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# **Against a descriptive turn**

**Nicholas Gane**

## **Abstract**

While description is a valuable aspect of meaningful sociological work, this paper takes issue with Mike Savage's argument that the social sciences, and sociology in particular, should seek to prioritize description over practices of explanation and analysis, and attention to questions of causality. The aim of this paper is not to take issue with descriptive forms of sociology in themselves, but to argue that the answer to the problems identified by Savage and Burrows in their landmark paper "The Coming Crisis of Empirical Sociology" is not to follow commercial forms of research by prioritizing practices of description and classification at the cost of asking fundamental questions about the "why?" and the "how?" of social life and politics. Rather, this paper argues that it is imperative that sociology does not simply describe inequalities of different types, but questions, explains, and analyses the structures and mechanisms through which they are created, reproduced, and sustained. The argument will be developed in three stages. First, this paper will restate the main points of Savage's call for descriptive sociology; second, it will address his critique of "epochalist thinking" and subsequent opposition to the idea of neoliberalism; and third, it will respond to his use of Thomas Piketty's work as a model for developing sociological descriptions of class and inequality.

## **KEYWORDS**

class, crisis, inequality, neoliberalism, power

## **1 | INTRODUCTION**

Over the past decade there has been a call to reconsider the value of descriptive work within the discipline of sociology and across the social sciences more generally. While concern for the status of description within sociology is nothing new, this recent development can be traced to Mike Savage and Roger Burrows' 2007 article "The Coming Crisis of Empirical Sociology," which set the terms of contemporary debate by arguing that

qualitative and quantitative forms of sociological description need to be rethought in the face of new forms of methodological expertise and “big” data that have emerged outside the academy. This argument, subsequently, has been developed into a more explicit call for a descriptive turn by Mike Savage, who in a series of following papers has addressed the power of the “descriptive assemblage” (2009a) and the limits of “epochalist thinking” (2009b), and has made a case for learning from the descriptive work of other disciplines, in particular from the type of historical economics pioneered by Thomas Piketty (Savage, 2014). While there has been extensive debate over the core argument of Savage and Burrows’ article on the crisis of empirical sociology, less attention has been paid to Savage’s critique of epochal thinking and to his reading of Piketty, which, this article will argue, is problematic in its simplistic dismissal of concepts such as “neoliberalism” and in its uncritical use of Piketty’s book *Capital* to address the question of social class. In response, this paper will argue that while description is a valuable part of all meaningful sociological work, Savage is mistaken in seeking to prioritize description over explanation, analysis, and attention to questions of causality. To be clear: the aim of this paper is not to take issue with descriptive forms of sociology in themselves, of which there are many, but to argue that the answer to the problems identified by Savage and Burrows in the “Coming Crisis” is not to follow commercial forms of research by prioritizing practices of description and classification at the cost of asking fundamental questions about the “why?” and the “how?” of social life and politics. For, given the extreme class polarizations that have emerged in the wake of the recent financial crisis, it is imperative that sociology does not simply describe inequalities of different types, but questions, explains, and analyses the structures and mechanisms through which such inequalities are created, reproduced, and sustained. This argument will be developed in three stages. First, this paper will restate the main points of Savage’s call for a descriptive sociology; second, it will address his critique of “epochalist thinking” and subsequent opposition to the idea of neoliberalism; and third, it will respond to his use of Thomas Piketty’s work as a model from which sociological descriptions of class and inequality can learn; a development that, to date, has received little critical attention as it has largely been eclipsed by engagement with the Great British Class Survey (which has been subjected to such extensive scrutiny (see, for example, Skeggs, 2015 and the articles that follow in the same volume) that it will not be addressed in detail through the course of the current paper).

## 2 | THE ARGUMENT FOR A DESCRIPTIVE TURN

In 2007, Mike Savage and Roger Burrows published their article “The Coming Crisis of Empirical Sociology,” the core argument of which has since been widely cited and debated (see Crompton, 2008; Gane, 2011; McKie & Ryan, 2016; Webber, 2009; for Savage and Burrows’ response to their critics, see 2009; for a further reflection on their initial position that focuses on the question of “big data,” see Burrows & Savage, 2014): that commercial agencies now have access to “big” datasets, processing power and pools of methodological expertise that cannot be rivalled by the existing “apparatus” of empirical social science within the academy. This problem, they argue, presents a fundamental challenge to the quantitative and qualitative branches of the discipline. In terms of the former, they observe that “the apparatus of contemporary capitalist organizations now simply don’t need the empirical expertise of quantitative social scientists as they go about their business” as they have “more effective research tools than sample surveys” and can “draw on the digital data generated routinely as a by-product of their own transactions: sales data, mailing lists, subscription data, and so forth” (2007, p. 891). And in terms of qualitative research, they declare that traditional methods such as the in-depth interview have lost their academic status as not only have they become part and parcel of popular culture, but also have been displaced by new transactional research technologies that are “able to produce nuanced representations of the lifeworlds of quite specific populations” (2007, p. 894; on the power of geodemographic technologies and classifications, for example, see Burrows & Gane, 2006). In the face of these challenges, Savage and Burrows call for a rethinking of the repertoires of empirical sociology, and make two suggestions for how to start this process. First, there should be a renewed concern for the “politics of method,” which means that sociologists should think again about research methods “not simply as particular techniques, but as themselves an intrinsic feature of contemporary capitalist organization” (Savage & Burrows, 2007, p.895). Second, and more importantly for the purposes of the present paper, there should be a descriptive turn, for if “we see the power of contemporary social knowledge as lying in its abilities to conduct minute description,” then “we should abandon a sole focus on causality (which we are very bad at) and analysis and embrace instead an interest in description and classification” (Savage & Burrows, 2007, p. 896, *emphasis original*).

This call for a sociology

that prioritizes practices of description and classification over questions of causality has been restated and rearticulated by Mike Savage in a number of publications since “The Coming Crisis.” The first of these is his 2009 article, “Contemporary Sociology and the Challenge of Descriptive Assemblage,” in which he draws on the work of Andrew Abbott, John Goldthorpe, and Bruno Latour in order to revisit the relation of social science to natural science and the humanities with the purpose of questioning sociology’s fundamental concern for “analysis, explanation and causality” (2009a, p. 156). Savage’s argument in this article is threefold: first, that descriptive sociology can learn from the commercial world, in which “causal concerns are not necessarily discarded but can be bracketed out” (2009a, p. 156); second, that sociology can produce better descriptions through the use of innovative visual methods (for a further reflection on the role of visualization in reconfiguring sociological practices of description, see Burrows, 2011); and third, that we should think critically about descriptions that are “routinely produced,” presumably both within and outside the academy (see Savage, 2009a, p. 171).

These three points are complemented and extended by the argument of a second paper published in the same year—“Against Epochalism”—in which Savage questions the ways in which sociology has championed the study of that which is “new” and/or “modern” in order to assert its intellectual legitimacy over other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Savage extends the earlier argument of the “Coming Crisis” by returning to two key methods considered previously: the sample survey and the interview. One of the problems of both, he argues, is that they have an underlying preoccupation with the analysis of social change, and so have provided the grounds on which “epochalist sociologists” (those who construct grand narratives such as postmodernism, post-Fordism, globalization, and risk society) have operated (see 2009b, p. 232). By way of response, Savage draws on figures such as Nikolas Rose and Donald MacKenzie to reassert the importance of fine-grained descriptive work. Against epochal claims of grand theory, Savage argues that we can learn from the likes of Rose and MacKenzie by paying attention instead to the ways in which the social sciences “imprint themselves, through their mundane devices and methods, rather than through their grandiloquent theorizing, into a range of social practices” (2009b, p. 228). For if the discipline of sociology remains tied to the study of grand forms of social change, then, he argues, it will remain stuck in the past along with other forms of social science that subsume attention to empirical detail under a constant search for “the new.” Indeed, Savage makes the bold claim (which is never in turn substantiated) that:

“For all the claims to intellectual novelty associated with epochalism, British sociology remains set hard in a time warp originally set in place nearly 50 years ago” (2009b, p. 233).

These arguments about the value of descriptive methods and the limitations of epochalist thinking underpin Savage’s more explicit call for a descriptive turn in his 2014 article “Piketty’s Challenge for Sociology.” This article draws on Thomas Piketty’s book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014), in order to develop a model of the type of descriptive work that, for Savage, should be central to the discipline:

Rather than play to specialist academic communities, mired in their own paradigms and technical toolkits, Piketty has been bold enough to play to a bigger audience. He does not do this through the kind of grandiose theorizing that sociologists are familiar with, but instead through the careful empirical unravelling of the long-term patterns of demographic and economic change across numerous nations over the past two hundred years... I argue that his work should not be seen simply as a specialist study in economics—though it is surely this—but is also of profound significance for sociology. (2014, p. 591)

What, exactly, should sociologists learn from this work of historical economics? Savage suggests three main things. First, he celebrates Piketty’s use of descriptive methods, in particular his use of documentary sources such as tax data and national accounts, as well as devices such as figures and graphs that are used to visualize these data. Savage argues that such methods are important as they do not let historical facts speak for themselves, and equally they stand against “the typical social scientific insistence on causality as the holy grail” (2014, p. 593). More than this, Savage argues that Piketty is right to study capital and wealth over a relatively long time period (roughly 200 years), for in so doing he advances a model for reading the relationship between past and present that insists on the importance of the *longue durée*, and with this provides “a powerful demolition of the kind of ‘presentist’ sociology that abounds” (2014, p. 596). Second, following on from this point, Savage embraces Piketty’s work on the grounds that it offers a corrective to the kind of epochalist thinking that is, he argues, commonplace in the social sciences and “especially sociology” (see 2014, p. 596). Whereas his previous article on this subject, “Against Epochalism,” takes issue with grand narratives of the (post-)modern, global, and more generally the “new,” now his target is the “neoliberal.” He observes that the term neoliberal is never used once by Piketty in *Capital* (something which, for Savage, is “striking,” see 2014, p. 605),

and, more than this, states that this book “debunks the neo-liberal mantra that the economic role of the state has changed profoundly” (2014, p. 599). This is an important point that we will return to in detail below. Third, and finally, he lauds Piketty’s contribution to sociological understandings of social class and privilege on the grounds that his work on such questions proceeds through description rather than a focus on causality, and does so by identifying “accumulation rather than exploitation as the central dynamic of capitalism” (Savage, 2014, p. 600). Savage argues, moreover, that Piketty makes an important contribution to existing sociological knowledge because he connects class both to the study of wealth and inheritance and to the study of households and family life—connections, he argues, that have previously been neglected within the discipline.

### **3 | EPOCHALIST THINKING**

The above section provides a summary of the main points of Savage’s call for a descriptive turn in sociology. The detail of this argument will now be considered by addressing his critique of “epochalist thinking” and his privileging of description over causality, particularly in relation to the sociological study of inequality and class. In terms of the former, the key point made by Savage is that the discipline should move away from its tendency to use grand narrational concepts to capture the essential features of an age or “epoch,” and to separate past from present in the constant pursuit of that which is deemed “new.” In his paper on Piketty, Savage declares: “Such thinking saturates debates about social change and incites an almost constant agitation for detecting new kinds of epochal change and transformation which makes our contemporary times different from anything that comes before” (2014, p. 597). It is hard to argue against the underlying sentiment of this statement, as periodizations of social change that dominated social theory in the 1980s and 1990s—in particular modernization, postmodernization, globalization—now look ill-equipped for the analysis of a present that is defined, among other things, by recurrent forms of political and economic “crisis”; by a political landscape in which the “anything goes” of the postmodern has become the mantra of the libertarian Right; and the emergence of virulent forms of nationalism which frame themselves in opposition to ideas of economic and political “globalization.” But Savage’s argument is more than this, as it stands not just against these “-izations,” but against “the glib temptations of ‘presentism’” more generally. What is needed,

as a remedy, is what he calls “careful historical study” (see 2014, p. 597). Again, Savage is right on this point, which has been stated in different guises many times before. At the outset of the discipline, for example, neo-Kantian thinkers such as Max Weber refused to use epochal thinking to deal with the complexities of the empirical world, and in response advanced a historical approach to the analysis of social and cultural change that was underpinned methodologically by the development of analytical concepts known as “ideal-types” (for further reflection on the role of concepts in social science, see Gane, 2009).

Savage’s aversion to social science that constantly pursues the “new” is also nothing new in itself. Many sociologists have questioned, for example, the newness of supposedly “new” cultural forms such as media technologies that, especially through the late-1990s, were predicted to give rise to radically different forms of society and even life. In response, they insisted on the need to think historically about media, and paid close attention to the breaks and continuities between past and present. Savage’s critique of sociological presentism, while not in any way ground-breaking, is well founded, for the danger of being dazzled by the “new” is that it risks divorcing the study of the present from a concern for the many ways in which it is embedded within longer historical trajectories and processes that demand close and detailed study. While Savage is right to draw attention to this point, the problem, however, is not simply that epochal thinking has supplanted nuanced historical work, but that, too often, meta-concepts such as the global, modern and postmodern have been used in a blanket way in an attempt to capture complex societal and cultural changes across time and in different places. This is important because epochal thinking is not the problem per se, but rather the use of what C. Wright Mills called conceptual “sponge-words” (see 1962, p. 53); words that suck the life-blood out of the empirical world and block serious historical study.

Savage is divided on the value of the work of Mills, for on one hand he stands against celebrating Mills’ life as a public intellectual on the grounds that “it is unhelpful to attempt to recover a heroic sociology that never actually was and look for a ‘golden age’” (2016a, p. 190), while on the other he uses Mills as a point of departure for developing new biographical methods (see Savage, 2013). The work of Mills, however, potentially offers much more than either of these things, particularly in its attempt to reflect on the “uses of history” within the sociological imagination (see Mills, 1962, pp. 143–164). While Mills’ commitment to the value of history to sociological analysis



might seem, initially, to chime with Savage's argument against presentism, in fact Mills advances quite a different position: that epochal history can be used as a form of typological analysis that provides a useful starting point for the analysis of social change, not least because it provides a means for addressing "pivotal events in the development of social structures" (1962, p. 160).

The Power Elite is a good example of what Mills means by this practice. In this work, Mills analyses the shifting basis of the institutional structure of power in US society across five epochs: first, from the American Revolution through to the early 1820s; a period in which there was little differentiation between social, economic, political and military institutions; second, during the mid-19th century, the economic order became more significant as individual property owners grew in status, but to a large extent there remained a balance between the economic, political and military orders; third, from 1866 economic power became ascendant and, following a Supreme Court ruling of 1886 the "centre of initiative shifted from government to corporation" (1959, p. 271); fourth, the New Deal created new, competing centres of power both in the political arena and the corporate world; and in the fifth epoch, Mills argues that post-1945 the deep involvement of business and government "reached a new point of explicitness" (1959, p. 274). This work on power elites in the US is important as it shows that epochal history need not be chained either to a meta-concept of social change (the modern, postmodern, the neoliberal) or to a concern simply for the "knife-edge" moments of change from one epoch to another. Rather, epochal history can fire the sociological imagination by helping to address what Mills calls "dynamic changes in a contemporary social structure," and doing so by understanding their "longer run developments" and thus "the mechanics by which these trends have occurred" (1962, p. 168). Mills argues that the analysis of social change can, in fact, be either short-term or epochal in basis depending on the research problem but that the latter is important for combatting sociological presentism: "Longer-term trends are usually needed if only to overcome historical provincialism: the assumption that the present is a sort of autonomous creation" (1962, p. 168). Here, Mills and Savage agree that presentism is a problem, but, for Mills, epochal history, used properly as a starting point rather than as an end in itself, is a potential cure rather than one of its causes.

The key point that can be taken from Mills is that epochal thinking is not necessarily a problem in itself just as long as epochs are used as heuristic devices rather than pursued as ends in themselves (on this point, see Weber, 1949) and/or tied to a meta-conceptual narrative of historical change (as in narratives of the “modern” and “postmodern”). The importance of Mills’ work here is that it prompts us to pay close attention both to the role of history and of concepts in sociological thought. Savage is more concerned with the former than the latter, but, in his article on Piketty, he takes particular issue with one meta-concept—the “neo-liberal”—which, like previous ideas of the global, postmodern, informationalized, and cosmopolitan, he says is tied to an epochal conception of a new world order (see 2014, p. 596, 597). Savage is right to draw attention to this problem, as there has indeed been a tendency to use the term neoliberal in a uniform way to capture grand changes in the governance and make-up of Western societies from the early 1980s onwards. But, again, the problem is not simply one of epochal history, but rather the use of a concept and an associated process (-ization) that too often is divorced from close historical analysis and, as a consequence, is used without sufficient attention to the complexities of the social and political structures and dynamics in question.

It is important to note, however, that not all sociological work on neoliberalism takes this form. For while “the neoliberal” was for many years used as a signifier for all that is bad about free market capitalism, since the financial crisis of 2007- a body of scholarship has emerged that has addressed the conceptual, historical, and political basis of neoliberalism in painstaking detail. Much of this work has been inspired by Michel Foucault’s (2008) lectures on biopolitics, which, as is well known, map out different national trajectories of neoliberal reason that emerged from the 1930s onwards. Are these lectures informed by “epochal thinking” of the type contested by Savage? Yes and no. There is a sense in which Foucault constructs a crude model of classical liberalism (the state watches over the market and only intervenes in the last instance), the structure of which is then said to be reversed by emergent forms of neoliberal governance (within which the market not only watches over but infiltrates the state and all things “social”). But this model is part of a much richer genealogical history of neoliberal reason, which, while not without problems (see Gane, 2014), is not driven purely by presentist concerns. This history is important. For one danger in dismissing concepts such as “the neoliberal” out of hand is that such concepts, including their institutional and practical effects, are then not subjected to analytical and critical scrutiny. This would mean, in the case of the neoliberal, that attempts

from the 1920s onwards to redefine the liberal cause and the subsequent attempt to mobilize pro-market ideas through organizations such as think-tanks (see Stedman Jones, 2012) would slip from view. In sum, Savage is right to question the elevation of concepts such as the neoliberal to the status of a master narrative, but the outright rejection of such concepts on these grounds is not the answer, as concepts can be mobilized in different ways by different social and political groups throughout their life-course. This means that close analysis of the conditions of emergence and subsequent historical trajectories of concepts such as neoliberalism is required, both in terms of their operation within political discourse and their lived effects and consequences on the ground.

Savage gives a further reason, however, for abandoning the concept of the neoliberal, namely that there is not sufficient empirical evidence to support its use. This argument is not concerned with the political history of the term neoliberal, which originated in the early part of the 20th century within right-wing circles as part of an attempt to move beyond the laissez-faire commitments of classical liberalism (on this history, see Gane, 2016), but rather whether the term itself can be used to describe accurately the changing role of the state and patterns of wealth distribution across time. Savage argues that one of the attractions of Thomas Piketty's work is that its close attention to historical detail means that one can dispense with static, all-encompassing ideas of the "neoliberal." Savage writes:

Piketty's work ... debunks the neo-liberal mantra that the economic role of the state has changed profoundly. In fact, with remarkable regularity, the ratio between private and public wealth is in the order of 6:1. This changes very little, if at all, despite changes in the politics associated with state intervention, the shift to marketization, neo-liberalism and so forth. This point is so important because of the obsession of the social sciences towards studying the state. (2014, p. 599)

At least two initial responses might be made to this position. First, concepts such as the neoliberal that have complex political and organizational histories themselves demand close historical study alongside the empirical effects that they may (or may not) have produced. Second, it is not clear that the social sciences have been or continue to be "obsessed" with studying the state. Indeed, post-crisis there has been a renewed interest in many things that are not simply reducible to "state"-centred analysis: money (see, for example,

Pettifor, 2017), debt (Adkins, 2017; Lazzarato, 2015), finance (Konings, 2017), and the family (Cooper, 2017), to name just a few.

The basic point of Savage's argument is that where we might be looking for social change, structurally, there may be none at all. The danger of this position, however, is that in rejecting the neoliberal as a grand narrative of change, a grand narrative of stasis is introduced, perhaps inadvertently, in its place. Savage's reading of Piketty's analysis of the relation of public to private wealth across time here deserves closer attention. In *Capital*, Piketty observes that net public wealth in both Britain and France, when viewed across the past 200 years, is "close to zero" as the tendency (with some historical variation through, for example times of war) has been for the assets and liabilities of the state to cancel each other out (see, 2014, p. 124). Private wealth (or what Piketty calls capital), however, in both countries remained fairly constant at 700% of national income until 1910 when it began to fall to a low of around 300% in 1950 before recovering to 500% in 2010 (see Piketty, 2014, p. 128). There have, then, been significant fluctuations in the ratio of private to public wealth, and the 6:1 ratio of private to public wealth is not a constant, as Savage suggests. Importantly, Piketty draws attention to the tendency, for roughly the past 30 years, for public debt to rise (to the point that, in some cases public capital is in deficit), alongside what he calls the "prosperity of privately owned wealth" (see Piketty, 2017). This, in turn, raises a series of important questions that demand closer sociological study; questions that concepts such as the neoliberal may (or not) help us answer. For example, are public assets (which Piketty defines rather narrowly as "public buildings," see 2014, p. 124) or the state the same things in 1700, 1900 or in 2010? How has the value and quality of such assets changed as they have been privatized? Who has benefitted not only from this process but also from the exponential rise in public debt since 1980? And which social groups, as Piketty himself has asked, have profited most from the accumulation of private capital, particularly from 1950 onwards? A simple assertion of historical continuity over the past 200 years and an accompanying dismissal of the continued importance of sociological analyses of the changing role of the state (alongside the market) effectively means that, in Savage's account, such questions are neither raised nor addressed.

#### **4 | INEQUALITY AND CLASS**

It is precisely because Piketty's work can be used to raise these types of questions that it is of sociological interest, not because it "debunks the neo-liberal mantra" and offers descriptive methods for producing potential answers. Savage, however, finds a different point of appeal in Piketty's *Capital*: that his work contains data that can be useful for the sociological study of inequality and class. This is a little surprising, for while, in *Capital*, Piketty offers a wealth of data on inequality within and across different societies over a long time-span, he has very little to say, explicitly, about social class. The only mention of class in this book comes in a series of tables on inequality of labour income, inequality of capital ownership, and inequality of total income (all across time and space), in which Piketty splits the share of different groups in total capital three ways: the top 10% is the "upper class" (the top 1% of which is the "dominant class"); the middle 40% is the "middle class"; and the bottom 50% the "lower class" (see 2014, pp. 247–249). In the pages that follow, however, Piketty states that these divisions and also their class "designations" are largely arbitrary as they are introduced "purely for illustrative purposes" and "play no role" in his analysis. He writes: "I might as well have called them "Class A," "Class B," and "Class C" (see 2014, pp. 250, 251). In other words, the notion of class and the related practice of social classification is, for Piketty, largely meaningless.

This position is not at odds with Piketty's broad aim of documenting historical patterns of wealth and income equality across Europe. What is surprising, however, is that Piketty observes that there is an underlying politics to the production of class schemas, which are "generally far from innocent." He writes: "The way the population is divided up usually reflects an implicit or explicit position concerning the justice and legitimacy of the amount of income or wealth claimed by a particular group" (2014, p. 251). Given this acknowledgement, why does Piketty not reflect on the effects or consequences of the class schema he himself constructs, even if these are designed for "illustrative purposes"? Instead, he absolves himself from such concerns by turning away from the concept of class and back to questions of inequality, stating that while class designations are "open to challenge" there is "no need for me to take a position on this delicate issue" (2014, p. 215).

Such a statement could not be further removed from the work of another thinker who is pivotal to Savage's work on social class elsewhere: Pierre Bourdieu (see, for example, Bennett et al., 2009, although it is worth noting that Bourdieu's book *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), which informs many of the arguments below, is not mentioned in this reappraisal of

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, see Bennett et al., 2009, pp. 9–23). Bourdieu argues, quite rightly, that every form of sociological description necessitates close attention to the terms and concepts at stake, including “class,” which, contra Piketty, can never be used in an arbitrary or purely illustrative way. For Bourdieu, while concepts such as class are essential tools for the analysis of inequalities of different types, it is crucial that we remain alert to the symbolic powers of such concepts when they are used as descriptors. He makes this point in his brilliant work on the symbolic power of naming (see Bourdieu, 1991; Burrows & Gane, 2006, pp. 806, 807), and its significance here is that to classify a population, in Piketty's terms (see above), as “wealthy,” “dominant,” or a member of the “lower classes” is a generative practice that can have powerful and often unforeseen consequences for those being classified. For this reason, Bourdieu argues that the social sciences should do more than describe through the use of classification; at the same time, they should be concerned with the politics of classification and, by necessity, pay close attention to ongoing struggles over the power to classify, on one hand, and subjection through classification on the other (see 1991, p. 241, 242). In this view, it is not enough simply to measure, describe and classify inequalities of different types; what also matters are the generative effects, both symbolic and material, that these very processes have for the lived experiences of different social groups on the ground.

This argument is developed in a different way by Imogen Tyler in her landmark book *Revolting Subjects*, which draws on the work of Jacques Rancière and Bev Skeggs rather than Bourdieu in order to consider class as a “struggle over names” (see Tyler, 2013, p. 154). Tyler refuses simply to describe or measure inequalities of different types, and instead asks the fundamental question of why a vocabulary of inequality rather than of class has become so prevalent in contemporary sociology and political discourse. Tyler traces this development in the UK to the 1990s, and to the attempt not only by New Labour to decouple economic inequality from the political language of class, but by elites more generally to rid politics of all forms of class-based struggle (see 2013, pp. 153, 154; interestingly this is a development not considered by Savage in his analysis of the fall and rise of class analysis in British sociology, see 2016b, or in his reflections on the politics of method in the conclusion to his book *Identities and Social Change in Britain Since 1940*, see 2010, pp. 237–249; but it is acknowledged briefly in his work with Tony Bennett et al., see 2009, p. 2). Sociology and the social sciences more generally, Tyler argues, have not been immune from this development, but in many cases have helped support it. Reflecting, in turn, on the work of Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters (1996) and

then Anthony Giddens, she writes that from the late-1990s onwards class analysis was seen to be “providing rapidly diminishing intellectual returns. Class no longer sold academic books or made academic careers. Class was a block to the marketization of academic knowledge. Class had become an embarrassing and even shameful topic” (2013, p. 158). It might be noted that this displacement of class by the study of inequality is something that continues today (see, for example, Dorling, 2014), and for this reason still demands critical sociological reflection.

Against this backdrop, Piketty’s brief gesture towards the construction of a class schema but accompanying refusal to consider the symbolic and material politics of such classificatory work, and subsequent return to the measurement and documentation of economic inequalities, is not something that can be dismissed lightly but is part of a wider problem that itself needs to be addressed. Tyler (2013, p. 177) rightly argues that the task in hand for sociology is not to develop better descriptive techniques (by drawing, for example, from thinkers such as Piketty), but to ask how and why class has become a “revolting subject” within the social sciences and mainstream leftist politics. To confront this situation, she argues, it is necessary to analyse neoliberalism as a class project and, beyond this, understand class politics in terms of an ongoing struggle against different forms of classification (for further articulation of this project, see Tyler, 2015). This is because classification is not something that is value-neutral or arbitrary (as in Piketty, see above), but rather is a practice that is fundamentally political in basis as, to use the words of Bev Skeggs, it creates “standards of value” that are “expressions of power” (2015, p. 214). Tyler and Skeggs observe that Savage’s work is not exempt from this problem as such standards of valuation are at work within the new taxonomies of class developed out of Great British Class Survey (see Savage et al., 2015). For while class might be presented as something that is taxonomic or descriptive in form, taxonomies and their associated descriptions, in practice, are never divorced from politics and power, not least because they have real generative and performative effects on the populations they are used to classify.

These sorts of considerations are bypassed by Savage in his appeal to a descriptive sociology that is inspired by the work of figures such as Piketty. For rather than engage with the problems of Piketty’s position on class and classification in *Capital*, he embraces the fact that “Piketty’s book is fundamentally descriptive” (2014, p. 593), and, more than this, argues that there are attractive features of Piketty’s analysis that can inform sociological

work on class and inequality. First, Savage welcomes Piketty's attempt at shifting attention away from a concern for exploitation and towards the study of processes of accumulation; something which, for Savage, helps move debate about inequality away from the labour theory of value and towards more "empirically nuanced perspectives" (2014, p. 600; for a robust response to this move see Toscano & Woodcock, 2015). Second, by moving away from a theory of exploitation, Savage argues that it becomes possible to separate class from class consciousness: "It allows us to see how fundamental inequalities can be generated by agents who are completely oblivious to class and who are not necessarily collectively organised" (2014, p. 601). Third, Piketty's work is said to offer an alternative to Marxist and Weberian conceptions of class as it analyses wealth and inheritance and not simply the labour market as the site where class divisions are created. Fourth, as an extension of this point, class can be understood as being "bound up" with households and family life; something that, for Savage, is particularly important as "By re-introducing household wealth into the study of class, it becomes possible to link family dynamics to class in a way which might recognize the significance of non-employed household members and provide a richer and more wide ranging perspective on class" (2014, p. 602). Finally, Savage argues that we can learn from the findings of Piketty's extensive study, and, in particular, pay greater attention to the "very wealthy" and to the ways through which they are "crystallizing as a class" (2014, p. 603)—something that has now started to happen (see, for example, Burrows, Webber, & Atkinson, 2016; Webber & Burrows, 2016).

On a number of these points, Savage is right, as clearly it is important to develop contemporary understandings of class that address historical processes and strategies of accumulation, and that pay closer attention to the structural dynamics of (family) wealth and inheritance. Equally, it is important that social scientists study the super-rich, just as long as this shift in gaze does not displace attention to the analysis of social marginalization, abjection, and poverty. But the question still remains: is a descriptive sociology the means to address such concerns? Is description of inequalities enough in itself or is there a need for a sociology that analyses the causes of inequality and explains these by developing a more political conception of social class that centres instead on structural and relational forms of power? There is a choice to be made here: should we follow Savage in pursuing a "taxonomic" sociology of class, or instead focus our attention on the "antagonistic politics of class formation" (Toscano & Woodcock, 2015) and with this material and symbolic processes of "exploitation, domination,



dispossession and devaluation” (Skeggs, 2015)—processes that can still be understood in important ways through practices of description?

This question is by no means new and, in many ways, reframes an age-old debate about whether class should be analyzed in terms of its relations (in a Marxist sense) or be concerned instead with the taxonomic study of stratification (a view that is commonly but mistakenly attributed to Weber, see Gane, 2005). In his previous work, especially that with Tony Bennett et al. (2009), Savage uses Bourdieu as a starting point for moving beyond Marx and Weber by developing a relational theory of the social that is tied to a theory of cultural capital that is said to be “multi-dimensional” in basis (i.e. one that is not anchored solely in the study of class). In this approach, relationality is less a theoretical or critical concern but something that can be captured and described through a methodological technique: multiple correspondence analysis (see Bennett et al., 2009, pp. 45–48). For Savage, the attraction of Piketty’s work is that it can be used to extend this position as its study of economic capital can be used as “a crucial counterpart to Bourdieu’s dissection of cultural capital” (2014, p. 601). Aside from a brief remark from Savage that Piketty and Bourdieu “share a common focus around accumulation and inheritance” (2014, p. 601), it is not clear, however, exactly how or why they should be treated as counterparts, and how cultural capital and economic capital, as read through these two authors, can lend to new understandings of social class. Instead, Savage turns to Piketty in large part because of his methodological approach. In particular, Savage is keen to move away from an overriding concern for causation (something, he argues, the discipline is “very bad at,” see Savage & Burrows, 2007, p. 896) and instead use data from Piketty to produce better historical and comparative descriptions of inequalities between different groups that are primarily economic in basis. Here, a strong conceptual and theoretical account of the economic and cultural basis of class is displaced by a different concern: that we should oppose the “strong condescension to the descriptive” that can be found within the discipline of sociology, and that we should do so by questioning the “core tenet” or “article of faith” of social science: that it should be “fundamentally concerned with analysis, explanation and causality” (Savage, 2009a, p. 157).

But what, exactly, are the merits of shifting towards a descriptive sociology and away from a commitment to sociological explanation and analysis, along with an underlying concern for causality? This question is fundamental as it concerns the aims, scope, and promise of what sociology as a discipline can

and should be. For the purposes of the present paper, three main points will be raised and addressed in turn through reference to Savage's turn to Piketty: first, the proposed elevation of description over causality as the focal point for sociological work; second, the continuing role of critique within a descriptive turn; and third, the quality of description that can be offered by academic sociology in relation to its commercial counterpart.

First, while Savage might be right that Piketty's work is a rich source of historical data that is potentially useful for sociological purposes (with the acknowledgement of some problems, for example, a lack of interest in the question of gender, see Savage, 2014, p. 605), a major limitation of this work is that it stops short of providing a detailed conceptual and explanatory account of the different inequalities under study. While Savage views this limitation as a positive aspect of Piketty's work, he stops short of saying exactly why, and what is to be gained by adopting the descriptive methods that are central to this approach. This point has not gone unnoticed. John Holmwood, for example, is critical of Piketty on the grounds that Capital provides us with data but only a "limited account of the mechanisms that produce the distributional effect he observes" (2014, p. 609). Surely Holmwood is right? For an enduring quality of the sociological imagination is its ability to cast light on the structures and relations of power that are the drivers and causes of inequality across time and place. To give an example: the events of the 2007- financial crisis have been well documented, but sociology can make a difference not simply by describing these events, but by explaining and analyzing the causes of the crisis, and asking how and why different social groups benefitted disproportionately from the government initiatives that emerged in response. Rather than retreat from questions of causality on the grounds that sociology "does them badly," the challenge is rather to move beyond description, which in the case of the crisis has often been provided by good journalism, to address fundamental questions of "how" and "why" by connecting the crisis to broader analytical and structural concerns about the underlying dynamics and trajectories of forms of financialized capitalism, and to the inequalities this type of capitalism creates as a matter of routine (this is the attraction, for example, of the work of thinkers such as Wolfgang Streeck (2016)). Such a sociology—one that transcends description by having strong analytical, explanatory and critical intent—will not only be politically engaged but is also more likely to be of genuine public interest.

This is exactly the point made by Aditya Chakraborty, the senior economics correspondent for The Guardian newspaper, who in 2012 questioned the failure of sociology to address the events of the financial crisis. His explanation for this failure was as follows: "Sociologists are reliably good at analysing the fallout from crises: the recessions, the cuts, the dispossessed, the repossessed. I'd expect them to be in for a busy few years. But on the upstream stuff, the causes of this crisis, they are practically silent." For Chakraborty, this was an opportunity missed, as the failure to tackle the political and economic drivers of financial crisis meant that the discipline had lost a chance to challenge the hegemony of economic concepts and ideas within the public sphere, and, with this, shape and perhaps recast public understandings of crisis as well as possible routes out of it. It is hard to disagree with the sentiment of Chakraborty's (2012) attack on the discipline: that sociology should do more than document and describe the consequences of events such as the crisis; it should instead swim "upstream" to identify and explain their root causes. Savage, for his own part, instead defends a commitment to a descriptive approach by arguing, "in the spirit of C. Wright Mills," that "descriptive modes can be energized by the sociological imagination" (2009a, p. 170). But the important point for Mills is a different one: that attention to the craft of description and to questions of causality lie at the very heart of the sociological imagination. His argument is that the formation of sociological problems "should include explicit attention to a range of public issues and of personal troubles; and they should open up for inquiry the causal connections between milieus and social structure" (1962, p. 145, emphasis mine). Indeed, for Mills this is the very promise and task of sociology: to make otherwise unforeseen connections between individual troubles and structural issues, between biography and history; connections cannot be made without explicit attention to questions of causality.

Second, there is the question of what happens to critique in a sociology that prioritizes description over other concerns. John Holmwood, again, is sensitive to this point, and argues that one danger of following Piketty's approach is that "sociologists respond by feeling confirmed, rather than challenged: that Piketty tells us what we already know and that there is no need to re-think our own categories and approaches" (2014, p. 609). This is a serious point because a purely descriptive sociology that documents inequalities of different types risks leaving intact views that are currently in the political ascendancy, most notably, in the current environment, libertarian and neoliberal beliefs that inequality is not only a fact of nature but also something that is desirable. Such

a view, which was popularized by figures such as Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek through the course of the 20th century, rest on a number of serious philosophical and political propositions: that human beings are by nature quite different in their abilities and so any attempt to promote equality between them is destined to fail; that in spite of this capitalism has been successful in raising the general prosperity of all to a degree never seen before throughout history; and that inequality promotes competition, which is a spontaneous force of integration that works for the social good. It is tempting to dismiss such views out of hand, but this would be a mistake as they continue to influence the direction of populist right-wing politics. Indeed, Boris Johnson, the current UK Prime Minister, openly expresses such views. In his Margaret Thatcher Lecture at the Centre for Policy Studies in November 2013, he states, for example, that “Whatever you may think of the value of IQ tests, it is surely relevant to a conversation about equality that as many as 16 per cent of our species have an IQ below 85, while about 2 per cent have an IQ above 130. The harder you shake the pack, the easier it will be for some cornflakes to get to the top” (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dzlgrrnr1ZB0>). For Johnson, in keeping with libertarian and neoliberal principles, inequality is “essential for the spirit of envy,” and any attempt by a government to “stamp it out” would not only be mistaken but ultimately “futile.” Such views demand a serious sociological response. It is not clear, however, that a descriptive sociology of inequality can engage with such political positions, meaning, as a consequence, that they are left to operate without sociological critique or opposition. Given the contemporary power of such ideas, this, I would argue, is a dangerous strategy, for the further privileging of description over a renewed concern for questions of causality is only likely to exacerbate the problem by failing to engage with political discourses and practices that see inequality as both necessary and desirable.

Third, even if one ignores the above and accepts the merits of descriptive sociology of the type advocated by Savage, then there is a further question: what makes for good sociological description? Although Savage does not answer this question directly, he suggests that innovative forms of visualization can help us produce better sociological descriptions of complex forms of data (on this point, see also Burrows, 2011). Indeed, he argues that one of the successes of Piketty’s work is that it “mobilizes a powerful set of visual inscription devices and uses these to great effect” (2014, p. 594). This may indeed be the case, but as Burrows rightly observes, “visual prowess” is not



in itself enough (2014, p. 580). For in spite of the visual successes of Piketty's work, which no doubt has helped it appeal to a mass readership, without a strong accompanying conceptual and analytical framework it is unable to produce better accounts or taxonomies of social class than those that exist already within the discipline of sociology. Indeed, regardless of figures, tables, and charts that decorate the pages of *Capital* and which illustrate shifts in inequality over time, Piketty's conception of social class is so thin that the class schema he develops as a consequence is of little if any value to the discipline. John Holmwood shares this view: "the presentation of his [Piketty's] data on distribution in terms of "deciles" seems crude" compared with existing sociological theories and measures of social class" (2014, p. 609). The point here is that neither description nor visualization are necessarily good things in themselves; what matters more is how they are used in relation to the analytical and/or critical task in hand.

This raises a further concern about Savage's use of Piketty to elevate the value of description over that of causal analysis: that quite often these two things accompany each other rather than compete with one another within sociological work. This is the position taken, rightly, by Emma Uprichard (2012) and David Byrne (2016), who argue, albeit in different ways, that good description is precisely that which opens up questions of causality. In the words of Uprichard: "Description provides the soil from where causal modes of inquiry can germinate and grow" (2016, p. 101). Halford and Savage, in a later article on big data (2017), revisit this question briefly and insist that Piketty is in fact interested in causality and that this is addressed through "the elaboration and explication of multiple examples" (Halford & Savage, 2017, p. 1137). While it is not clear that Piketty does indeed address causality by piling up "repeated examples" of the concentration of wealth in different national settings, the paucity of his conceptual and theoretical framework severely limits his account as a form of sociological "explication." Concepts (such as class) play a key role in sociological analysis as they bridge description of the raw data of the empirical world with causal and critical analysis of such data (see Gane, 2009), or, put simply, they are the devices that make meaningful sociological description possible, while at the same time empowering the sociological imagination to be concerned with more than simply description. Halford and Savage (2017) suggest that a "symphonic social science" that centers on the relationship between "data, method and theory" is the way forward, but for this to be the case the role of concepts needs to be taken seriously, and an approach is required that does not focus on data and

method at the expense of theory (as tends to be the case in Piketty's *Capital* and in Savage's appropriation of this work).

Savage's argument for new forms of descriptive work is, in large part, methodological in basis, and addresses questions, many of which are important, about the challenges of doing empirical sociology in a world of increasingly "big" data (see Burrows & Savage, 2014). One of the key issues here is whether sociological forms of description can and should learn not just from other disciplines (such as economics in the case of Piketty) but from research produced outside the academy by commercial agencies of different types. There is some sense in this argument (see Burrows & Gane, 2006), but given that commercial agencies now have unrivalled datasets, processing power and methodological expertise (as stated in the original "Coming Crisis" article), should social science now take a descriptive turn? For could it not be the case that sociological work that prioritizes description runs a greater risk of being displaced by its non-academic others that can do this job better: for example, by good journalism or by research of commercial agencies that are capable of ever-more powerful and finer-grained forms of measurement and classification?

It could well be the case that sociology can learn from its non-academic counterparts in order to improve its own descriptive practices (and bring them up to some kind of commercial standard), but this is not the only possibility. Another argument is that sociology as discipline continues to be valuable precisely because it can offer description of a different kind; one that need not be chained to a commercial imperative. And given the powers of description that now exist in the commercial world, the value of sociological work perhaps now lies elsewhere, namely in its ability to ask difficult questions about the instrumental logic of certain forms of knowledge and knowledge production outside the academy. Holmwood expresses this point more boldly: "the question is not simply one of how to practice sociology in the context of commercial interest in, and access to, data that was previously mainly of interest to social scientists and policy-makers, but also of sociology's purposes; that is, the question of sociology's jurisdiction is not simply knowledge of what, but knowledge for what, or more precisely, for whom?" (2014, p. 610). Indeed, given the descriptive powers of contemporary forms of commercial research that takes place outside the academy, a key challenge for the discipline is to question the underlying politics of these descriptions and the classifications

and/or decisions they are used to inform. It is not clear, however, that a sociology that prioritizes description at the cost of causal explanation and/or critical analysis is best-positioned to perform this task.

## **5 | CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The aim of this paper is not to argue against the value of sociological description in itself, but to resist the elevation of description over a concern for explanation, analysis and questions of causality, which together lie at the heart of what C. Wright Mills called the sociological imagination. If sociology is bad at addressing questions of causality (and it is not clear that this is indeed the case), then one answer is to think again about causality in an age of “big” and often misleading data rather than call for work that privileges description in its place. For without attention to what Mills calls “causal connections,” it is not possible to locate individual lives within wider social and political structures, and to understand the powers that lend shape to history. Again, the financial crisis is a case in point. A descriptive approach to this crisis does have value: it documents, among other things, events (for example, dramatic movements in market prices and the resulting responses of governments and institutions such as central banks), a range of socio-technical processes and devices (credit default swaps, collateralized debt obligations, leveraged forms of derivatives trading, and so on), and resultant inequalities of different types. But surely sociological work can do more than this? It can question the structural causes of the crisis, the group powers and interests involved, as well as the symbolic and material effects of the very idea of “crisis.” The writings of

C. Wright Mills are again instructive. In the final pages of *The Power Elite*, Mills analyses what he calls “the higher immorality,” and writes that “‘Crisis’ is a bankrupted term, because so many men [sic] in high places have evoked it in order to cover up their extraordinary policies and deeds...” (1959, p. 345). Mills’ suggestion is that crisis is connected to the operation of elite power; an insight that continues to be relevant to the present (on this question, see Davis & Williams, 2017). Given this, rather than simply describe inequalities generated by the policies and deeds of this recent crisis (an exercise that requires no particular sociological training or affiliation), a more critical approach is one that explains the causes and accentuation of these inequalities by analysing, among other things, the processes of financialization that led to the crisis in the first place; governmental responses to the crisis in form



of austerity programmes (see Blyth, 2013) and quantitative easing (see Gane, 2015); and new forms of usury that further marginalized the poor in the immediate post-crisis period (see Gane, 2019). For such developments not only require description but also, and more importantly, close attention to their underlying causes. It is the argument of the present paper that at a time when class has become a dirty word within mainstream party politics and perhaps also, as Tyler suggests, within sociological analyses of inequality, it is a mistake for the discipline to take a descriptive turn at the cost of deeper concerns for causality, politics, and power. For if, as Savage states, “Class analysis is fundamentally about politics” (2015, p. 224), then the grounds and operation of such politics should be a point of central sociological concern.

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