

UDC 316.2

*S.K. Ridgley***AVATARS OF THE NEW DARK AGE:*****MOLOCH, MAGICAL THINKING, AND THE ANTI-SCIENTIFIC SPIRIT***

“The 1960s have changed sociology irrevocably into a field of study that is now more open to diverse perspectives. Once the genie was let out of the box, there was no way of putting it back.”

M. Burawoy and J. Van Antwerpen

“Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! . . . Moloch the incomprehensible prison!”

A. Ginsberg, *Howl*

Much of what is considered bleeding edge theory in sociology<sup>1</sup> today consists of articles propounding theories that cannot be falsified, that are grounded in confirmation bias, that are crafted in a strange and inaccessible argot, and that appeal to *pathos* in the creation of a Moloch upon which to hang blame for the world's ills. Any one of these contentions about modern sociological writing could and probably should be the subject of expanded study – taken together, they constitute a tendency in sociology toward a New Metaphysics. This tendency represents a profound change in the modern *zeitgeist* – a reversal, in fact. We are experiencing a reversal of the ascendancy of science and scientific thinking and a resurgence of medievalist magical thinking about society – how we live, how we exchange with each other, how we are governed. This essay ranges far in this regard and charts a course for further exploration. It examines the rise of the New Metaphysics and its primary means of communicating its ideas. It draws parallels between today's new metaphysicians and those schoolmen of the middle ages, whose embrace of magic thinking was so complete that its straitened medieval orthodoxy not only hindered scientific, economic, and commercial progress, but also often punished such progress as heretical. Finally, this essay suggests that in its embrace of its own truth and with its “praxis-oriented” posture, the New Metaphysics poses a growing threat to the scholarly traditions of the university and itself constitutes a barbarous pseudo-science that begs unmasking.

*Keywords:* sociology, metaphysics, social sciences, falsification, confirmation bias, praxis, critical theory, Popper.

**Introduction**

When we attempt to make sense out of a welter of facts, we bring order to chaos at risk of criticism, for critics breed freely wherever there are those who create, who offer uncomfortable explanations, who generalize about tendencies. This paper examines one of those tendencies – the coalescing of a New Metaphysics and its expression in the social sciences, primarily in sociology. This New Metaphysics is characterized by theories that are non-falsifiable, theories that are constructed almost entirely of confirmation bias, theories that are unnecessarily inaccessible by virtue of an idiosyncratic argot adopted for obscurantist purposes rather than clarity, and the return of magic thinking in the form of a *Moloch* responsible for evil and which must be vanquished.

This essay forays as a first attempt to trace the outlines of this New Metaphysics and to disaggregate its approach, so to understand its durability, its persistence, and the continued attraction of its ethos for those who practice it. Here I draw parallels between today's New Metaphysicians and those schoolmen of the middle ages, whose embrace of magic thinking was so complete that its straitened medieval orthodoxy not only hindered scientific, economic, and commercial advance, it punished it as heretical. This paper calls attention to the general spirit and direction of academia; here, with regard to academia, I speak generally about the humanities and social sciences and the direction of Western academia, broadly conceived. Of course, one can always offer exceptions to any generalization, which is the nature of generalizations – we can always find a rock or two that stand solid against a stream's current. That does not change the path of the stream and may only slow it marginally. The direction of academia is the topic here, and that direction is – generally – easy to espy.

By “direction,” I mean the general thrust of questions discussed, the research interests of its chief practitioners in its leading departments, the articles appearing in their leading journals. In Bourdieusian terms, this would constitute the portion of the *field* of permissible discourse. I offer the notion that this cur-

<sup>1</sup> This is not to single out sociology unfairly, for there is much to forgive in the social sciences generally. This article, when it refers to “social sciences,” does not include economics, the one social science that for the most part engages in science.

rent “new” direction is toward nothing new, fresh, different, or progressive; it marks, instead, a regression from the principles of the Renaissance and Enlightenment and a return to the darkness of metaphysics, mystification, and magical thinking of the middle ages.

The task, here, is to identify the tendencies and assay their content, which could reveal a mechanism at work in the social sciences that begs description and analysis. In this essay, I first discuss the general state of sociology, juxtaposing it with traditional sociology as it was largely practiced before, roughly, 1960. I then review the four key debilitating factors that comprise New Metaphysics theory-building in sociology and why, *in toto*, they constitute a barbarous pseudo-science that begs unmasking.

### Theoretical Background

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Auguste Comte, generally acknowledged as founder of sociology, tried to understand and explain the intellectual progression of mankind that had led to stupendous advances in economics, science, and political development, beginning fitfully with the Renaissance and then with vigor during the Enlightenment. Comte offered a three-stage schema of “mind” by which to organize the successive stages of progress in knowledge, which began with theology, was followed by metaphysics, and which culminated in science [11. P. 149]. Thus, saw the birth of positivism of the modern era. Metaphysics inevitably began a retreat, and the newly ascendant gospel of science promised, if not Utopia, then steady progress.

After more than 150 years of the Enlightenment project, however, we can see signs that suggest the current modern age has crested, even as science and reason are under assault, particularly in the universities. Sociology itself appears to be regressing to that condition in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when reformers of all stripes wished mightily for a better world, such wishes constituting their entire contribution to societal well-being. If we adopt this Comtean schema for illustrative purpose, we can argue that there are signs that the steady progress of science, reason, and rationality could now be coming to an end and, indeed, could be in the process of reversal with the rise of a New Metaphysics.

Characteristic of this New Metaphysics is the expansion of metaphysical notions masquerading as “science.” This is particularly noisome in the field of sociology. Sociology occupies the leading edge of the new tendency, whose macro-ambition is the overthrow of something it calls *neoliberalism*, the undermining of natural science, and – in its own micro-bailiwick – the infiltration of and transformation of other divisions within the academy, most notably the Western business school.<sup>2</sup> This New Metaphysics represents a reversal of a great tradition that began only with great difficulty at the end of the medieval period and the dawn of the Renaissance.

At this point, I offer a brief historical review so that we may establish the parallels between today’s trends and those extant during the middle ages. Our review begins approximately 1,500 years ago with the fall of the Roman Empire and moves briskly.

By the time of the deposition of the last Roman emperor Romulus Augustus by the barbarian Odoacer in 476 AD, the shadows had already grown long on the great disciplinary citadels of learning. Philosophy and law, science and mathematics were left to the Byzantines and those farther east to preserve. The great tide of civilization and learning receded, and a metaphorical darkness indeed descended on Europe, contrary to what many revisionists would have us believe. If not for the diligence of monks of assorted orders, cloistered in their fortresses of asceticism, and who diligently copied fragments of vellum, the light might have gone out indefinitely.

Skills of literacy, already meagerly distributed, faded inexorably under the pressing need for mere survival in a fragmented, barbarian world, where the class distinctions were clear and immutable: “Those who fight, those who pray, those who work.” Disease, famine, war, pestilence were joined and exacerbated by superstition and magical thinking as an entire epoch of knowledge was all but lost. The magical thinkers and metaphysicians dominated intellectual life, such as it was, and they consciously and assertively kept reason and rationality at bay; or at least the modes of thought that we consider reason and rationality today. Science and empiricism remained the almost exclusive province of the artisan and tinkerer.

For 1,000 years, the theologians and metaphysicians ruled politics and the economy, and they determined the very fabric of the society that they imprisoned in structured political stability and economic subsistence. “A granite-like quality in the ancient ways of life had yielded only slowly to the forces of time.

<sup>2</sup> Quasi-Marxist “Critical” perspectives of every sort find their way into the various disciplines, including the modern business school, where it is called “Critical Management Studies.”

From the westernmost reaches of Europe, in Ireland, to Russia in the east, the peasant masses had maintained an imperturbable sameness” [20, P. 7]. Not only the structures of the Church served as pillars of stability, but the universities, too, were domains of conformity run by the medieval schoolmen. Nominally the epoch’s intellectuals, these scholastics fulfilled the stability function not by new inquiries and experimentation, but with pseudo-scientific speculation and pronouncements on the ancients in service to the *status quo*.

The Renaissance and then the Enlightenment marked an intellectual awakening in the period 1500-1800, but not without stout resistance from the “dominant ideology,” whose fortunes had waxed and waned but whose ecclesiastical authority had never faltered. Even though the stable society fought a tenacious rear-guard action, neither the hectoring of Aquinas nor the thumbscrews of Torquemada could stop the long night from ending. The time of the metaphysicians and their magical thinking had drawn to a close. For a time, at least.

The roll-back of superstition, magical thinking, and pseudo-science was a long and difficult struggle. We at times forget that the dominant ideology of the European Middle Ages imposed a mode of thought and action that meant the commonplaces we take for granted today – economic progress, human rights, scientific method, political liberalism – were ignored, considered sorcery, or branded heretical. It was only in the 1500s that Europe began to emerge from medieval intellectual dissipation, characterized by war, pestilence, famine, disease, and superstition; a new way of thinking and inquiry led to a period of unparalleled economic and intellectual progress [36. P. 48]<sup>3</sup>. Renaissance and subsequent Enlightenment lifted the shadows, and mankind began his emergence from Plato’s allegorical cave. Enlightenment values have guided academia for more than 200 years. But that could be changing.

Today, we may be witnessing a profound change in the modern *zeitgeist* – a reversal, in fact. We are experiencing a reversal of the ascendancy of science and scientific thinking and a resurgence of medievalist magical thinking about society – how we live, how we exchange with each other, how we are governed. This resurgence is evidenced most often and most profoundly in the discourses within the humanities and social sciences – particularly sociology. Freighted with ideology and the obligatory references to “emancipation,” journal articles by the New Metaphysicians of sociology invariably call for radical change and wholesale rejection of “neoliberalism” at a macro level and of individualism at the micro level – changes in curriculum, changes in students, changes in faculty, changes in attitude, changes in the macro-economic system. But change to *what*, specifically? To *what end* is this great metamorphosis directed? That end is a call for a vague “emancipation,” wrapped in the sterile gauze of the moralizing that has been the stock in trade of reformers from time immemorial.

It wasn’t always this way with sociology. In a time not too distant, sociology perched on the cusp of respectability and general acceptance by the academic community. Seymour Martin Lipset and Neil Smelser could write in 1961 of “the complete triumph since World War I of the new ‘scientific sociology.’” They urged that sociological thought was to strive for “a closer approximation to standards of scientific adequacy [32. P. 8].” But for a number of reasons, not least of which was the unrest that roiled America’s campuses in the 1960s, decline began almost upon the publication of Lipset/Smelser’s valorization of sociology.

Professor Robert Nisbet, a founding member of Berkeley’s sociology department, observed the “monolithic liberalism” of the social sciences since World War II and contended that the “fall of the social sciences began in the early 1960s.”

It would be hard to find in all history a more flagrant scene of hypocrisy than that which was presented by social scientists, pretending to be scientists, assuring the world that objectivity was quite as possible in the study of human beings as of atoms, but all the while making certain that their assorted hypotheses, principles, and conclusions emerged in a fashion that would make them presentable in any liberal caucus [42. P. 287].

Much later, Burawoy and VanAntwerpen chronicled the sociological enterprise a bit differently than Nisbet as a place where “diverse perspectives” vied with each other, certainly in their own Berkeley department. Refuge in categorization is always an option for chin-scratching academics, and in their 2001 piece on Berkeley Burawoy and VanAntwerpen sought refuge in anodyne categories; they listed a four division

---

<sup>3</sup> Economist Deirdre McCloskey waxes grandiose – justifiably – about what she calls “The Great Fact.” This Fact is a historically unprecedented, breathtaking, mysterious, and almost magical, increase in production and world living standards that launched approximately 200 years ago that yielded a 16-fold improvement in the lives of everyone. Everyone. “No competent economist, regardless of her politics, denies the Great Fact.”

schema of the discipline as professional sociology, public sociology, critical sociology and policy sociology [6]. The authors, of course, found it almost incidental to mention that one of these categories, critical sociology, is populated by folks who would like nothing better than to eliminate the other categories; another of the categories, “public sociology,” constitutes non-academic outreach on behalf of a critical sociological agenda – in other words, unscholarly partisan “political activism.”<sup>4</sup> This is what is meant to be “praxis-oriented” in the academy and is the stuff of the New Metaphysics. Burawoy’s own work resides comfortably in this field [5].

The decline of sociology has not gone unremarked upon in the academy. It is no secret to observers, but it’s obviously not a message that disciplinary moguls want promulgated. Still, some mavericks occasionally break ranks. Sociologist Irving Louis Horowitz recognized the descent of his discipline in his work *The Decomposition of Sociology*, a trenchant critique of tendency to supplant scholarship with political advocacy in the field. He in fact argues that the field of sociology was committing a kind of slow suicide in its abandonment of the traditional scholarly virtues of “honest research” and the belief that “objectivity, even if never quite realized in fact, is an ideal and a value that must be held sacred at least in theory” [24. P. 6]. Horowitz was clear in his criticism.

[S]ociology, a result of a special set of historical and current situations, and internal pulls no less than external pushes, has become so enmeshed in the politics of advocacy and the ideology of self-righteousness that it is simply unaware of, much less able to respond to, new conditions in the scientific as well as social environments in which it finds itself [24. P. 5].

This pattern of aggression in sociology was successful despite the relatively small number of “praxis-oriented” faculty engaging in it, primarily because of the passivity of those in traditional academia. Traditional academics are not engaged in ideological crusades, and if they were so inclined, they’d likely be at the barricades, not in the classroom. “Most academics want ‘to do their work,’ that is, their research or class preparation. For the radicals ‘work’ is more broadly defined, their work is also political and ideological and power-oriented within the institutional setting” [22. P. 154]. Their activist colleagues in “public sociology,” however, see no difference between the classroom environment and the streets on which ideological struggles are acted out, regardless of the merits of the ideology. Horowitz had no patience for these traditionalists who stood by idly while the Ideologues were transforming his discipline; he lambasted the nonconfrontational traditionalists who kept their heads down and fingers crossed.

[There is] a lingering suspicion that what has taken place was not inevitable but a function of cowardice and retreat on the part of the leaders of sociology, those people who knew better but preferred silence to resistance, collapse to struggle. The smart set was convinced that the age of ideology within sociology could be “end run” by hiding out in techniques and methodologies or, at the other end, in tepid talk about civilizational rises and falls, or gatherings celebrating past achievements, that gave offense to none but the lonely hearts [24. P. 5].

Today, the sociological scene has changed dramatically from its turmoil of the early 2000s, and we find the ascendancy and influence of the New Metaphysics, a veritable archipelago of sociological speculation that comprises a welter of theoretical niches – critical race theory, critical white studies, public sociology, queer theory, privilege theory, feminism, critical legal studies, critical management studies, and critical theory itself and various other shades of Marxism. Postmodernism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, and other candidates exert influence as well [10]<sup>5</sup>. If there is one unifying characteristic that pervades the theory-islands that constitute the archipelago, it is the pseudo-science of the New Metaphysics, a creeping anti-scientific and anti-rational ethos that is akin to that imposed by the ten-century medieval intellectual imperi-

<sup>4</sup> A less-charitable characterization would be “rabble-rousing.”

<sup>5</sup> The rubric for this pastiche is “Intersectionality.” *Intersectionality* is a recent entry into the sociology lexicon. The idea of *intersectionality*, reasonable on its face if one were approaching social science for the first time, is to recognize that our “society” is complex and, hence, “social” outcomes have complex causes. This moves the usual progressive analysis from single-factor explanations – race, class, gender – to more traditional multi-factor explanations: race/class/gender. Its utility is derived mainly from the unfamiliarity of those who use it with the methodologies of social science as they have been practiced for decades. Here I speak of the recognition that multiple factors (variables) act and interact to yield an outcome that we wish to study – a phenomenon. We wish to study that phenomenon and perhaps explain its cause. Single explanation and deterministic causes were rejected long ago and gave way to multivariate analysis.

um regnant in Europe from the fall of Rome to the dawn of the Renaissance. It took an additional five centuries to overthrow that medieval imperium in favor of Renaissance and Enlightenment values.

If we consider sociology as a bellwether (and perhaps this offers too much credit), then we have entered an era of increasing mysticism and mystification and pseudo-science, at least in departments of sociology and in places where the “sociological imagination” exerts influence. In addition to attacks against science and business in esoteric journals [19; 18]<sup>6</sup>, the trend of the new magical thinking is most evident in the reactionary literature of anti-globalism and anti-economics [4; 39; 50].

## Method

This section of my essay discusses one of the most important tools of theory-building in the social sciences – the method falsification as propounded by Sir Karl Popper. According to Popper, falsification was the means by which we could – and can – demarcate and distinguish between theory based in scientific method and that which springs from metaphysical speculation – pseudoscience. This line of demarcation is a bone of contention for those in sociology with a reformist bent – those who offer strong opinions, sharp contentions, and “praxis-oriented” social rhetoric, but whose “theories” are rooted firmly in metaphysics masquerading as “science.”

In all the kerfuffle that surrounded the early development of sociology in its striving for scientific rigor throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was left to the great Austrian philosopher of science Karl Popper to bring an important point into focus – where was the line of demarcation between metaphysics and modern science? That line had yet to be clearly established. It was an obvious question of where metaphysics ends and science begins. Popper embraced the task to establish a clear demarcation between the two. He acknowledged that such a demarcation would be difficult to establish, much less gain agreement on by practitioners of science and of philosophy. To his mind, however, the effort to do so was one of the great epistemological challenges of our time, even as he considered it a trivial foray when he began asking questions about it in 1919.

Popper’s goal was to resolve the “problem of demarcation” – Kant’s Problem, he once called it. On one side of the demarcation would reside science and its generally acknowledged methods, approaches, and questions; on the other side, would reside what he called “pseudo-science” or Metaphysics.

At the time, a widely accepted criterion that distinguished science from pseudo-science was the empirical method, or of induction based on observation and experiment. For Popper, this alone was unsatisfactory. For instance, what about disciplines that pursued sociological and psychological inductive methods yet did not yield answers remotely meeting scientific standards? He offered three examples of this type of non-rigorous theory-building – the Marxist theory of history, psychoanalysis, and individual psychology. Popper believed that these three theories, “though posing as sciences, had in fact more in common with primitive myths than with science; that they resembled astrology rather than astronomy” [45, P. 34].

According to Popper, the central problem with “theories” of a metaphysical bent was their apparent strength – their *explanatory power*. This type of theory excites and impresses those exposed to it, and this can lead to a suspension of the critical faculties in favor of what we call today *confirmation bias* [41; 51]. Popper’s discussion of the matter:

These theories appeared to be able to explain practically everything that happened within the fields to which they referred. The study of any of them seemed to have the effect of an intellectual conversion or revelation, opening your eyes to a new truth hidden from those not yet initiated. Once your eyes were thus opened you saw confirming instances everywhere: the world was full of verifications of the theory. Whatever happened always confirmed it. Thus its truth appeared manifest; and unbelievers were clearly people who did not want to see the manifest truth; who refused to see it, either because it was against their class interest, or because of their repressions which were still ‘un-analysed’ and crying aloud for treatment. The most characteristic element in this situation seemed to me the incessant stream of confirmations, of observations which ‘verified’ the theories in question; and this point was constantly emphasize by their ad-

---

<sup>6</sup> See works by Bruno Latour, Stanley Aronowitz, Jacques Lacan, and Pierre Bourdieu, among others. For the fightback, see Paul R. Gross, Norman Levitt, and Martin W. Lewis (eds.), *The Flight from Science and Reason* and also Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt, *Higher Superstition*.

herents. A Marxist could not open a newspaper without finding on every page confirming evidence for his interpretation of history; not only in the news, but also in its presentation – which revealed the class bias of the paper – and especially of course in what the paper did *not* say [45. P. 34-35].

Today, we may witness the same illusion of universal “explanatory power” in modern sociological theories that hardly resembles the striving for scientific validity of an earlier, traditional era. This resurgence of metaphysics began in the humanities, with a progressive rejection of modernism and its succession by a raft of niche theorizing that is traceable to the influence of the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School. Critical Theory, in fact, represented an attractive alternative to the staid sociological work of the traditionalists, the target of C. Wright Mills in his influential *Sociological Imagination*. Inspired by this ethos, sociology seems to have simultaneously narrowed its perspective of the “social” and decreased its emphasis on “science,” while “praxis-oriented” critical sociologists burrow inside to create a more radical perspective on social issues in the discipline [49, 13, 7, 43, 19, 35, 34, et. Al.].<sup>7</sup> “Praxis-oriented” faculty, particularly those engaged in the critical theory enterprise, decide for reasons of their own to become participants in the very movements they purport to study. They become advocates – usually of a “social justice” sort – for the movement in question, both in their journals and in their university courses. “[P]raxis-oriented sociologists value the liberating effects of developing the sociological imagination” [19. P. 328].

The results of “praxis-oriented” faculty work have been phenomenally successful in the academy. Acceptable questions in sociology now must depart from the accepted assumption of what in the field might be called “settled social science.” This departure point consists of a bedrock conception of modern capitalist society as portrayed by a raft of philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, and political theorists that bears little resemblance to the actual world of commerce, manufacture, and finance that produces wealth for human kind – in short, the world in which science and business academics live. This departure point views “capitalism” – which includes business school education – as purveyor of what they call a “dominant ideology” that is protected, nurtured, and “reproduced” by cultural and ideological hegemony, which masks its real nature by an intentional “mystification,” and which inculcates a “false consciousness” in the majority of persons who serve the institutions of the capitalist hegemon. With this as the basic assumption, the burning questions of modern sociology offer us few surprises. Niche theories of a critical bent, in fact, appear as merely the latest edition of an archaic anti-science and anti-business ethos that has existed for millennia as a product of magical thinking.

The unifying characteristic of these niche theories are their 1) non-falsifiability, 2) foundation upon confirmation bias and anecdotal evidence, 3) use of an idiosyncratic *argot* coupled with apocalyptic hyperbole, and 4) their erection of a Moloch or ubiquitous villain, a product of magical thinking. These four characteristics are present in all, or in part, of much of the work of the New Metaphysicians. Let’s look at each, in turn.

## Discussion

### *Non-Falsifiable Theory*

Karl Popper’s notion of falsification as theory test proved the *bete noire* of social science theorizing for decades. In the 1970s, historian Paul Johnson observed the emasculation of Marxist theory in the face of the relentless Popperian logic of falsification.

Popper’s methodology is a devastating weapon because it enables us to detect the pseudo-scientist straightaway, even if we are not very familiar with his subject. And it extends itself over the whole range of disciplines which claim to have a truth-content: none can escape it. The false betray themselves instantly by their unwillingness to risk the verification process, and still more by their evident anxiety to prove themselves. Particularly obnoxious are theories which contain built-in defences against refutation. . . . It is the Marxists and the psychoanalysts who continually reformulate their theories to avoid creeping refutation. . . . Popper points out that the

<sup>7</sup> From Karl Marx’s 11<sup>th</sup> thesis on Feuerbach to Herbert Marcuse’s call for a “long march through the institutions,” a strain of praxis-oriented activity has characterized the left. Marcuse borrowed the “long march” imagery, with credit, from an obscure German student radical in the 1960s, Rudi Dutschke. It meant “working against the established institutions while working in them, but not simply by ‘boring from within’ . . . .”

secret of the appeal of Marxism and Freudianism is precisely their ability to explain everything. The Marxist knows in advance that, whatever happens, he will be able to fit it into some part of the theoretical edifice and explain it. . . . Marxism and Freudianism remain in the witch doctor stage of myth because they dodge refutation by reformulation, osmosis and imprecision [27. P. 147-148].

The rebellion against scientific theory-testing has continued and, if anything, has worsened. The main problem with the path that social science has taken with regard to theory – sociology, in particular – is that theory construction is hamstrung by what we may call the “Popper Problem.” In the archipelago of niche sociological speculation, scholars have all but abandoned the notion that their theories ought to withstand the scrutiny of testing. Rather than a willingness to test rigorously various popular theories that emerged from the heyday of critical theory, which spawned a cottage industry of various “critical” subfields, we find a sort of enshrinement of *verification*, if not outright confirmation bias. Some subfields, such as “critical race theory,” are founded almost exclusively on confirmation bias.<sup>8</sup> Modern theories in sociology spun from critical theory are largely *not* falsifiable. They are faith-based. As a method of exploration, this is not wholly objectionable. Popper declared its value, in fact, decades ago.

I am inclined to think that scientific discovery is impossible without faith in ideas which are of a purely speculative kind, and sometimes even quite hazy; a faith which is completely unwarranted from the point of view of science, and which, to that extent, is ‘metaphysical’ [46].

Popper encouraged speculation as a means to develop hypotheses, a means to stretch the boundaries of the known. He contended that good theory does not only explain; it also should predict. Moreover, a good theory should be testable and falsifiable – it should help us understand *and* explain phenomena. They help us make sense of what at first look may seem chaotic. For some academics, however, theory supplants the reality that theory seeks to explain. Immanuel Wallerstein is a particularly egregious example of this type of scholar – a New Metaphysician – who confuses his theorizing with historical fact, and apparently can no longer tell the difference. Wallerstein’s work is often simply outright historical fiction [50].<sup>9</sup> The Popperian challenge is clear and inescapable, and because of this it causes many academics to bridle at its demands. Popper:

Intellectual honesty does not consist in trying to entrench or establish one’s position by proving (or ‘probabilifying’) it – intellectual honesty consists rather in specifying the conditions under which one is willing to give up one’s position. Committed Marxists and Freudians refuse to specify such conditions: this is the hallmark of their dishonesty [44. P. 9].

And in an earlier work:

[Theories] can clash with observations; they can contradict observations. This fact makes it possible to infer from observations that a theory is *false*. The possibility of refuting theories by observations is the basis of all empirical tests. For the test of a theory is, like every rigorous examination, always an attempt to show that the candidate is mistaken – that is, that the theory entails a false assertion. From a logical point of view, all empirical tests are therefore *attempted refutations* [45. P. 192].

<sup>8</sup> See, for example the fraud of “White Privilege,” which emerged in the early 1990s with the 1988 publication of Peggy McIntosh’s seminal anecdotal working paper/article. This piece is unique in that it invited the reader to supply the anecdotes to confirm the predetermined conclusion of the piece. While not all sociology is practiced in such sloppy fashion, much of it is. See Schudson elsewhere in this paper on the *Sociological Imagination*.

<sup>9</sup> Wallerstein’s lack of understanding or misunderstanding or simple ignorance of the roots of capitalism in the Middle Ages and earlier is breathtaking. He commits grand and sweeping errors. His *Historical Capitalism* is only one example. Published in his prime of scholarship while he was Distinguished Professor of Sociology at Binghamton University and the Director of the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations, Wallerstein evinces either ignorance of or unconcern with an accurate depiction of the roots of capitalism in both ancient and medieval periods. He is simply incorrect in much of what he offers. In other places, he is reductionist to the point of simpleness. In still other places, he is vague, abstract, and borders on the obtuse. This neglect of fundamental facts is not inconsequential in that much of his entire corpus of work rests on his analysis of “the capitalist world economy.”

The speculations of 19<sup>th</sup> century reformers such as Ruskin and Carlyle, Arnold and Marx, offered prescriptions of how we might live better, of schemes to organize society, of how we might govern ourselves with compassion and justice. Unencumbered by scientific method, essayists and novelists of every stripe can speculate, and they can entertain. But today's reformers, like their 19<sup>th</sup> century counterparts offer speculative ventures that are no better than the fantasies of utopians of every age. It is this understanding of Popper's "problem of demarcation" that distinguishes the work of the New Metaphysics from genuine social science. We may consider this line – this demarcation – the symbolic boundary between the modern and the medieval, the scientific and the pseudo-scientific. Non-falsifiable theories are pseudo-science, not science.

### ***Confirmation Bias and Anecdotalism***

With his book *The Sociological Imagination*, C. Wright Mills unleashed in 1959 the practice of anecdotal social science when he called for the linking of personal troubles to public policy. In fact – if we had to pick a moment – this was the point at which sociology began reversal of its slow journey to scientific respectability and adopted the quick fix of pseudo-science. Mills's *Sociological Imagination* served to free sociology of the shackles of method, of rigor, even of common sense.

Replacing the traditional model of sociology and its supposed sterility was the Millsian notion of identifying personal ills as symptoms of larger system-wide problems. This notion indeed offered new avenues of inquiry that could have born superb fruit, but which in fact opened a Pandora's Box of journalism masquerading as social science. Even as sociology clung to the prestige of science, it progressively abandoned the very methods and constraints that define science and its method. Sociology kept the lingo of rigor, it added Mills's anecdotal method, and it increasingly incorporated the *patois* of critical theory, a vocabulary of neologisms to encompass new approaches and to give expression to new "voices," and to overcome "pessimism" [3, 25]<sup>10</sup> All of this served to erode much of sociology's pretense to rigor and the respect accorded to the natural sciences and to its lead social science competitor – economics. Economics, in fact, has served as a target of social science envy for decades, as erstwhile competitors strive to unseat economics as first-among-social-science equals [14].

Mills appeared to give the green light to this type of anecdote-driven social "science." Less talented followers embraced Mills as it seemed to free them from the strictures of method. They, too, could become philosopher kings, moralizing social reform giants like Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, and Dickens from a century earlier, but with neither the eloquence nor the moral *gravitas*. Mills called this worldview or phenomenon the "sociological imagination" – the elevation of the anecdote to journalistic supremacy. In the words of communications professor Michael Schudson, this sociological imagination "connects personal troubles to public issues." It surely does much more than that. It substitutes single anecdote for larger reality – a larger reality which may or may not comport with the anecdote. In fact, it's highly *unlikely* that reality writ large will comport with the anecdote, but this presents no problem for the "sociological imagination," which owes nothing to rigor, evidence, logic, or common sense. What matters is the establishment of a connection, no matter how tenuous, between a personal, individual trouble and a larger, perhaps impersonal system, either explicit or "masked."

"Each time one can demonstrate the roots of a personal trouble in a public issue, it is an achievement that justifies the sociological enterprise," says Schudson, calling this the "sociological mission" [47, P. 41]. This mission has impacted the larger world of public discourse, certainly in journalism. Schudson observes a

<sup>10</sup> Critical theory is an academic journeyman, and its practitioners fancy themselves discovering "new knowledge(s)" while they follow a template as they drift among the disciplines, rather like a troubadour spending time in communities, then moving on when the audience grows impatient with the same small selection of tunes. According to Stephen Eric Bronner, "Critical Theory" was coined by Max Horkheimer in the late 1930s as a measure to fly under the radar of those alert to Marxist and neo-Marxist transgressions of any kind. [Horkheimer, 1937]. The moniker was a subterfuge, a self-defensive workaround. The Frankfurt School was born from Marxism, and all of the early Frankfurt School members were "inspired by the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 and the euphoria surrounding the European radical uprisings of 1918-1923." [Bronner, 2011] As a result, a new and strange vernacular emerged within the Horkheimer's School upon its temporary relocation to Columbia University in the 1930s. This argot was purely instrumental, designed to avoid the needless taint of Marx and to avoid confrontation with anti-communists of the time. The new vernacular gave Critical Theory philosophizing *cachet* among succeeding generations of graduate students, who mistakenly believed that they were – and are – granted admission into a kind of priesthood of those who have shed "false consciousness" and with access to a kind of emerged-from-Plato's-Cave enlightenment.

trend in journalism over two generations that sees the phenomenon of “journalism-by-anecdote” become widespread to the point of “almost a reflex.”

My own admiration for Schudson’s insights and self-awareness is that he recognizes, unlike many others, where the sociological imagination can lead.

[D]o not get trapped by sociology. It doesn’t explain everything. Take sociology’s virtues seriously, particularly a respect for empirical evidence, but don’t substitute anecdote for investigation. . . . I have practiced a kind of sociology of intellectual sloppiness. I have been drawn to the willingness of academics and op-ed writers and contemporary affairs observers, journalists, and professors and writers, to accept as reality things that sound good or things that are emotionally satisfying or things that flatter one into imagining oneself a French intellectual at a café, remembering the great days of the resistance that one may or may not have had anything to do with. Intellectuals often live in a world of words, words and fantasies, and words may obscure as well as reveal. So while Mills offers an intellectual call to “only connect,” my own watchword has more often been a Weberian call to distrust one’s own inclinations to make connections that are not justified by the facts [47. P. 44].

One example of this type of confirmation bias – it stands as the *archetypal* example – is a 1988 piece by Wellesley academic Peggy McIntosh<sup>11</sup> called “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies,” which became known as “The Invisible Knapsack.” It launched what might be called the *J’accuse* genre of pop social science, in which Millsian-inspired anecdotes serve as the centerpiece.

Anecdotal evidence is generally frowned upon in the social sciences, of course (or at least anecdotal evidence with which we disagree), but McIntosh appears to have invented a new methodology that lifts anecdotal evidence to a new level of disrespect. [37] McIntosh acknowledges openly in the initial paragraphs of her essay that her notions of “privilege” emerged from her personal experiences teaching in a “Women’s Studies” program. These experiences led her to believe that there existed/exists a phenomenon she labeled “male privilege” – “a phenomenon with a life of its own.” With this insight as foundation, McIntosh moved on to identify what she called white privilege:

White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks [37].

To her credit, McIntosh acknowledges that her work is not “scholarly” and consists of a compendium of “daily experiences within my particular circumstances.” That is to say – anecdotes. But what makes this article so interesting is its use of what can be called the *hypothetical anecdote*. To illustrate her point that there exists an invisible knapsack of privilege, filled with the copious metaphorical baggage she lists, she compiles a test of sorts – a list of 46 elastic hypothetical conditions that if met, one supposes, confirms the existence of the phenomenon that she describes. I use the word “hypothetical” to be charitable. The list is contrived to lead the reader to a particular conclusion. It is, in fact, the very definition of *confirmation bias* – a list of “conditions” designed to elicit personal anecdotes to confirm the existence of what is assumed. The reader is invited to fill in the blanks to create magically the conclusion that she assumes beforehand.

It isn’t surprising that a scholar trained in English literature would commit methodological blunders such as this one, particularly as it likely arises from deeply held convictions about what one wants to believe. This is typical, in fact, of unscientific thought. In his extensive survey of the literature on confirmation bias, Raymond Nickerson concludes that:

Our natural tendency seems to be to look for evidence that is directly supportive of hypotheses we favor and even, in some instances, of those we are entertaining but about which are indifferent. . . . The point is that we seldom seek evidence naturally that would show a hypothesis to be wrong and to do so because we understand this to be an effective way to show it to be right if it really is right. [41. P. 211]

The mind can convince itself that an irrational opinion is a result of a rational thought process. Research by Kunda shows that people find it necessary to justify their beliefs, theories, hypotheses with at least a genuflection to notions of rationality:

---

<sup>11</sup> Wellesley lists Dr. McIntosh, who received her Ph.D. in English, as a “Senior Research Scientist.”

People do not seem to be at liberty to conclude whatever they want to conclude merely because they want to. Rather, I propose that people motivated to arrive at a particular conclusion attempt to be rational and to construct a justification of their desired conclusion that would persuade a dispassionate observer. They draw the desired conclusion only if they can muster up the evidence necessary to support it. In other words, they maintain an “illusion of objectivity.” To this end, they search memory for those beliefs and rules that could support their desired conclusion. They may also creatively combine accessed knowledge to construct new beliefs that could logically support the desired conclusion. . . . The objectivity of this justification construction process is illusory because people do not realize that the process is biased by their goals, that they are accessing only a subset of their relevant knowledge, that they would probably access different beliefs and rules in the presence of different directional goals, and that they might even be capable of justifying opposite conclusions on different occasions [30. P. 483].

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that McIntosh’s essay constitutes an exemplar on how to engage in confirmation bias and the illusion of objectivity. Her conditions, as noted, are elastic in that they aren’t specified to be useful. They’re downright colloquial, as if penned by an undergraduate, probably one studying “public sociology.” Here is what I mean – in her list of conditions that solicit reader input, McIntosh uses the qualifying terms “most of the time,” “pretty sure” [five times], “pretty well assured,” “widely represented,” “I can be casual,” “remain oblivious,” “I can easily buy,” “I can be sure,” “I can easily find.” The lack of precision and social scientific rigor here is stupendous.

If we take a truncated Bourdieusian perspective, we might conclude that McIntosh’s circumscribed list of 46 questions is the result of her marking out the dimensions of her personal *field*, in which she is merely a social agent interacting with a self-selecting group of others of like mind. If we view the matter this way, however, it suddenly and definitively removes any pretensions to universality her notion might carry. It carries no utility of any theoretical sort. In fact, it becomes an elaborate exercise in wishful thinking or of an explanation born of magical thinking, what one might expect from a “senior research scientist” with a Ph.D. in English.

### ***The Idiosyncratic Argot and Hyperbole***

Linked to the falsification problem and confirmation bias of faith-based niche theories is an almost reflexive necessity of adopting an alien, abstruse, and perhaps unnecessary vocabulary. Professor Peter Berger, writing in the early 1960s and contemporaneous with C. Wright Mills, observed this tendency of sociologists to cast their speculations in a Newspeak that was growing in popularity.

We would contend, then, that some of these neologisms have been necessary. We would also contend, however, that most sociology can be presented in intelligible English with but a little effort and that a good deal of contemporary “sociologese” can be understood as a self-conscious mystification. . . . Much American scholarly writing still reads like a translation from the German [1. P. 14-15].

Generations of graduate students have since been seduced by the promise of access to various truths. Essential to the theoretical scheme is the creation of a vernacular by which the new ideas are expressed – neologisms that mystify, a code language that transforms the mundane reformist notions of the past into *nouveau pâté* for graduate students enamored of the possibilities and vistas offered by French intellectuals.

The commonality among the niche theories is a distaste for convention (except for their own), opacity of style and substance (these are *difficult* works), genuflection to a collection of totems, the embrace of anecdotes, and a general non-falsifiability concurrent with acceptance of idea of “truth by consensus.” All of this is served up in a *patois* of the initiate.

In a doubtless unintentional irony, today’s leading edge sociologists have embraced a degree of obscurity and abstruseness that might embarrass the doughty Mills. Mills mercilessly pummeled traditionalist Talcott Parsons for his abstract ramblings, and his seeming intentional opacity. And yet today, we see the inheritors of Mills employ the same type of elephantine abstractions in the service of neo-Marxism.

The irony is clear and perhaps hyperbolic itself, if irony can be hyperbolic. In revelation or in demystification, Critical Theory revels in style for its own sake, as a code for the like-minded, as a touchstone and marker for the converted. Its hyperbole and self-consciousness are responsible in large measure for its popularity and its resemblance to works from the Baroque era.

By Baroque I mean at once a literary style, a period concept, and a fundamental *Weltanschauung* that describes the transitional period in European culture from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment . . . generally marked by rhetorical sophistication, excess, and play. . . . More than trying to persuade or simply please, the Baroque style tends to court surprise, admiration, and, depending on the author, skepticism or belief [26. P. 2].

This neo-baroque style – this ornate reaction to modernity – is far too prevalent for it to be accidental. Mills gave this style of writing a warrant and purpose in *The Sociological Imagination* – the anti-scientific assemblage and empowerment of anecdotes that sing of emotions and feelings. But while Mills was strong and direct in his musings, subsequent generations of less able sociologists and theorists wear the style much more cheaply.

The groundwork had been laid long before with the musings of the Frankfurt School scholars; Mills's treatise simply gave license to the emotional and the metaphysical to smother the growing legitimacy and scientific advances of Weberian social science. In fact, we find that the rubric of much sociology and its ancillary influencers of post-modernism, post-structuralism and of critical theory is contrived to obscure and to impress rather than to explain and elucidate. The thinking became more prescientific, magical, and almost of an animistic teleology – much as that engaged in by the scholastics in the universities of the Middle Ages [54. P. 549].

Magical thinking not only re-emerged, it gained *avant-garde* legitimacy and its excesses have become an essential defining characteristic of the New Metaphysics. The characteristics of the Baroque period of European art (1600–1750) capture the modern critical social science embrace of the Millsian ethos.

Ecstasies and raptures are the psycho-physical conditions which designate the culmination of mystical activity. At many periods artists endeavoured to render not only these conditions themselves but also the visions experienced in that exalted state of perception. What distinguishes the Baroque from earlier periods and even the High from the Early Baroque is that the beholder is stimulated to participate actively in the supra-natural manifestations of the mystic art rather than to look at it 'from outside'. This is meant in a very specific sense, for it is evident that in many works from about 1640 on a dual vision is implied, since the method of representation suggests that the entire image of a saint and his vision is the spectator's supra-natural experience. . . . [T]he dual vision was often pressed home with all the resources of illusionism during the High Baroque and supported by drama, light, expression, and gesture. Nothing was left undone to draw the beholder into the orbit of the work of art. Miracles, wondrous events, supra-natural phenomena are given an air of verisimilitude; the improbable and unlikely is rendered plausible, indeed convincing [53. P. 139-140].

Thus, the unharnessed social scientist as hero. The Nietzschean superman, a kind of Prometheus unbound, characterized by emancipation from rules, strictures, constraint, the past. Standing proudly atop the pedestal forged by a bourgeois world. Mills himself has been accused of pursuing a personal ego-driven goal and that he "hankered after greatness, and while striving for recognition, revealed a bullying and abrasive character" [52. P. 182].

For those restless folks inspired by the Beats – William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and others – and for those perhaps unwittingly on the cusp of the student revolts of the early 1960s, they could find no better clarion call for release from the strictures of reality than that of Mills; and they found ready theoretical justification in the activist philosophy of the Frankfurt School of Marx-inspired critical theory.

Critical theory erected an entire obscurantist jargon to shroud its political origins at a time when the political winds were blowing against the communists at the dawn of the Cold War. This *patois* with its odd contrivances became an initiation rite, obligatory and mystifying. Here's an example:

Connolly – indebted to Deleuze and others – writes of capitalism as a resonant assemblage composed through relations of imbrication, infusion, and intercalation between heterogeneous elements that simultaneously enter into one another to some degree, affect each other from the outside, and generate residual or torrential flows exceeding the first two modes of connection'. Among the key elements here (in addition to immediately recognisable economic entities such as corporations and financial institutions), he has in mind 'state policies, educational institutions, media practices, church proclivities, class experiences, and scientific practices' that not

only support a commonly recognised ‘capitalist axiomatic’, but also engender a spiritual ethos in which extreme inequality, fundamentalism, generalised *resentiment* towards difference and ambiguity, as well as bellicosity and indifference towards future generations, the poor, foreigners and the planet often intensify one another [9. P. 275].

If one suspects that this is an exception – an exceptionally *bad* exception – here is another passage from the same piece several paragraphs later.

I too seek to contribute to a theory and practice of resonance that disrupts and disestablishes the dominant exploitative resonance machines of our day and that simultaneously enhances relational capacities for receptive generosity, dialogic power and vital ecological sensibilities. Yet, it is important to avoid viewing resonance itself primarily as a static type of energy and relationship. Although it is vital to consider ways in which we may employ currently dominant modalities and practices of resonant energy towards different ends, my primary concern here is to inquire into how resonance as such might be re-conceived – even re-resonated in radically receptive democratic modes – as a vital element of the ethos and power of an engaged, hospitable and ecological democracy [9. P. 276].

On it goes like this, tortured sentence after tortured paragraph.

But needlessly abstruse writing is not an invention of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It has historical parallels and, in fact, performs an instrumental function in commonality with one utilized in the Middle Ages. Hortatory metaphysical writings of the medieval period exemplify the emergence of what Edgar Zilsel perceived in the medieval university’s schoolmen as a “specific kind of rationality, which appears in similar forms wherever old priests, intrusted with the task of instructing priest candidates, rationalize vague and contradictory mythological traditions of the past” [54. P. 548]. The suffusion of one’s writing with obscure references and its careful construction with building blocks of neologisms and rhetoric borrowed from science – *genuine* science – gets one far in today’s rarefied academic journals of a “critical” bent.

Even the brilliant Marxist theorist Terry Eagleton shows impatience, if not outright fatigue, at this type of abstruse nonsense. While no one would mistake Eagleton for Daniel Boone, he is about as plainspoken as a Marxist can get, and to his everlasting credit, he has been consistent in his call for clear expression in service to theory. “It is not just that sentences like these are incomprehensible to the toiling masses; they are incomprehensible to most of the non-toiling intelligentsia as well. Sometimes, one suspects, they might even be only dimly intelligible to those who produce them” [12. P. 76].

On this point – clarity of expression – Eagleton and Karl Popper agree. Eagleton again: “You can be difficult without being obscure . . . it is possible to write clearly about some esoteric issues, just as some theorists manage with heroic perversity to write esoterically about plain ones” [12. P. 77].

This is hardly the stuff of a vibrant academic discipline. Reading article upon article is akin to a *Through the Looking Glass* experience. We are untethered from the workaday world of resource constraints, budgeting, strategy, numbers – *life itself* – and invited into a misty, utopian world of eventual “emancipation” inspired by philosophical giants of the Frankfurt School and an assortment of other influential contributors – Horkheimer and Adorno, Merleau-Ponty and Marcuse, Heidegger and Habermas, Lukacs and Lacan. Although these are not idle intellectual exercises, it is a rare piece that offers anything new, fresh, or head-turning. We observe, instead, the academic treadmill, and the experience is akin to reading the same article repeatedly, with only the time and place changed, the jargon reassembled in a limited number of combinations. As sentence after ponderous sentence lumbers across the pages of obscure journals, we soon realize that the articles all sound alike and all point to the same conclusion.

### ***Moloch and Magical Thinking***

For centuries, the demonization of the industrial production process of wealth creation into a kind of *Beelzebub* has served as a ready staple for social reformers. The singular anthropomorphism of “capitalism” has apparently become acceptable in modern journal articles and scholarly books with a critical bent. “Capital,” “neoliberalism,” “economic rationality,” “neoliberal economization,” “neoliberal thought collective” become actors, all of them necessarily evil with respect to their actions in the social realm [39; 4; 21]. Beat poet Allen Ginsberg captured this spirit of demonization in his 1956 poem *Howl*, in which he cursed modern industrial society with an ejaculation of prose that some consider poignant from a literary perspective:

Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! . . . Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judgment! . . . Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb! . . . Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smoke-stacks and antennae crown the cities! Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius! [16. P. 17]

If this seems odd to the modern mind, this is because its oddness stems from its reliance upon magic thinking expressed in hyperbolic prose. Its oddness, in fact, is essential to its power. This is a classic and necessary element to magic thinking that persuades: “[N]o act or idea is in itself magical, and all act or idea can become so, if it is attached to a dose of strangeness” [40, P. 764]. It relies primarily upon thinking based in *pathos* rather than *logos*, in emotion rather than reason. And in this, it is very much medieval. The legitimization of “feeling” and a pervasive and almost reflexive anthropomorphism and animism that invests “systems” with human characteristics of purposiveness [28, P. 291]. In this, it much resembles the spirit of the Baroque period. Baroque art appeals to the mind through the emotions. “[T]he Baroque makes use of emotional appeal as a means of reaching the mind in a special way. It goes out to meet the spectator’s emotional susceptibilities; it is ‘spectator-oriented’ to a greater extent than any other style” [29, P. 15].

Emotions and illusionism were characteristic of the Baroque period, as was the use of exaggerated motion and a blurring between art and life. Rich colors and enchantment and splendor, uneven lighting, imbued with drama. “The result is an evocative, sometimes dramatic chiaroscuro effect . . . The light may be strong in some parts but deep pools of shadow are left in the recesses, in doorways, under arches, behind pillars” [29. P. 41].

The Baroque is infused with drama, tension, exuberance, and grandeur. It bridges to the metaphysical and emotional and shuns the real, the true, the solid, the empirical, the actual. Baroque ornamentation is detailed and designed to evoke a higher spiritual yearning. In this way, an elaborate design of finials can obscure the empirical. This is not happenstance; it’s the point. Its adoption by many sociologists of a critical bent is a regression for a field that pretends to science and the prestige and respectability that accrue to things “scientific.”

Magic – the very word seems to reveal a world of mysterious and unexpected possibilities! Even for those who do not share in that hankering after the occult, after the short-cuts into “esoteric truth,” this morbid interest, nowadays so freely ministered to by stale revivals of half-understood ancient creeds and cults, dished up under the names of “theosophy,” “spiritism,” “or “spiritualism,” and various pseudo-“sciences,” -ologies and -isms – even for the clear scientific mind the subject of magic has a special attraction. . . . [b]ecause “magic” seems to stir up in everyone some hidden mental forces, some lingering hopes in the miraculous, some dormant beliefs in man’s mysterious possibilities [33. P. 69-70].

The exacerbation of fear and urgency in the form of a *Moloch* appears as a staple of the New Metaphysicians, just as it has always served for reformers, whether public intellectuals, academics, or purveyors of popular culture. This fear and urgency is a necessary component in the argument from *pathos*. I am reminded of the scene in Fritz Lang’s 1927 science fiction dystopian film *Metropolis*, where the hero Freder Fredersen sees a great machine transformed by his imagination before his eyes into a massive, hungry maw that literally feasts not just on human labor, but on human beings themselves. Fredersen bites his knuckles in fear and cries: “Moloch!”

This image of human sacrifice before a pagan god served as metaphor – a tired one at that – to capture what Lang believed was an oppressive economic system in the democratic West. It also serves now to illustrate the pervasive anthropomorphism of invisible forces and systems and actors. It is a rejection of science in favor of incantation. Even more extreme, it represents magical thinking evocative of the Baroque period of the immediate post-renaissance.

The neo-baroque style and manner of sociology, as the name suggests, establishes kinship with the scholars and arts community of the late renaissance and counter-reformation. This style arose from the nature of the educated segment of society in the late middle ages and Renaissance, which was elitist in character; medievalist historian Edgar Zilsel identified this style in the scholars of the time:

The university scholars and the humanistic literati of the Renaissance were exceedingly proud of their social rank. Both disdained uneducated people. They avoided the vernacular and wrote and spoke Latin only. Further, they were attached to the upper classes, sharing the social prejudices of the nobility and the rich merchants and bankers and despising manual labor. Both, therefore, adopted the ancient distinction between liberal and mechanical arts: only professions which do not require manual work were considered by them, their patrons, and their public to be worthy of well-bred men [54. P. 550].

Coupled with this detached, elitist attitude, scholars through much of the early and middle medieval periods, still accepted the existence of magic, certainly where much of the systematic wealth creation process was considered the realm of the unknown and supernatural. Werner Sombart spoke of the “utilization of magic for the attainment of riches.”

Belief in spirits and demons was necessary, and faith in the possibility of getting into touch with them, of making them subservient to the desires of man. A vivid imagination, which but too often was the child of a mind diseased, soon discovered propitious times and places for this super-human intercourse [54. P. 37].

Anthropologists and historians have contributed much to our store of knowledge of how belief in magic has waxed and waned through the ages, and how it stands juxtaposed with science as a means of explaining the world [8; 55; 31; 33; 15]. When one moves away from science, or rejects its explanations in favor of some other explanation, that *other* explanation often emerges from the realm of faith, magic, and superstition.

Science is born of experience, magic made by tradition. Science is guided by reason and corrected by observation; magic, impervious to both, lives in an atmosphere of mysticism. Science is open to all, a common good of the whole community, magic is occult, taught through mysterious initiations, handed on in a hereditary or at least in very exclusive filiation. While science is based on the conception of natural forces, magic springs from the idea of a certain mystic, impersonal power, which is believed in by most primitive peoples. This power, called *mana* by some Melanesians, *arungquiltha* by certain Australian tribes, *wakan*, *orenda*, *manitu* by various American Indians, and nameless elsewhere, is stated to be a well-nigh universal idea found wherever magic flourishes [33. P. 19-20].

The New Metaphysicians thus embrace a kind of new magic thinking, sometimes masked by a façade of science – the rubric of “rigor” and of “verification” and of “hypothesis testing” – but invariably failing the test of strong, scientifically based theory by virtue of the four dysfunctional characteristics discussed in this paper. The return of magical thinking comes as no surprise to anyone familiar with the writings of those who speculate on and study the human mind’s proclivity toward the mysterious and inexplicable. French social psychologist Serge Moscovici opined on this tendency to believe that the lure of the fantastical lurks just beneath the surface and lures even the most rational person.

. . . the emergence of magical thought is due to a lack of vigilance to reason, or even to science. Whatever the personal or collective motives, individuals who draw their information from the environment and use them to build a world representation, do not follow the necessary precautions of rigour to verify them according to adequate rules. Caring little for this negligence, they take into consideration mainly the resemblance between facts, their family air, their superficial concordance, instead of controlling them, analysing them and submitting them to criticism. Motivated by their desire, they are led to lend faith to the most dubious testimonies, to the fuzziest observations, with the same certitude with which they believe in the existence of the sun or the Russian Revolution [40. P. 769].

Are modern sociologists assuming the manner and the style of medieval metaphysicians, whether intentionally or not? A steadily growing body of sociological work with niche themes suggest this very tendency toward obscurantism, hubris, and self-awareness – certainly among many leading sociology practitioners.

## Conclusion

This essay suggests that a great reversal of the modern *zeitgeist* is under way, that we are experiencing a reversal of the ascendancy of science and scientific thinking and a resurgence of medievalist magical thinking about society – how we live, how we exchange with each other, how we are governed. In Popperian terms, this shift toward metaphysical explanations in the humanities and social sciences and away from scientific explanations indicates what he would have assessed as an increasing legitimation of pseudo-science in the academy. I have called this trend the New Metaphysics, and I have described it here as manifested in journal articles and books inspired by “critical theory” and its ancillary unconventional contemporaries.

The field of sociology is broad – there are in fact many sociologies [2, P. 1987] – and so any generalization about sociology is bound to be met with skepticism and “countered” with a barrage of examples to demonstrate a different and, one supposes, equally valid generalization(s). But fear of contradiction has never been a guide to prudent action. In this essay, I identify a convergence among various niches in sociology toward a singular goal. That goal is rarely articulated, except in negative form as a critique of “capitalism” under various guises and of various expressions of “classical liberalism.” The positive expression of some end state is typically described in millenarian terms, usually “emancipation” or the overthrow of some/all forms of alleged “domination.” Is this the only tendency in sociology? In the social sciences generally? It likely is not, but this is the one that has stirred my interest, because it appears to me as particularly nihilistic, messianic, and aggressive. I interpret this as a threat to the academy’s intellectual enterprise, and I characterize this tendency as the New Metaphysics because it exhibits four anti-scientific dysfunctions in its theoretical expressions: 1) non-falsifiable theory, 2) confirmation bias, 3) contrived argot, and 4) magical thinking.

I perceive that the great intellectual achievement of the Enlightenment project is in recession, at least in certain disciplines in the academy, and is giving way to magical thinking, much as it did in the Middle Ages. Do we now enter another, similar epoch – a new Dark Ages – where magical thinking dictates discourse in the academy and displaces science and experience? The prospect is worth discussion.

## REFERENCES

1. Berger, P. *Invitation to Sociology*. New York: Anchor Books, 1963.
2. Bottomore, T. *Sociology: A Guide to Problems and Literature*, (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1962, 1971, 1987).
3. Bronner, S.E. *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
4. Brown, W. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books, 2015.
5. Burawoy, M. “The Public Sociology Wars,” in Vincent Jeffries (ed.), *Handbook of Public Sociology*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011.
6. Burawoy, M. and J. VanAntwerpen. “Berkeley Sociology: Past, Present and Future,” 2001. Accessed from Berkeley Sociology Department Website: <http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/PS/Berkeley%20Sociology.pdf>
7. Burke, M.A. and K.H. Banks. “Sociology by Any Other Name: Teaching the Sociological Perspective in Campus Diversity Programs,” *Teaching Sociology* 40 (1) 2012, p. 21.
8. Cameron, E. *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, & Religion, 1250-1750*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 2013.
9. Coles, R. “The neuropolitical habitus of resonant receptive democracy.” *Ethics and Global Politics*. Vol. 4, No. 4, 2011.
10. Collins, P.H. and Bilge, S., *Intersectionality*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016.
11. Comte, A. / Lenzer, G. (ed.). *The Essential Writing of Auguste Comte*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1998. From Auguste Comte, *Cours de Philosophie Positive*.
12. Eagleton, T. *After Theory*. London: The Penguin Group, 2004.
13. Ergun, E. “Negotiating the Geopolitics of Student Resistance in Global Feminisms Classrooms.” *Feminist Teacher*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2013.
14. Fourcade, M. *Economists and Societies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.
15. Frazer, Sir James George. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. London: MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1923. Print.
16. Ginsberg, A. *Howl and Other Poems by Allen Ginsberg*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1955, 1959.
17. Gross, P.R. and Levitt, N. *Higher Superstition*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1994.
18. Gross, P.R., Levitt, N. and Lewis, M.W. (eds.). *The Flight from Science and Reason*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1996.
19. Haddad, A. T. and Lieberman, L.. “From Student Resistance to Embracing the Sociological Imagination: Unmasking Privilege, Social Conventions, and Racism.” *Teaching Sociology*, Vol. 30, 2002, July.
20. Handlin, O. *The Uprooted*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951.

21. Harvey, D. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
22. Hollander, P. *Anti-Americanism: Critiques at Home and Abroad, 1965-1990*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
23. Horkheimer, M. "Traditional and Critical Theory." In *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. New York: Continuum, 1937, 1995.
24. Horowitz, I.L. *The Decomposition of Sociology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
25. Jay, M. *The Dialectical Imagination*. Little, Brown & Company, 1973.
26. Johnson, C.D. *Hyberboles: The Rhetoric of Excess in Baroque Literature and Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010.
27. Johnson, P. *Enemies of Society*. New York: Atheneum, 1977.
28. Kallery, M. and Psillos, D. *Research in Science Education*. Vol. 34, 2004.
29. Kitson, M. *The Age of the Baroque*. New York: London, 1966, 1976.
30. Kunda, Z. "The Case for Motivated Reasoning." *Psychological Bulletin*. 1990 Vol. 108, No. 3.
31. Levi-Strauss, C. *Totemism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.
32. Lipset, S.M. and Smelser N. *Sociology: The Progress of a Decade*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1961.
33. Malinowski, B. *Magic, Science, and Religion*. New York: Anchor Books, 1948.
34. Marcuse, H. *Counterrevolution and Revolt*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1972.
35. Mayer, J. "Teaching Critical Awareness in an Introductory Course," *Teaching Sociology* Vol. 14 October 1986.
36. McCloskey, D.N. *Bourgeois Dignity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010.
37. McIntosh, P. "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies." Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College, 1988. Reprinted in Delgado, Richard and Jean Stefancic (eds.). *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997: 291-299.
38. Mills, C.W. *The Sociological Imagination*. London: Oxford University Press, 1959.
39. Morowski, P. and Plehwe, D. (eds.). *The Road from Mont Pelerin*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009, 2015.
40. Moscovici, S. "The New Magical Thinking," *Public Understanding of Science*. Vol. 23, No. 7, 2014.
41. Nickerson, R.S. "Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises." *Review of General Psychology*. Vol. 2, No. 2, 1998.
42. Nisbet, R. *Prejudices: A Philosophical Dictionary*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.
43. Pleasants, R. K. "Men Learning Feminism: Protecting Privileges Through Discourses of Resistance." *Men and Masculinities*. 14(2) 2011.
44. Popper, K. in Lakatos, I. *The methodology of scientific reseach programmes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, 1984.
45. Popper, K. *Conjectures and Refutations*. New York: Basic Books, 1962.
46. Popper, K. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. New York: Basic Books, 1959.
47. Schudson, M. "'The Sociological Imagination' as Cliché: Perils of Sociology and Practices of Journalism." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*. Vol. 20, No. 1, Sept. 2008.
48. Sombart, W. *The Quintessence of Capitalism*. New York: Howard Fertig, 1967, 1915.
49. Tharp, D.S., "Using Critical Discourse Analysis to Understand Student Resistance to Diversity." *Multicultural Education*. Caddo Gap Press. Fall 2015.
50. Wallerstein, Immanuel. *Historical Capitalism*. London: Verso, 1983, 2011.
51. Wason, P.C. "On the failure to eliminate hypotheses in a conceptual task." *The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 12:3, 1960.
52. Wilkinson, I. "With and Beyond Mills: Social Suffering and the Sociological Imagination." *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies*. (Vol. 12, No.3, 2012).
53. Wittkower, R. *Art and Architecture in Italy 1600-1750*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1985.
54. Zilsel, E. "The Sociological Roots of Science." *The American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 47, No. 4, Jan 1942.
55. Zusne, L. and Jones, W.H. *Anomalistic Psychology: A Study of Magical Thinking*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1989.

*С.К. Риджли*

**АВАТАРЫ НОВОГО ТЕМНОГО ВЕКА:**

***МОЛОХ, МАГИЧЕСКОЕ МЫШЛЕНИЕ И АНТИНАУЧНЫЙ ДУХ***

Большая часть того, что сегодня рассматривается как передовая линия в современной социологической теории, состоит из склонных к подтверждению собственной точки зрения теоретических статей. Эти статьи не могут быть подвергнуты критическому анализу, поскольку создаются на странном и недоступном для других ученых особом языке, в пафосных выражениях они создают некоего Молоха, которого обвиняют во всех мировых бедствиях. Любое из утверждений о современном социологическом знании может и, вероятно, должно стать предметом расширенного исследования, а их комплексный анализ позволяет увидеть тенденцию развития социологии в сторону Новой Метафизики. Эта тенденция представляет собой глубинное изменение современного *zeitgeist* («духа времени»), при котором происходит фактический разворот в научном познании. В обществе наблюдается отказ от господства науки и научного мышления и возрождение средневекового магического мышления – и в отношении того, как мы живем, и как мы общаемся друг с другом, и как нами управляют. В настоящей статье данная проблема лишь поднимается и намечается курс для дальнейшего изучения. В ней рассматривается усиление влияния Новой Метафизики, а также основные средства распространения ею своих идей. Статья проводит параллели между сегодняшними новыми метафизиками и теми учеными мужами средних веков, чье увлечение магическим мышлением было настолько абсолютным, что его прямолинейная средневековая ортодоксия не только препятствовала научному, экономическому и коммерческому прогрессу, но и часто рассматривала такой прогресс как еретический. И наконец, данная статья предполагает, что с такой привязанностью к собственной истине и ориентации на практику Новая Метафизика представляет растущую угрозу научным традициям университета и сама создает варварскую псевдо-науку, требующую разоблачения.

*Ключевые слова:* социология, метафизика, социальные науки, фальсификация, предвзятость, практика, критическая теория, Поппер.

Stanley K. Ridgley  
Associate Clinical Professor of Management  
LeBow College of Business  
Drexel University  
3220 Market Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19104 USA  
E-mail: sridgley@drexel.edu

Стэнли К. Риджли,  
Профессор Менеджмента  
Институт Бизнеса Лебоу  
Университет Дрексела  
3220 Market Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19104 USA  
E-mail: sridgley@drexel.edu