Aspirations and opportunities: a career in Sociology

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In 1945, at the end of World War II, there was only one person in Britain, Morris Ginsberg, who held an appointment as Professor of Sociology. By 2001, according to a survey conducted by A. H. Halsey (2004:225-232), there were 199 serving and 37 retired professors of sociology. Halsey threw his net widely, counting as sociologists persons who held posts in Social Policy, and others on the fringes of the subject, but nonetheless the figures testify to a truly remarkable expansion.

For the BSA annual conference of 2005, Jennifer Platt convened a panel of speakers to review the growth of British sociology over these sixty formative years. She was interested to consider the extent to which their careers had been the development of personal inclinations as opposed to external constraints, like the employment market and the changes in the political environment (post-war austerity and economic growth, television, Labour and Conservative governments, the founding of the Social Sciences Research Council, the Research Assessment Exercises, etc). For this reason Professor Platt wished to look beyond the campus and take note of the participants’ contributions outside the university world. I was invited to open the discussion as a representative of the first post-war generation of British sociologists. If five speakers were to fit into a two-hour session, oral addresses had to be brief, so I filled out the record with a series of endnotes.

A career

One model of the human life cycle is that set out in the Christian sacraments: baptism and communion, plus the five lesser sacraments. I was baptised a sociologist by Edward Shils at LSE in 1947, and confirmed by a notional laying on of hands at a graduation ceremony three years later. According to Halsey’s History of Sociology in Britain, thirteen of my generation became apostles. We were sustained in our membership among the faithful at meetings of the University Teachers section of the BSA and at other conferences (Platt, 2003). They were our communion. We were ordained as teachers of doctrine by various universities; in my case, by Edinburgh and Bristol. Sociology, like the church, is troubled by scandalous doctrine; teachers can make students do penance for errors and give them absolution, but, again like the church, they have only limited powers to correct the heresies of their peers. The analogies are weaker with respect to matrimony, though my wife has sometimes protested that I am married to her and not to sociology. Whether I will enter into the sociological hereafter depends not upon extreme unction but upon the possible conferment of a place in accounts of the growth of sociological knowledge.
Religious faith, and its criticism, was more important to sociologists of my generation than it has been to our successors. At the age of fourteen I was struck by the aphorism 'God made man in his own image and man has been returning the compliment ever since'. It marked the beginning of my interest in epistemology. How can we have confidence in the conceptual structure within which human knowledge is organised? I contrast this with an assumption that underlies Halsey's History. He believes that our generation were activists, enthusiastic for the reform of British society. I came to sociology believing that there were other societies more interesting than that of modern Britain. The problems of the welfare state seemed to me relatively parochial concerns.

I came because, though originally intending to specialise in economics, mine was the good fortune to have Edward Shils as a personal tutor. He got me to read The Protestant Ethic, then Crime and Custom and Sex and Repression in Savage Society, Le Suicide, and Street Corner Society, followed by the works of the Chicago school and more Weber in translation. I was to understand Britain the better by drawing on a comparative perspective. When, before the end of the second term, I told Shils that I would opt for sociology as a special subject in the BSc (Econ.), he astonished me by saying 'Well, go register in the Anthropology Department then; you will learn more sociology there than you will in the department I am in'. Having made inquiries, I came back to tell him that, as far as I could see, a qualification in social anthropology pointed only to a career in the Colonial Service, but I could, within special subject sociology, follow a course in the Anthropology Department leading to one exam paper called Ethnology. I asked 'Would that do, Sir?' He replied 'I suppose so'. Shils also recommended me to listen to Karl Popper because his was 'probably the most interesting teaching in the School at present', and I never received better advice. Popper, even more than my other teachers, conveyed the inspiring conception of an academic career as devoted to the advancement of learning. So, though I graduated only in the Lower division of the Second Class, I persisted in my hopes of an academic career and at the end of the following October secured a research assistantship in the Department of Social Anthropology in the University of Edinburgh that was funded by the Noel Buxton Trust. I displaced Erving Goffman from the lowest rung of the departmental ladder. Until 1955, by which time I had a wife and two children to think of, I had no job security. Though salaries were then very poor, it was a great relief when, within the University's Social Sciences Research Centre, a new lectureship in social anthropology was established and I was appointed to it.

My first three books, The Coloured Quarter (1955), West African City (1957), and White and Coloured (1959), all derived from research inspired by my head of department, Kenneth Little, though they were very much in line with my own interests. The latter two were aided by grants that he secured from the Nuffield Foundation. The research that led to my next book, The Policeman in the Community, sprang from my own ideas, greatly helped by a year as a visiting professor in political science at MIT. When the expansion of the mid-sixties began, I was well placed.

In the late sixties, as Halsey (2004:118) testifies, sociology and sociologists became identified with disruption and dissent. From 1965 my main concern was with the
establishment of a new Sociology department in the University of Bristol. When, a little later, a professor of dental surgery remarked to me that ‘your subject has grown a lot’, I responded ‘No, it has been expanded, and that is not the same thing’. Sociology was sinned against as well as sinning. Universities advertised courses before they had suitable staff to teach them. It was also an era of acute struggle between warring conceptions of what the subject should be, a time when there were many accusations of heresy, and one in which it became easier to understand that Socrates should have been forced to drink hemlock for corrupting the young.

In January 1970 I was appointed Director of the Social Sciences Research Council Research Unit on Ethnic Relations at Bristol on a part time (two-fifths) basis, and continued in this post until July 1978 (longer than any of my full-time successors). The Unit was multi-disciplinary, established to demonstrate that in this field there were problems of theoretical as well as practical interest to all the social sciences. Such interest did grow, more because of trends outside the universities than because of our efforts. My time with the Unit intensified my interest in this field and helped me formulate my own theory, one that I would now call an application of the theory of collective action. I also found that I did not enjoy being responsible for other people’s research. Nor would I have wanted to become a Vice-Chancellor.

Looking back, I see my interest in human rights, and in racial discrimination in particular, as the development of an orientation formed before leaving school and shaped by the doctrines I studied at LSE. The School gave me a conception of sociology as a social science, sharing with the other social sciences common theories, so that any boundaries between the various disciplines are matters of convenience. Yet the claim that an interest in human rights runs right through my career is a retrospective view. I was an unsuccessful candidate for the chair of sociology at Reading in 1964. That university is close to the police staff college at Bramshill, so had I gone to Reading I might well have developed my interest in police studies and my academic life would have taken a different direction. Though there was continuity in my efforts, their development was helped by my being in the right places at the right times. That must partly explain why I was invited to engage in several forms of public service, including appointment to two Royal Commissions, one at home and one colonial. Prior to my involvement with the United Nations from 1986, like other British sociologists, I had no conception of human rights. My service on the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination gave me an opportunity to learn about them and to contribute a sociological perspective to some questions of international law. It opened a path to my main career distinction, for I have so far been the only UK national elected to chair a UN human rights treaty body. I cannot estimate the importance of the opportunities that have come my way relative to my personal intellectual development; the two have interacted. For this reason I am doubtful if anything can be learned about the future of British sociological careers from my life course.

Retirement is a step down but not a terminus. It has enabled me to return to epistemological questions and to argue that the study of ethnic relations has to develop technical concepts to replace ordinary language concepts like those of race and ethnicity.
The biochemist whose discovery of vitamins earned a Nobel prize, Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins, reportedly said that in his laboratory he would sooner have a first class man with a second class idea than a second class man with a first class idea. I have been a second class man with the first class ideas of another person, Karl Popper. When others come to review my career they may focus on the way I gained prominence by writing about ‘race relations’ and then turned right round to look for ways to supersede that concept. Very few of us will enter into the sociological hereafter. My chances of doing so may depend upon others’ evaluation of the extent to which I influenced later generations’ conceptions of the field of ethnic and racial studies. That is a project on which I am still working.

Notes

1. From 1941 (the year in which I became fifteen) it was clear that, provided Britain did not lose the war, I would be joining the armed forces when I left King Edward’s School, Birmingham. There I studied Classics up to what is currently ‘O’ level. The task of writing an essay comparing education in Athens and Sparta extended the ideas of cultural variation I had obtained from my reading and from the Scout movement. If, as small boys, we were to play Cowboys and Indians, I preferred to be an Indian. Indians had distinctive cultures and lived in harmony with their environment. From school I entered a naval officer selection scheme that took me for two terms to the University of Glasgow. To reduce the class bias in their officer ranks all three services had instituted schemes that began with a wide range of entrants but were highly selective. Relatively few entrants were eventually commissioned. I was one, though by this time the war was over and my active service was as a navigating officer in a warship sweeping minefields in the North Sea and off the Irish coast. With a view to employment in commerce, I had started a correspondence course leading to a qualification of the Chartered Institute of Secretaries when there came a signal from the Admiralty indicating that there would be scholarships for people like me to go to university. This was a welcome surprise. I assumed that I would have to seek employment in industry or commerce and that a qualification in economics would help. Having written to two Oxford colleges only to hear that they were struggling to find places for their own former students, I applied to the London School of Economics on the assumption that an institution with such a name ought to be a good place to study economics.

2. I believe Shils’ comment on his department had some justification in that Ginsberg’s conception of sociology had grown out of nineteenth century philosophies of history; it placed non-European societies in a framework of social evolution and closed off any interest in other questions arising from study of them. Ethnology was one of the three sociology papers in my nine-paper finals examination. The others were three papers in economics, one in Comparative Social Institutions, one in Scientific Method and one essay paper. The BSc (Econ.) was for me a qualification in social science rather than in one or more particular social sciences.
3. The possibility of extending my police research to the USA came about because of an invitation to teach in the Political Science section at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I had participated in a conference in Chicago about economic development and cultural change in 1959 that had drawn attention to my West African research. Funds were available because an MIT alumnus named Sloan had invented a missile propellant and had money to give away. His wife, Ruth Sloan, had worked on the Africa desk of the US Information Service. The two benefactors came to Cambridge having told Harvard and MIT that they were prepared to endow chairs in African Studies and Chemical Engineering. The universities assumed that Harvard would get the former and MIT the latter, but they were wrong. So MIT found itself with an African chair at a time when there were hardly any Africanists in the US. They decided to fill the post on a temporary basis and invited me. I used the opportunity to teach two courses in African studies. In my spare time I continued my study of the police. My year in the USA was a very valuable stimulus but it also taught me that Edinburgh had good points I had not appreciated sufficiently.

4. Universities competed with one another for the services of graduates qualified to teach sociology. I remember that one man to whom we offered a research post had simultaneous offers from Kent of an assistant lectureship and from Hull of a lectureship. Graduates able to teach the quantitative aspects of sociology were almost impossible to find. In 1968 Bristol students were very conscious of their privilege in having a new and large building for the Students’ Union. They wished to make Union membership available to those registered as students at other institutions of higher education in the city, which required changes to the Union’s constitution. While the necessary amendments were being drafted, still within the area for which the Union was itself responsible, some students decided that the delay was the fault of the Vice-Chancellor and occupied the main administrative building. The spirit of 1968 was maintained for some years by students in sociology who argued for plebiscitary democracy, examination by continuous assessment, and for a conception of sociology as a guide to political action that drew upon a Marxist philosophy of history.

5. Our record of publication was disappointing, but many of our staff moved on to academic posts and at least six of them have contributed significantly to the advancement of ethnic and racial studies (Roger Ballard, Avtar Brah, Robert Miles, Anne-Marie Phizacklea, Sandra Wallman and Peter Weinreich).

6. Had I taken employment outside Britain (always a possibility), my career might have been even more different.

7. I served for thirty years as a magistrate on the Bristol bench. With the increased pressures in universities it would now be extremely difficult for anyone with professorial responsibilities to accept appointment as a JP.

8. The Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure sponsored several studies of a socio-scientific character and based some of its recommendations on their findings. As a member of the Royal Commission on Civil Disorders in Bermuda, I was the principal architect of a report that could be considered an exercise in applied sociology. In working on racial discrimination I have tried to synthesise the relevant fields of law and sociology.
9. Among sociologists in the generation preceding mine, my teacher Morris Ginsberg was the most alert to the recognition of human rights. In On Justice in Society (1965) he stressed ‘the enormous importance of the growth of legality, the emergence of the notion that persons are under the rule of law and not of men’, yet he failed to see the significance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or to mention the process by which it was being given legal effect.

10. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has to advise on whether states have fulfilled the treaty obligations they accepted by ratifying the Convention of that name. Prior to 1995 the obligation to prevent racial segregation had been interpreted as an obligation binding the actions of governments. I was able to get it changed to require action against all forms of segregation, however caused.

11. Much current writing about ethnic and racial relations utilises ordinary language concepts and could be assigned to the study of social policy as distinct from sociology. The study of social policy is tied to the institutions of states and to those that originate in treaties between states. The growth of sociological knowledge depends upon the discovery or creation of concepts of a more general character that that make possible transnational and transcultural explanations of social phenomena. If I could have my time over again, I would wish to go back to 1970 with my current ideas about the study of ethnic preferences and ethnic alignment and have the directorship of a research unit free to develop them.

References
