



## British Sociology: Gains and Losses

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**1.1** It may be as well to give information before seeing what it means, both to me and to the general question being posed. I went to the USA for a year in 1986 on half sabbatical, with extra funding from Leverhulme. After a term teaching in California designed to increase my funds, I took up a Fellowship at the Center for European Studies at Harvard. Whilst there I was offered a job, teaching in Sociology and in Social Studies, a famous undergraduate concentration somewhat like Oxford's 'Modern Greats' (that is, PPE – politics, philosophy and economics). Given the financial atmosphere of the time my university was only too happy to grant me extended leave. So I spent a happy period in Boston, made happier by not having to climb through all the hoops required to get tenure at Harvard. But in 1990 I did decide to stay in North America: marriage and an unexpected offer of a job from McGill University in Montreal made a real jump possible. I have been here ever since, albeit with extended periods in Central Europe, Northern Ireland and Denmark.

**1.2** An initial point to make is that displacement has not been total. I return very often, and have some sense of the state of play within social studies within Britain. More important, my intellectual agenda was more or less formed before I left, and continual interaction thereafter with Ernest Gellner and Michael Mann, the great influences on my work, meant that its force was not lost. That said, I feel myself to have gained a great deal from moving. One very particular point concerns being close to the United States, looking in at it from a very advanced but highly dependent country. There is a sort of default position in the United States suggesting the right to rule the world, made all the more curious in that possession of the power to do so is tacitly denied by the commanding heights of the conceptual economy—which stress socio-economic motives, thereby failing to appreciate the pleasures that can be derived from the exercise of power. Montreal has always been a particularly good position from which to think about power in the modern world—better I think than Europe, a civilization which for so long had its own autonomy. A point of very great importance to me is life within Quebec rather than Canada *per se*. Work on Central Europe for many years has made me aware of the horrors of modern Europe. Prague seems typical: once Kafka's tricultural city, it is now homogenized and dull, despite its great beauty. Montreal has two nations, and many immigrant communities, making it exceptionally interesting and vibrant. But of course there are tensions, and these led to a further advantage of my move. I would never have thought deeply about nationalism without experiencing it first hand, every day. The British overseas often have an easy time of it. In Quebec Anglophones can feel discriminated against, in mild ways, making it possible to get some sense of the stakes involved in nationalist conflict. Finally, a measure of distance from one's own society can give clarity, making me at times rather critical of the culturalist turn of a good deal of social studies in Britain.

**1.3** The literal meaning of diaspora is that of displacement. But I think there is another sense to the word, namely that of continual linkages within a single community spread around the world. The maintenance of a common culture, with intellectual and trading links within it, seems to characterize both Judaism past and present and many Chinese in the contemporary world. In the light of this definition there are clear losses in my own case. The sense that I have of the state of British sociology is fragmentary, and it is decreasing all the time; my connections are to scholars of a previous generation. I miss this, miss the feeling that I once had—not least as it so very absent in the United States, if less so in Canada—of being able to contribute to public debate. Differently put, I am less the member of an engaged diaspora than a rather marginal figure, truly at home nowhere. I have already stressed that there are advantages to this, above all the fact that distance allows for clarity. Raymond Aron once remarked somewhere that British sociologists stood too close to the Labour Party, his point I think being that hopes could replace analysis. This was probably accurate, now as well as then, but I still miss normative engagement. And there may be something deeper. Recently I was asked to reflect on the career of Ernest Gellner, whose biography I have just written, as part of a workshop dealing with marginality. At first sight, Gellner seems a marvelous example of the conceptual riches that thinkers of Jewish background have given us, as the result of experiencing the dark vicissitudes of Europe's twentieth century. But the more I thought about it, the more cautious and perhaps skeptical I became. Homelessness and marginality certainly played a key role in Gellner's visceral

endorsement of Max Weber's view that our lives are and must be colder and disenchanting. But is that a correct reading of the lives of most people in the modern world? Are there not more social connections, more warmth, in daily life than marginal thinkers realize? I suspect there are, and now look back at some of my work and more of my preconceptions with a little anxiety.

**1.4** So displacement has gains which entail losses. There are opportunity/costs here, as the economists have it, for sure.