



## Editorial Introduction: John d Brewer and Jennifer Platt

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**1.1** This special section forms part of the series of events in 2011 to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the British Sociological Association (BSA). It is not about the history of the BSA, although there are some items that add new material on this topic, even less a historical overview of the development of sociology in Britain, though there are pieces here which contribute significantly to that. As guest editors we have had the privilege of serving the BSA as the current President (Brewer) and a former President (Platt). Both of us have an interest in the history of the discipline, but we have avoided pursuing our personal interests. There was a general call for contributions and the conventional review process was rigorously applied except to short solicited autobiographical contributions. Nonetheless, the anniversary theme perforce imposes a stamp on its contents and our positions and background gave us the ambition to provide something different but with longer-term historical significance.

**1.2** Going under the title of '*60 Years of Impact: Reflecting on 60 years of British Sociology*', as editors we want first to address the word 'impact', for we do not want to leave this implicit, as if the relevance of British sociology emerges naturally from any account of its growth and development. Contemporary interest in 'impact' in Britain arises from two concerns, its use in the Research Excellence Framework as a way of showing the utility of research outcomes, and its incorporation in the evaluation of grant applications to Research Councils as a way of highlighting engagement with the 'users' and 'beneficiaries' of funded research. It has a narrow and technical meaning in these usages. If we take impact to mean more broadly the public value and relevance of research, it has been a feature of British sociology since its inception, whether its origins are thought to rest in Scottish Enlightenment engagement with the effects of proto-industrialisation in eighteenth-century Scotland, late Victorian interest in distributive injustice or early twentieth-century political arithmetic, but this was never conceived as impact. Diverse ranges of people came to sociology in large part for its commitment to social improvement and human betterment, but the 'relevance' of the discipline was taken for granted and rarely articulated in terms that would be recognisable in today's governmental concern with 'impact'. Even the leading figures of British sociology in the 60 years covered by this special section let their research findings speak for themselves, as they pursued interesting sociological questions regardless of government higher education policy. Yet as we shall see in most of the contributions here, whether in the work of specific individuals like Ray Pahl, the effect of particular books like Rex and Moore's *Race, Community and Conflict*, or the overview of fields such as economic sociology, gender or the sociology of food, sociologists were doing high impact research whether or not they intended it or knew it. What differs with modern generations of sociologists is merely our explicit attention to impact today.

**1.3** In this sense, history itself has impact by illustrating the social benefits of sociology in the past and thus the essential continuity of the idea of impact. The controversy today is about the attempt in government higher education policy to impose a particular form of impact, rather than the suggestion that sociology is incapable of generating socially relevant and beneficial research. Impact has been part of the growth and development of British sociology even further back than the sixty years covered by this special issue. If impact as an idea illustrates the continuity of sociological practices, this suggests that the discipline itself shows the same tendency toward continuity and change. This is another recurring theme that ties our contributions together, and it is useful to review the contents of this special section in the light of that.

**1.4** There are two backward glances to old documents of great historical interest, both as contributions to the history of the BSA and sociology in Britain more generally, and as illustrations of the personal and professional standpoints of the people involved at the time. The first is Asher Tropp's summary of the state of British sociology, contained in the very first edition of the BSA Bulletin in October 1956, which we might consider as the forerunner to the BSA's *Network*. Tropp was its first editor and noted that the intention was to publish the Bulletin, then merely a typescript copy, three times a year. The review of the 'present state and development of professional sociology' reported on the Association's conference of the same title, held at the LSE in January 1956. The second document is Richard Brown's previously unpublished interview

with Anne Dix in 1992 on her retirement from the BSA as its Executive Officer. The interview is significant for the personal perspective it provides on the professionalisation of the BSA.

**1.5** No backward glance is ever entirely just about the past however, and both documents may well leave readers with a sense of *déjà vu*. The timelessness of some of the bureaucratic concerns of the BSA as a professional association are matched by some enduring problems in the discipline in Britain faced by its growth and popularity, the balance between intellectual interests and vocationalism, anxieties over the employment of sociology graduates and difficulties in managing the tension between teaching and research, amongst others. This sense that while things change, they remain very much the same, that in the midst of change there is also continuity, is captured well by the personal reflections of John Eldridge on the state of sociology in an era of cuts, then and now. As a former President of the Association, Eldridge is able to speak knowledgeably as an insider to some enduring and recurring issues in the politics of sociological research and the effects of public expenditure cuts.

**1.6** We were eager to complement these historical documents with new ones generated especially for the occasion. An innovation appropriate for our theme is a focus on the diasporic experience of sociologists migrating into and out of British sociology, in which they reflect on both their personal trajectories and that of the discipline generally across national boundaries. We deliberately commissioned testimonies from a number of different sorts of sociologists with quite varied experiences, in order to capture wider historical trends in sociology as they were experienced in personal, autobiographical journeys. There is a sense in which the institutional development of sociology in Britain occurred through the life and activities of the key individuals who comprised it, and wider structural events had their consequences through the individual careers of major sociologists. This intellectual diaspora contributed to the later emergence of sociology as a global discipline. But the personal trajectories contained within the migrations offer a blend of the macro and micro events behind such globalization, as well as displaying the particular intellectual spaces offered by sociology in Britain. Movements into (Misztal, Morawska), out of (Hall), and back into (Crouch, Saunders) British sociology, enable authors to comment on features in the discipline in Britain that were attractions and disincentives. These accounts cover Australia, North America, and Western and Eastern Europe and thus leave ignored some other significant migrations to Britain, from South Africans in particular. It is inevitable that these accounts are of the experiences of senior sociologists, but as counterbalance we include the autobiographical journey of a new entrant into the discipline (Bates) as she encounters what C. Wright Mills would call the promise of the sociological imagination.

**1.7** This emphasis on careers *in* sociology and sociology *as* a career is reinforced by Crow and Takeda's article on one specific sociologist, the late Ray Pahl. It is in part a measure of the institutional development of sociology in Britain that it was able to sustain significant careers for its major practitioners, but the article on Pahl also reflects the way in which the discipline has been professionalized through the contributions of significant sociologists. Today we call this 'impact' – and so difficult is it to distance the discipline from the impact agenda that our title nods towards it – but major sociologists like Pahl were pursuing interesting lines of research oblivious to its institutional ramifications for the growth of sociology as a discipline in Britain and without consideration of its impact. Yet, as Crow and Takeda acknowledge, people like Pahl are role models for today's generation of sociologists in both the range of their sociological thinking and their concern to pursue socially beneficial research. Pahl is, of course, in a way representative of his whole generation. (The trajectories of some members of his cohort are valuably documented and celebrated in the Qualidata 'Pioneers of Qualitative Research' series, which in addition to Pahl includes Colin Bell, Peter Townsend, Janet Finch, Paul Thompson and Denis Marsden, among others. For this pioneering generation there is, regrettably, no equivalent general source for predominantly quantitative workers, but Crow and Takeda cite a number of valuable biographical and autobiographical sources on other authors.)

**1.8** To look at the development of sociology as a discipline through the careers of key sociologists as they made the discipline their vocation is one interesting angle of approach; another is to do so through specific instances of major research programmes or key books. There are numbers of works which could be used in this way. The one offered here, which we can take as emblematic of a larger group, is *Race, Community and Conflict* by John Rex and Robert Moore. Robert Moore's analysis of its reception here shows how the parts of the work which received most attention were not always those of most interest to the authors, but depended on the historical context, and focuses attention on the ways in which British sociology was affected by the remarkable social changes occurring in Britain at the time, which saw not only the emergence of a sociology of race relations but also significant contributions in the study of poverty, family relations, gender, class and mobility, education, and work and employment. (It also marks the significant contribution of Rex as one of those made by South African exiles in British sociology.)

**1.9** Trends in two of these sub-fields are reviewed in greater depth by contemporary specialists who give what are personal overviews in that, while they reflect the expertise of the authors, they carry also some of their particular emphases and interests. They are not designed to be fully comprehensive within the space provided, but no assessment of sociology in Britain over the last sixty years could be considered complete without some commentary on economic sociology, provided here by Duncan Gallie, or on gender and feminism, by Sylvia Walby.

**1.10** While sociology was in part shaped by its analyses of social change in modern Britain, sociology itself was subject to the influence of social change. Charles Crothers reflects on some of these changes in his analysis of the content of the major British sociology journals. The expansion in the notion of the 'social', which has accompanied the fragmentation of the discipline away from its original central concerns with power, class and inequality, witnessed the emergence of new areas for the display of the sociological imagination, including gender but more recently fields like emotions, consumption, tourism, human rights, peace processes and food.

**1.11** The last is covered in depth here by Anne Murcott's analysis of the emergence of food as a sociological topic, and the role played in that by the BSA's Food Study Group. This paper is important not only for its attention to new intellectual developments but also for highlighting that the BSA itself is part of the context in which individual sociologists work and develop careers; and not just in the case of the Women's Caucus in the 1970s, which was so powerful in reshaping the whole sociological agenda, and not just around gender. Through Study Groups like that on food, the BSA provides intellectual spaces for people to pursue shared interests, as well as some financial assistance. Study groups in the areas of medical sociology and the sociology of religion are very large, with academic conferences and events of their own which attract large numbers. The newest study group, on the sociology of climate change, established in 2010, has potential to play a very significant role in analysing one of the most critical problems affecting the future of humankind, showing the relevance of sociology to public issues. The importance of study groups, and the whole infrastructure to intellectual debate fostered by the BSA as an organisation, is demonstrated in the proposal to establish a study group on the history of sociology, which, if it comes to fruition, will appropriately begin its operation in this 60th anniversary year.

**1.12** This neatly brings us full circle. Sociology is as much its past as its future, containing within it path-breaking work on topical issues like climate change as well as fascinating historical enquiries into its own history. It is methodologically plural as well as substantively diverse. Some of this plurality and diversity is represented in this section. More could have been said on these issues and some areas are untouched, not through design but simply because nothing was submitted on them; we are aware that there are gaps in the picture it paints of British sociology. We hope, however, that it may encourage further work of similar kinds to help fill the gaps. This volume is therefore merely part of the ongoing account of the history of British sociology, speaking as much to its future as its past.

**1.13** But we would like to end with an assessment of our own. It is difficult to identify national traditions in sociology because of the global nature of the discipline and the world-wide circulation and dissemination of ideas. But cultural spaces do affect both the production of ideas and their reception, giving us what David Livingstone (2003) calls the 'geography of ideas'. There are features of British sociology that stand out strongly, which, if not constituting a national tradition, at least give it some shape and identity. British sociology always was, and remains, associated with the sociological analysis of social problems, not atheoretical but concerned with developing theories of the middle range rather than the grand historical narrative, methodologically pluralist but with an emphasis on mixed methods, although weaker on quantitative skills while renowned for qualitative methods, substantively open and flexible, with a wide range of topics to which the sociological imagination is applied. The papers presented here are emblematic of these qualities and represent in microcosm what is distinctive about sociology in Britain.

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## References

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