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# What is a Sociologist doing in a School of Management?' Reflections on the Use of Sociological Concepts in Management Education

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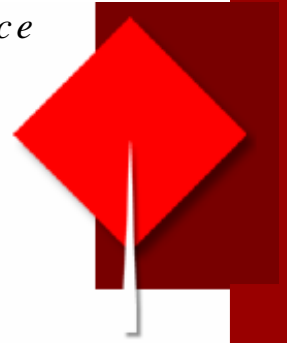
# What is a Sociologist doing in a School of Management?' Reflections on the Use of Sociological Concepts in Management Education

## **Abstract**

Written from an auto-biographic perspective, this paper is based on reflections and insights arising from a journey of adaptation by a 'sociologist-teaching-in-a-school-of-management'. These reflections unveil the relevance to management studies of four interrelated conceptual tools: critical thinking, reflection, reflexivity and the sociological imagination. Examples of scaffolding activities and class exercises are provided throughout the paper to illustrate the usefulness of these concepts in management teaching.

## **Keywords**

management education, sociological imagination, critical thinking, reflection, reflexivity



## **REFLECTIONS**

# **‘What is a Sociologist doing in a School of Management?’ Reflections on the Use of Sociological Concepts in Management Education**

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### **Abstract**

*Written from an auto-biographic perspective, this paper is based on reflections and insights arising from a journey of adaptation by a ‘sociologist-teaching-in-a-school-of-management’. These reflections unveil the relevance to management studies of four interrelated conceptual tools: critical thinking, reflection, reflexivity and the sociological imagination. Examples of scaffolding activities and class exercises are provided throughout the paper to illustrate the usefulness of these concepts in management teaching.*

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## Introduction

When I first joined the School of Management at the University of Western Sydney in 2002, a colleague allegedly asked: 'What on earth is a sociologist doing in a school of management?' For the first few months of employment I was not sure myself. Having been trained in the sociological tradition of challenging established values and dominant ideologies of modern society, I could not help but feel a bit like 'the other'. I was daunted by the unfamiliar management idioms and fearful of rejection by colleagues and students. I was uncomfortable with the possibility that through teaching management subjects I might be contributing to reinforcing the very 'dominant ideologies and discourses' that I had been trained to challenge.

However, a few years later the scenario is vastly different: I am now conversant with the major theories and debates in management studies; I have designed and developed several subjects for our Bachelor of Business Management; I have published a number of articles in management journals; I have refereed papers for management journals and conferences, and I have even received a 'best paper' award at a management conference! But how has this remarkable metamorphosis occurred?

Written from an auto-biographic perspective, this article endeavours to address this question. It is based on personal reflections and insights arising from what can be seen as a 'journey of adaptation' in the shift from teaching in a discipline that is critical of the *status quo* to one that operates inside its boundaries; from sociology to management studies. In the first part of the paper I discuss my epistemological 'luggage', and in the second, I explore the relevance to management studies of four conceptual tools commonly used in sociology – *critical thinking, reflection, reflexivity, and the 'sociological imagination'*. While these practices are clearly interconnected, I examine them separately for the purpose of this paper, and provide examples of scaffolding<sup>1</sup> activities and class exercises to illustrate their usefulness in management teaching.

## My Epistemological 'Luggage'

As I prepared to teach my first management subjects I realised that, as a sociologist, I carried with me an epistemological luggage that significantly facilitated my entry into this new disciplinary field. While I had never been exposed to management theory before I joined the School of Management, I realised with great relief that I would not need to 'start from scratch'.

For example, my knowledge of Weber's formulations on *bureaucracy*, gained in my early years of training was invaluable to understand how organisations operate; my familiarity with gender theory helped me make sense of the persistence of the glass-ceiling syndrome in organisations; my knowledge of globalisation theory proved extremely useful to grasp the organisational changes arising from increased integration of the global economy, and my interest in power and politics enabled me to design a stimulating curriculum for a subject called *Power, Politics and Knowledge*. It was reassuring to see my students respond positively to the ideas of classical and contemporary theorists of power such as Hobbes, Machiavelli, Locke, Weber, Dahl, Bachrach and Baratz, Lukes, C. Wright Mills – and even Foucault!

My sociological knowledge has been an ideal complement to management studies, as it highlights the complexities, ambiguities and paradoxes of management, and invites students to go beyond conventional prescriptive approaches that over-simplify the managerial experience. Sociological knowledge encourages openness to alternative perspectives constitutive of the totality of human experience inside work organisations – perspectives that take into account *both* the managerial and the employees' perspectives. It therefore creates opportunities for students to appreciate that work organisations do not exist in a socio-historical vacuum, but are products of specific historical conditions; that work organisations are not static but are constantly (and actively) transformed by human beings, and that human behaviour in organisational settings is fluid, complex, and often contradictory (Duarte & Fitzgerald, 2006).

## Thinking Critically about Management Issues

*Critical thinking* is the ability to evaluate information and propositions offered as 'true' and to form judgements based on facts. It engenders the capacity to think clearly in order to understand the logical connections between ideas. Critical thinking also fosters the ability to identify, construct and evaluate arguments; to detect inconsistencies in reasoning; to solve problems in a systematic manner; to assess the relevance of ideas, and to reflect on the justification of one's own beliefs and values (Lau & Chan, 2007). Critical thinking leads to a greater appreciation of free-dialogue and a more thorough appraisal of established ideas, beliefs, discourses and practices.

When I first joined the School of Management, I held a rather stereotyped view that critical thinking was incompatible with management studies. From my perspective, management studies reinforced conventional, apolitical views of managers as 'rational' decision makers, and of management as a purely technical activity. However, a serendipitous 'discovery' in 2004 forced me to discard these prejudiced views about management studies. While reading a textbook in preparation for a lecture on organisational politics, I came across a footnote which alluded to a book edited by Alvesson and Wilmott called *Critical Management Studies* (1992)<sup>ii</sup>. These authors stressed the need to 'prise management open' and question 'the wisdom of taking the neutrality or virtue of management as self-evident or unproblematical' (1999:5;1). This work was all about critical thinking in management, marking a turning point in my experience as a 'sociologist-teaching-in-a-school-of-management'.

My serendipitous discovery of Critical Management Studies led me to appreciate how crucial critical thinking is for future managers. For example, through critical thinking students gain a greater understanding of how managers exercise power in organisations and also how they relate to their peers and subalterns. It also prompts the discovery of alternative discourses in management – for example 'green capitalism', 'industrial ecology' and the 'cradle to cradle' concept. Alternative discourses create possibilities for more socially and environmentally sustainable business practices, and ultimately a better society.

Critical thinking also brings into focus issues that are normally excluded from what Grey & Mitev (1995:74) describe as the 'technicist' approach to management education, based on the assumption that management is a 'morally and politically neutral technical activity'. In management education, critical thinking involves a constant interrogation of hegemonic discourses and practices, which is a fundamental undertaking of the sociological enterprise. As commented by Howery (2002), 'Sociologists pride themselves on asking "unmasked questions"'.

Bearing this in mind, I often pose polemic questions in class to encourage a Socratic dialogue with my students: What are the ethical concerns associated with management? How are power relations concealed in management practices? How are power elites formed and maintained in organisations? Why are so few women in senior management positions? Why is sexual harassment in the workplace often ignored or covered up? How is language used in management as a political weapon? Why is it that there is so much resistance in businesses circles to the notion of environmental sustainability? Why has globalisation not benefited all nations in the world? Why is it so hard to have real democracy in capitalist societies? I have found that questions posed from a critical perspective 'push students out of their comfort zones', encouraging them to become more inquisitive and sophisticated in their analyses of organisational phenomena.

My research in the field of Critical Management Studies led me to a thought-provoking article by Burrell (2001) who puts forward a useful framework<sup>iii</sup> to systematise pedagogical reflections on critical thinking in management studies. This framework has been particularly useful in *Power, Politics and Knowledge*, a subject that by its very nature entails a great deal of critical thinking. Burrell (2001:14-5) acknowledges four dimensions of critical thinking: *political*, *investigative iconoclastic* and *epistemological*. The political dimension focuses on the exercise of power in organisational settings and seeks to understand 'the use and exercise of social power and ways in which political forces... shape, govern and even determine human life'. The investigative dimension 'searches to uncover and unearth what others may take for granted'; it questions the powerful and brings into agenda issues which power elites tend to suppress. The iconoclastic dimension aims at breaking down 'the solidity of dominant imagery and icons' in organisational life (for example, the notion of 'the leader') which need to be 'uncovered, unveiled and analysed'. Finally, the epistemological dimension is based on continual

reflection 'upon how and why we know something'. In Burrell's (2001:15) own words, 'To ask epistemological questions is to continually ask, as academics, upon what do we base our judgements and evaluations'. This important point is further developed in the sections below which discuss the value of *reflection* and *reflexivity* in the context of management education.

## Reflecting on Management Issues

*Reflection* can be defined as an active cognitive process which uses previous learning to review, analyse and evaluate experiences (Cunliffe & Jong, 2002; Johns, 1995; Kemmis, 1985; Schon, 1987). Reflection is a core element of teaching for *deep learning* which aims at fostering in students the 'need to know' (Biggs, 2004:16). Deep learning also encourages a greater focus on the 'big picture' and the underlying meanings of social phenomena (see also Entwistle, 1981; Entwistle, 1979; Marton & Saljo, 1976a, 1976b; Ramsden, Beswick, & Bowden, 1989; Saljo, 1979).

Within the context of management studies, reflection enables students to better grasp the complexities of organisational life and to make connections between theoretical and practical knowledge (Schon, 1987). As Woolgar (1988) puts it, reflection is crucial to make logical sense of the 'outside world' (cited in Cunliffe & Jong, 2002). It can be also seen as a personal process that prompts shifts of consciousness and personal growth, creating new attitudes and outlooks; promoting new learning. This leads to the conclusion that reflection is crucial for managers to make informed and fair decisions, based on careful consideration of the impact that their decisions and actions may have on others.

My experience at the School of Management has shown, nevertheless, that the capacity to reflect does not come naturally. It must be actively nurtured in the students by the teacher. In view of this, I decided to include in my subjects scaffolding activities especially designed to foster reflection. For example, in a subject entitled *Contemporary Management Issues*, I devote an entire tutorial to scaffolding for reflection when we examine the issue of 'work/family balance'. We begin the class with an in-depth exploration of the meaning of 'flexibility', a management buzzword that is frequently used in discussions of 'work/family balance'. To this end, we engage in a brainstorming session on the concept to produce a list of words on the whiteboard ('adaptation', 'change'; 'accommodation'; 'understanding' and 'manipulation' are words that frequently emerge in this exercise). We then explore the meaning of these words in-depth and try to establish how they are related to the notion of 'flexibility'. Next, I put up an overhead transparency with the following questions:

1. What is the meaning of *flexibility* as used in organisations with regard to work/family balance?
2. Do you think this is an equitable practice? Why? Why Not?
3. Do you think it creates a 'win/win' situation for both employer and employee? Why? Why not?

At this point, I ask the students to close their eyes and reflect on each of these questions for a few seconds, jotting down on a stream of consciousness the ideas that emerge from their reflection. Despite some initial resistance from students (i.e., eye-rolling and giggling) to what they see as a 'strange' approach to teaching, they gradually relax, and a productive silence often falls upon the class signalling that reflection is in progress. The exercise concludes with a more systematic reflection on the notion of 'work-family balance' as a contemporary management issue, and on the difficulties in addressing it due to the demands of increased competition created by globalisation. It is evident in the good quality of the class discussions that follow this exercise that students have been thinking deeply about the above questions; that they have been *reflecting* on these questions. This activity resonates with Burrell's *iconoclastic dimension* of critical thinking, in the sense that students are able to see 'flexibility' for what it is: a managerial myth that benefits the employer more so than the employee.

I have noticed that since I started using activities especially designed to foster reflection, the quality of the students' responses in the online discussion forums in *Contemporary Management Issues* has also improved considerably. Students seem to be more deeply engaged with the discussion topics and are therefore able to craft their postings much more thoughtfully. I have also been impressed with the quality of the Reflective Journals that they are required to submit as a summative assessment in this subject. The entries clearly indicate that students have been able to pause 'in order to make sense and reframe' (Johns, 2004:2) the issues under examination. Borrowing from a theoretical framework devised by Hatton & Smith (1994:40-1), it can be said that through reflection my students have been



able to shift away from *descriptive reflection* (i.e., mere regurgitation of materials discussed in the literature and/or lectures) to *dialogic reflection* (i.e., active exploration of possible reasons for phenomena). In some cases, they have been able to go even further, moving towards *critical reflection* (i.e., the ability to explore possible reasons for organisational phenomena, and to consider the broader socio-historical and/or political contexts that shape these phenomena).

## Deconstructing through Reflexivity

While the notion of reflection presupposes the existence of an 'objective reality' on which we reflect, *reflexivity* is a constructivist concept premised on questioning the existence of this 'objective reality'. It explores how 'our ways of being in the world' (Cunliffe and Jong 2002:4) are subjectively constructed in social interaction. Reflexivity is therefore based on a continuous interrogation of taken-for-granted discourses and practices of our society. As noted by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2004, p. 246; italics added), it 'is the very ability to break away from a frame of reference and to look at *what it is not capable of saying*.' Within the context of management education, reflexivity is based on a continuous interrogation of taken-for-granted belief systems, ideologies, discourses and practices operating in organisational settings.

A good starting point in the operationalisation of reflexivity in management education is the application of Burrell's notion of *iconoclastic critical thinking* to deconstruct the very concept of management. As pointed out by Collins (2000)<sup>iv</sup>, there is more to management than just 'getting work done through others'. Through reflexivity students should be able to understand that management is not a 'natural' phenomenon, but it is a profession that emerged at a particular point in time and space to serve the imperatives of industrial capitalism in Europe. Reflexivity can also help students recognise that the actions of managers are not purely technical, but are often political. As noted by Collins (2000:63), 'Through their meetings, discussions and interactions, managers attempt to influence and to shape the behaviour of others, so that they must be "persuaded" to work in pursuit of certain objectives.'

Deconstructionist class activities can be applied to hone reflexivity skills, including a critical inquiry into the type of language used by managers, which often includes words with an 'euphemistic potential' (Collins, 2000:313). For example, despite their appearance of neutrality, terms such as 'downsizing'; 'restructuring'; 'reengineering' and 'human resources management' conceal negative outcomes for the employees (i.e., unemployment; uncertainty; anxiety; stress; occupational illnesses). Through reflexive thought students are able to flesh-out the social reality that such words conceal.

Reflexive thought is thus an empowering activity (Johns, 2004:8-9)<sup>v</sup> as it prompts students to appreciate that people are not just passive victims of their circumstances, but can be active subjects able to critically appraise events and situations. They can also problematise 'commonsense' explanations by exposing their philosophical or ideological underpinnings. Reflexivity reveals the emancipatory potential of *human agency* which is premised on the belief that individuals are self-conscious, self-questioning agents 'capable of formulating and reflecting on their means and ends of action' (Johns, 1995). Within the context of management education, reflexive thought encourages students to challenge assumptions about the unlimited power of the manager, and to interrogate particular versions of 'truth' promoted and sustained through organisational practices and discourses. It also enables them to detect and expose the contradictions, doubts and dilemmas (Cunliffe & Jong, 2002) of managerial discourses, creating the possibility for clearer, more ethical decisions in managerial contexts.

## Unleashing the Sociological Imagination

'The sociological imagination', writes C.Wright Mills (1973:12), 'enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise'.

My realisation of the value of the sociological imagination to understand organisational phenomena occurred when I re-visited one of my favourite sociology textbooks, by Giddens (2002:2-4), and came across his evocative example of 'thinking ourselves away' from the mundane act of drinking coffee. This involves the ability to think beyond taken for granted assumptions which leads to the realisation

that there is far more to a cup of coffee than just a way to start the day. At the most basic level, coffee can be seen as a *drug* that contains the stimulant caffeine, consumed for 'that extra boost'. But coffee is also imbued with *symbolic value*, as it is part of our daily social activities ('Let's have a cup of coffee'). Drinking coffee can be regarded more analytically as the result of a complex set of relationships stretching across the world (e.g., coffee is consumed in large quantities in wealthy nations, but is produced primarily by poor ones). Drinking coffee can be *imagined* as an outcome of past social and economic development, its mass consumption dating from the late 1800s – a period of intensive Western expansion. At a deeper analytic level coffee can be viewed as 'a product that stands at the heart of contemporary debates about globalization, international trade, human rights and environmental destruction' (Giddens, 2002:3-4). Giddens' thought provoking analysis of a cup of coffee through the lens of the sociological imagination reveals the usefulness of this concept as a tool 'to think with'. Through this lens we realise that events that may seem concerned with *the individual*, reflect in fact the influence of broader social forces. But how is this relevant to teaching management studies?

My experience with management education has demonstrated that the sociological imagination is an effective tool to encourage students to understand the connection, often neglected in management studies, between phenomena unfolding at the micro-level of organisations and at the macro-systemic context that produces them. In this sense, the sociological imagination operates as a 'wide-angle lens' (Klonsky & Strenski, 1994) which enables students to catch a glimpse of the big-picture that shapes, changes and reproduces organisational events.

In order to sensitise students to the benefits of the sociological imagination, and prepare them to 'think sociologically', I recommend a scaffolding activity based on an exercise devised by Kaufman (1997:309) This activity helps to foster the ability to establish links between micro- and macro-contexts. In preparation, the teacher asks students to read the first chapter of Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* in order to ensure that they have a good grasp of what is involved in this mode of thinking. Students are also asked to bring to class an ordinary, manufactured object that they use in their daily routines (e.g., a tube of toothpaste, a bottle of shampoo, a lipstick, a box of cereal, a soft drink, a clock, a laptop computer, a camera, a mobile phone or an *iPod*). These items will serve as generative themes (Shor, 1980) to trigger the *sociological imagination* in small group discussions. In the preparatory stage, students are also given a document containing the analytic framework for the exercise, and guiding questions for each of the steps to be followed (see Appendix 1).

As the class discussions gain momentum, students begin to realise that taken-for-granted, ordinary objects are far more complex than they appear – and indeed far more interesting. For example, apart from being breakfast food, a box of cereal can be linked to macro-systemic processes through a consideration of the conditions and relations that lead to its production – in particular, the social impacts of large agri-business transnational corporations in poor countries. A lipstick raises similar issues of commodity production under conditions of advanced capitalism, in addition to gender-related themes such as the 'cult of beauty' in Western society, the power of the cosmetics industry over women, and the blurring of the difference between *wants* and *needs* under conditions of advanced capitalism. This activity can be also used as an assignment, where students are asked to carry out a sociological analysis on an object of their choice, using similar guidelines to those provided in Appendix 1.

Due to its unusual character, it is possible that there may be some resistance to this exercise at first, but after a few rounds of discussion, students normally begin to recognise its value. As noted by Kaufman (1997:312), they realise that 'the production of knowledge is not flowing from the teacher to the student, but rather, from the student to the teacher, and from student to student'. Through this activity students can also be led to appreciate that responses to the questions pertaining to each of the dimensions of the activity outlined in the instructions sheet (i.e., description; local analysis; macro-analysis and historical analysis) may differ, as they reflect the specific circumstances of each student (Kaufman, 1997:311).



## Conclusion

In this paper I have reflected on personal and pedagogical insights gained in my 'journey of adaptation' that occurred during the shift from teaching sociology to teaching management studies. During this journey, I realised the relevance and value of conceptual tools used in sociology to management education.

A serendipitous encounter with the rich field of Critical Management Studies made me discard the stereotyped views I had about the 'incompatibility between management education and critical thinking'. I can now fully appreciate the relevance of critical thinking to the study of organisational phenomena; the fact that critical thinking enables students to appreciate that these phenomena are multi-layered and complex, and that there is always 'more than one side to a story'. Critical thinking also leads to the realisation that there are alternative organisational discourses and thus possibilities for more democratic workplaces and equitable management practices.

My journey also revealed the benefits of *reflection* and *reflexivity* in management studies. Reflection enhances the learning experience by enabling students to review, analyse and evaluate information more effectively. Reflexivity – the realisation that 'we construct the very accounts we think describe the world' (Cunliffe, 2002:38) – encourages management students to stand back and question ideologies, 'techniques' and other practices of domination and control found in more conventional styles of management; to expose what is unsaid in management discourses; to deconstruct managerial myths that mask inequitable practices in the workplace.

In my journey, I re-discovered the value of the 'sociological imagination' as a pedagogical tool to foster an appreciation of the links between organisational phenomena and the broader socio-historical, economic, political and cultural contexts that produce them; of the complexities and ambiguities of organisational life, and of the dangers arising from abuses of managerial power. When unleashed through appropriate class activities the sociological imagination is a powerful device to encourage students to think beyond their immediate surrounds; to expand their horizons.

Borrowing from Berger (1971:51), it can be said that sociology exists in management schools as a 'form of consciousness' that 'looks for levels of reality other than those given in the official interpretations of society'; which keeps alive issues of social justice and equity. As commented by Peery Jr some years ago (1995:250-1), 'Gone are the days, if ever there were any, when a manager could forget about matters of ethics and justice in making decisions'. Peery Jr's remarks are even more relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, when business corporations and CEOs are under constant media scrutiny and public pressure to behave ethically and responsibly.

The conclusion to draw from these reflections is that there is clearly a place for a sociologist in a school of management because s/he can contribute to the development of a 'critical management pedagogy' (Cunliffe, 2002; Reynolds, 1997) which entails an on-going dialogue with self and others. Not only does this dialogue contribute to unveil assumptions and ideologies that persist in managerial discourses and practices, but it also ensures that teachers of management studies become 'critical reflexive practitioners' (Cunliffe, 2004:408). This is fundamentally important in the education of future managers because, by adopting a more critical posture in relation to our own assumptions and actions, we are in a position to encourage future managers to develop more humane, collaborative and ethical ways of managing.

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i The term 'scaffolding' refers to temporary supports used by teachers to assist students who are not quite ready to accomplish a given task independently. Here, the metaphor of 'constructing a building' from the ground up is used to describe the learning process and its requirements. As a teaching strategy, scaffolding originates in Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of learning (1934; Vygotsky, 1956) in particular his notion of 'zones of proximal development'; in other words the cognitive region that lies just beyond what a student can do alone, without the help of the teacher.

ii Critical management studies has since developed into a well established interdisciplinary approach in management studies underpinned by a number of sociological assumptions, in particular the proposition that the concept of management is intimately

entwined with social and political power and should therefore critically analysed. It draws on a plurality of intellectual traditions from the social sciences, including the Frankfurt School, labour process theory, cultural studies, social linguistics, literary criticism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, environmentalism, feminist theory, and psychoanalysis.

iii Burrel's framework is based on based on the ideas of the Warwick Organisational Behaviour Staff.

iv Here Collins (2000:54) is paraphrasing Mary Parker Foller, deemed as 'one of the earliest commentators on management'.

v While Johns (2004:8-9) uses the notion of empowerment with regard to reflection, it can be argued that empowerment may also occur from reflexivity, as it enables the acquisition of additional knowledge created by probing beneath the surface of appearance.

## Appendix 1

### UNLEASHING THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION TO EXPERIENCE *ORDINARY* OBJECTS IN *EXTRAORDINARY* WAYS

#### Instructions for Students

Below are the different levels to be considered in your analysis of the ordinary object you have been asked to bring to class. Within each level there is a set of questions to facilitate reflection on the sociological meaning of the object at hand.

- 1) **DESCRIPTION:** What is the object under examination? How would you describe it in detail? How is it made?
- 2) **LOCAL ANALYSIS:** Where do you obtain it? Is it easily obtainable? Is it available to everyone? How is it used? By what sorts of people? In what kind of settings? How does it relate to other aspects of social life? In what social context does it exist? Who benefits from it? Is anyone disadvantaged in its production? Why does it appear the way it does? How does it relate to your life? Is it indispensable?
- 3) **MACRO-ANALYSIS:** Does this object exist in other places of the world? If so, in what form? How is it used? By what sorts of people? Is its use in other parts of the world the same as in this country? Is it altered in any way when used elsewhere? To what extent does it affect the environment? To what extent does it affect the lives of people who live in that country?
- 4) **HISTORICAL ANALYSIS:** When did this object come into existence? Why did it appear at that particular time? How has it changed over time? What other aspects of social life have changed as a result of this object? How has your use of this object changed over time? What will this object be like in the future?

Adapted from Kaufman, P. (1997). 'Michael Jordan meets C. Wright Mills: Illustrating the sociological imagination with objects from everyday life'. *Teaching Sociology*, 25(4), 309-314

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