerilities of the Sokal Affair are illustrative.
one’s own disciplinary schema, with academic rewards falling on those who are reproductive of the ‘hierarchy of the sciences’ through the back door of discursive enunciation. With the prospect of a proposed axing of funds to political science research in a recent spending bill for the US National Science Foundation, it was pointed out in the journal *Nature* that ‘part of the blame must lie with the practice of labelling the social sciences as soft, which too readily translates as meaning woolly or soft-headed’ (Editorial 2012). This need for prestige surely lies behind so much of the taste for ‘hardness’ in social science vocabulary, though it does not account alone, as we shall see.

It was arguably in the case of Anthropology – that great stepping-stone bridge from the biological sciences to the social sciences to the humanities – that the first inroads of this process were made. Clifford Geertz’s (1977) ‘thick description’ of anthropological phenomena probably comes immediately to mind. Deirdre McCloskey (1988) contrasted ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ methodologies in social science, where ‘thick’ implies a diffuseness and complexity allied to ‘richness’, and ‘thin’ the intricacy of formal abstraction. However, such tributaries and side-channels cannot match the omnipresence, effectiveness and directness of the mainline flow that is the ‘hard/soft’ conceptualisation. Recent years have therefore seen a sedimentation of ‘Soft Law’ vs. ‘Hard Law’ in jurisprudential studies (Christians 2007), and the similar rise of ‘Soft Power’ over ‘Hard Power’ has enthroned a new princeling in the domain of political science (Nye 2004; Campbell and O’Hanlon 2006). These developments might not be surprising in the cases of International Relations and Law. After all, as academic disciplines they tend to produce work of great complexity, but all too often great philistinism also, the academic and social prestige of which is equalled only by its intellectual and critical limitations. However, the metastasis of the tendency is spreading in these areas, and the effects are ominous.

Evidently, with ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ we are back once more in the world of biunivocity, but enough has been said about that already. The leading objection at this point revolves around three significant effects of the conceptualisation as it is disseminated throughout the social medium. Firstly, as I have just shown, it prolongs the ascendency of uncritical positivist-empiricist naiveties, and marginalises critical modes of thought that operate beyond the pale of sound science.

Secondly, it engenders an uncritical reification of social relations, an absolutely core concern of critical social science. Surely, as it is principally with social relations that critical discourses are concerned, those social relations are just as surely ‘objective but immaterial’ (Harvey 2010: 113–14, 128). This apparently oxymoronic formulation is, in fact, to the point. Social relations that are objective, yet immaterial, are nevertheless just as real as anything tangible, and crucially are possessed of social force regardless of their immediate immateriality. Aside from the obvious epistemological point here, to challenge the sump conceptualisation of hard/soft is to question in a single stroke the crude notion that ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ force, coercion, power, or whatever, denotes or describes effective differences in the substance of force. This leaves us with the hard/soft conceptualisation either as a pure sump concept, to which academics resort for lack of expressive talent or vocabulary beyond their upbringing in vulgar empiricism, or it leaves us with a clinging to the terminology of academic conformity, acceptance and a steady salary. Either way, neither of these motivations are satisfactory.

Thirdly, and perhaps most profoundly, it is constitutive of gendered discourse, and so is contributory to a politics of sexism. Why? Well, of all the arguments presented so far I
imagine this will perhaps prove the least penetrative of the mainstream, but the answer lies with ‘turgidity’. The gendered asymmetries of hot–cold, active–passive, dry–moist, turgid–flaccid, penetrator–penetrated, and hard–soft run through the discourses of the western tradition right back to Antiquity (Foucault 1986, 1990), with the privileged positionality of power in the enunciative relation alighting on the first half of each couplet, designating the masculine over the feminine. These are just some permutations of the ‘two roles and two poles’ that are perpetually reconstituted asymmetrically through discourse formation as ‘two positional values: that of the subject and that of the object’ (Foucault 1990: 46), and through which the reproduction of gendered difference has been inscribed into our historical knowledge-complexes for eons. We might not wish to own up to it, but when we ontologically privilege the metaphorically ‘hard’ over the metaphorically ‘soft’, we are engaging in the same unthinking practice and contributing to the oldest of all the oppressive social architectures.9 It is time we put an end to it.

**Evolution**

*Evolution* is one of the most dangerous sump concepts in the social and human sciences, as the history of the twentieth century can attest, and as the creeping return to bio-technological eugenics in this century ought to make us beware. Its dangerousness is matched only by its enormous prevalence in daily speech. Furthermore, it is fundamental to a whole raft of academic discourses currently fashionable in the social sciences, both implicitly and explicitly (i.e., evolutionary psychology, developmental economics, social history, cognitive sciences). What makes it a sump concept, though, ought to be clear. It is a means of expressing, presenting and talking about historical change without rigorously thinking about it. So often a shorthand simply for ‘change’, the concept is usually deployed so as to sidestep clear and specific treatment of the knottiest of all historiographic problems: the relationship of continuity and change, cause and effect, origin and telos, event and structure and the assignation of significance in narrativisation. The words and phrases, notions and concepts of evolution entail packaged semantics that accompany the word unacknowledged, leaving one with the sense that those who import and employ the term are simply incapable or unwilling to lay out their historicising unassisted by what is in most instances simply a crutch.

It is, in particular, the widespread and dominant assumption of ontogenetic adaptability, and its complementary phylogenetic narrative, as the defining core feature of the concept that presents us with the darkest of misunderstandings of its labyrinth, and it has serious political and social consequences. This is ‘the idea that evolution is a tale of sequential moulding of parts to designs favoured in local habitats’ (Gould 1987: 48), a socio-biological position summarised as ‘the equation of current utility with historical origin’. What is very telling about evolution as a sump concept in the social sciences is how it is properly a mixed species of Lamarckism, rather than Darwinism proper. It is on the inheritance of acquired characteristics, influenced and shaped by environmental change, that the adaptationist assumption is based. Once again, *aetia* and *telos* are returned to our interpretational schema as development and design in History, but this

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9 Even in recent attempts to advocate in favour of the ‘soft’ (power, law, etc.), there is something typically feline in its assumptions and pitch, reminiscent of the feminine wiles discourse.
time through the back door lexica of natural history after careful laundering in the discourses of biological science.

However, for Darwin and others such as Stephen Jay Gould, the concept predicates a natural history of *elimination*, rather than positive selection as elevation to worthiness. ‘Natural selection’ for Darwin, as the primary mechanism of evolutionary change, was at core ‘the preservation of favourable variations and the rejection of injurious variations’ (1968: 131). This preservation/rejection dynamic left a huge range of variation possible in the extant and the living, neither useful nor injurious, and as such contingent, or as Darwin put it, as a ‘fluctuating element’ that is ‘polymorphic’. This is the ‘great asymmetry’ of evolutionary history that makes of evolution an entirely negative dynamic (Gould 1987: 49). There is no purpose in an organism’s continuing existence, merely Fortuna. ‘Under nature, the slightest difference of structure or constitution may well turn the nicely-balanced scale in the struggle for life, and so be preserved. How fleeting are the wishes and efforts of man! how short his time!’ (Darwin 1968: 133). However, the term ‘natural selection’ is perhaps unfortunate, as it conveys a misleading sense of agency, intention, positive preference and thus *purposive* functionality, in the selection/elimination traits that just happen to turn out to be ineffective at maintaining life in a given change of circumstance. When Darwin speaks in the problematic register of agency, we get as follows: ‘I can see no reason to doubt that natural selection might be most effective in giving the proper colour to each kind of grouse’ (1968: 134), or; ‘if nature had to make the beak of a full-grown pigeon very short for the bird’s own advantage …’ (1968: 137). Nature is made a counterpart to homo faber. *Natura faber?*

Of course, in failing to assimilate the negativity and contingency in natural selection, we are then just a few steps from other dubious notions attendant to the main concept, such as *Design* and *Development*. The place of mutation in evolutionary natural history is intergenerational, not an adaptive metamorphosis of the individual biological entity in response to changing conditions. The characteristics of an entity that prove instrumentally successful by virtue of the fact of its survival alone are epiphenomenal. It is the gravest of misapprehensions to see anything as nomological or coherent as a *development* in the simple survival, through changing circumstances, of these epiphenomenal traits that are then memorialised in genetic documentation. That which is presumed to be a linear development of stages, those ‘continuous pathways of progress along unbroken lineages’, is nothing more than ‘a chronological set of termini on unrelated evolutionary trunks’ (Gould 1993: 322).

*Design*, of course, is the most commonly bandied around term from the manual of evolutionary theory: ‘this is what we are designed to do’, one often hears. Funnily, it is the precise opposite of the meaning and import of the theory of evolution, the exact epigram of which, if it had one, would read something like: ‘there is no diachronic design in natural history, merely retrospectively modelled chance and caprice at the synchronic threshold of mutation’. Even the intergenerational transmission of genetic characteristics are not ‘crafted specifically by natural selection for their current function’ (Gould 1987: 49) – it could go either way at any historical moment of transmission – leaving us at best with ‘co-opted epiphenomena’ that are evidently so disappointing to those addicted to the comforting and reassuring mode of sociobiological explanation. Tangled in all this is the repeated gravitation back to a ‘profound unwillingness to abandon a view of life as predictable progress’ (Gould 1993: 323), and an inability to relinquish all the ‘iconographies of
evolution’ that reflect ‘our hopes for a universe of intrinsic meaning defined in our own terms’ (Gould 1991: 43). As Gould clinched it once again, it is an urge with ‘little relation to truth, and all to do with solace’ (1993: 323).

The implication is that only the most tentative political or moral conclusions can be drawn from the theory, and these only if qualified almost to the point of irrelevance. For in the final analysis, this evolution by circumstantial elimination of genetic lines is characterised by ultimate ontological contingency. The functionality of any evolutionary trait is purely contingent in historical terms regardless of the teleological privileging of the Present, toward which most historical interpretation tends as the ‘synthetic activity of the subject’ in historical interpretation (Foucault 2002a: 15). There is then no more perverse and unfaithful a corollary to be drawn from natural selection than to paraphrase its subtlety with the flatfooted and heavily ideologised term – ‘survival of the fittest’.

Once again, the intention here is not to argue for an exclusive presentation or interpretation of such a thoroughly examined and contested notion such as Evolution, for there are those that would disagree with the Gouldian way of thinking (Richards 1992). To outline evolution as a sump concept is rather to demonstrate how a particular interpretation of the notion is assumed, repeated and made hegemonic over a plurality of discourses unknownst to the complacent utterer, regardless of their intention in uttering, and to raise the issue of the political effects of those repeated enunciative interventions.

The transmigration of the quasi-Lamarckian Evolution concept into social non-theoris-ing, along with all its hellish confederates of Design, Development, and Adaptation, has a lot to account for. Examples are too legion to cite usefully but just listen to BBC Radio 4 over a given weekend. This conceptualisation, and its related semantics that I have outlined, is the oxygen that feeds the kind of Whiggish and teleological History so devastatingly critiqued by the likes of Herbert Butterfield (1965) and Quentin Skinner (2002a), and which nevertheless saturates the popular feed. Politically, it serves to reinforce the status quo, for design and development entail necessity, against which naturally enough resistance must be irrational or unnatural. Of course, the oft-fascistic politics of Social Darwinism that is nourished by this sump concept need hardly be addressed; we know the cut of its cloth already.

More specifically, perhaps the decisive problem with the transportation of the evolution metaphor lies in its unreflexive privileging of mechanistic causality that usually precludes more critical epistemologies regarding historical interpretation. The implicit epigenetic assumption regarding historical change in this meaning of evolution, in contrast to the ahistoricity of theories of preformation or ‘recapitulation’ in the history of the concept (Richards 1992), constrains social possibilities by making of historical change a sequential and linear progression. Here, whatever can possibly be must be spatially and temporally adjacent to that which recently was and is. In these terms, the organicist, conservative or grudgingly reformist social politics implicated in this use of metaphor becomes apparent, and so does the reason for rejecting any unconsidered transportation of the concept into sociological discourses by critical social scientists when speaking simply of change without intending an explicit theoretical commitment.

What is required therefore, beyond the confines of this essay, is detailed and extensive investigation into the enunciative function of the evolution concept in contemporary discourse outside of biological science, and analyses of the conditions of discourse formation by which the concept is deployed into the political and social field. Meanwhile, if the genie
would grant me three wishes, it would be that people stop saying that human beings are 'designed' for anything, that they utter not that some living entity ‘adapts’ genetically in a single generation, and that they desist from claiming anything to ‘evolve’ when they are merely speaking simply of an undefined temporal connection between two phenomena, objects or processes.

**Exhortation**

The intent of this paper is not to advocate for a complete abandonment of the use of discourse-creating metaphor. The point is to make room for the consciously purposive and original use of metaphor to evoke, provoke, incite, energise, elaborate, critique and texture in the formation of discourse, by eliminating the unthinking formation of discourse through concepts that are overfamiliar, trite and regurgitated with neither cognisance nor artistry. In this I follow Orwell’s assertion that language is ‘an instrument which we shape for our own [political] purposes’ (1968: 127), particularly regarding the use of metaphor. So, couched in the brazen irony and impertinence of my sump conceptualisation, there is a pertinent point at work and a justification to be found.

However, the discursive prevalence and prominence of the chosen concepts are surely indisputable. What elevates the significance of these sump concepts above the level of the annoying is the intellectual and discursive way in which they are constituted as conceptual creations that suture thought and action into reactionary formations through identity-thinking. Though only briefly, I have tried to indicate at least the operation of sump conceptualisation. The intention has simply been to introduce the notion and to discuss some examples cathartically. The next step will be a more elaborate and sophisticated analysis of the formation of sump concepts, as well as the critical counter-conduct of negative dialectics.

In the meantime, the basic take-home is a simple one: that we ought to be mindful of how we use concepts, to introspect rigorously our choice of words, and to engage with critical vigilance such use by others. It is a reminder to critical social scientists of the dangers entailed in the passive acceptance of casual conceptualisation in scholarly language, and of the importance of an active incorporation of concept creation to one’s own interventions into academic discourse. However, the pull of these concepts is formidable, and I am sure the desired eradications will not come anytime soon.

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**Notes on contributor**

*John Welsh* is a researcher at the Department of Political and Economic Studies, University of Helsinki, whose current interests in critical theory revolve around questions of historical capitalism, global cities, social epistemology, as well as the contemporary transformation of academic life. Recently published articles can be found in *Distinktion, Critical Sociology, Contemporary Politics* and the *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*.
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