



## Editorial Foreword: Sociology and its Public Face(s)<sup>1</sup>

### ■ John Holmwood

*University of Birmingham*

### ■ Sue Scott

*Keele University*

This issue celebrates the 40th anniversary of the British Sociological Association's 'flagship' journal, *Sociology*. Of the 'big three' non-specialist sociology journals based in Britain, it is the youngest, with *The British Journal of Sociology* founded at the LSE in 1950 and the *Sociological Review* founded by the Sociological Society in 1908 and relaunched at Keele University in its new series in 1952. All three journals have reflected the strengths of British sociology, its healthy diversity and its openness to publication by sociologists outside the UK. *Sociology*, however, has, in addition, become the recognized voice of the profession.

The leading article in the first issue of *Sociology* was a reflection by the then Secretary of the BSA, Joe Banks, on the first 15 years of the British Sociological Association, including the circumstances of its founding in 1951 and subsequent growth to the point where it could launch its own journal. Significantly, the launch of the BSA itself was announced in a letter to *The Times*, in which, as Banks says:

... it was recognized that 'professional' sociology was to all intents and purposes non-existent in Britain at that time and admission to membership of the association was not defined in such terms. Indeed, there was no indication that the thirteen people who signed the letter had any enthusiasm for a sociology that might be confined to professional specialists. (1967: 1)

What we find here, if not long-lasting themes in British sociology, is at least evidence of some 'peculiarities of the British'; the status concerns evident in the choice of a letter to *The Times* to launch the Association and the suspicion toward professionalization, perhaps associated with an 'American' attitude to

sociology as an 'occupation', rather than as a 'vocation'. It is worth noting that with the subsequent development of 'the profession', beginning shortly after the launch of the journal, a different suspicion of professionalization would come to be voiced, one associated with new social movements rather than with traditional status concerns.

Banks describes the rapid growth of sociology in Britain with a doubling of membership of the BSA between 1951 and 1965 and a rapid rise in the number of postgraduate student members in the period 1960 to 1966. For Banks, this *was* an indication of the 'growing professionalization of British sociology' (1967: 7). He does not say as much, but it is reasonable to see the launch of *Sociology* in the same terms. Perhaps appropriately, the first issue of the journal did not carry an 'editorial foreword' by its first editor, Michael Banton; what kind of manifesto would be necessary for a journal committed to express the views of professional sociologists?

Yet if the launch of the journal was an expression of the professionalization of sociology in Britain, it occurred not only at a time when the discipline, and especially its representation in British Universities, was expanding apace, but also one that fixed an ethos for the discipline that has remained both distinctive and relatively constant over the last 40 years. Whereas a gulf seems to separate current sociological concerns from most articles published in British sociology journals prior to the Second World War – between the old and new series of *Sociological Review*, for example – those published in *Sociology* in 1967 (and thereafter) are recognizably continuous with those published today. The range of topics addressed is catholic, but not idiosyncratic from present perspectives. The mix may have altered, with the decline in articles on the sociology of work most evident (and explained in large part by the emergence of the Association's specialist journal, *Work, Employment and Society*), but the terms of engagement with those topics is strikingly similar across the period, as is the constancy of sociological concern with questions of class, stratification and mobility.

Whereas US sociology had professionalized much earlier around calls for positive methods or functional theory as the basis of collective identity, British sociology came of age at a time when such calls were being challenged. For example, Parsons' Presidential Address to the American Sociological Society (as the American Sociological Association was then known) in 1949, designed to define the profession of sociology in the USA, stands in marked contrast to the sensibilities encapsulated by the BSA at the launch of *Sociology*, not 20 years later. Parsons set out the need for the integration of the field of sociology through agreement on a conceptual framework of general theory. This was important, he held, because problems of objectivity and value-bias are confronted by social scientists to a much higher degree than is the case for natural scientists and there is a greater 'problem of selection among an enormous number of variables' (1954[1950]: 3). It would also help to insulate sociology from ideological influences and provide the principles for the selection of research problems. It would facilitate the cumulative development of knowledge in so far as the latter is, 'a function of the degree of generality of implications by which

it is possible to relate findings, interpretations, and hypotheses on different levels and in different specific empirical fields to each other' (1954[1950]: 5) and provide, 'a common conceptual scheme which makes the work of different investigators in a specific sub-field and those in different sub-fields commensurable' (1954[1950]: 6).

Ten years later, in an article commissioned for discussion at the 1960 ASA Conference, Parsons was asked to consider 'some problems confronting sociology as a profession' (1959). Here he suggests that the ideological pressures on sociology are greater than hitherto acknowledged and growing, even if capitalism had matured such as to make the 19th-century ideological conflict over the 'individualism–socialism' dilemma increasingly redundant. Social structural changes to capitalism made the sociological dimension of social problems more evident, but this also meant an increase in the popular consumption of sociology. Parsons noted that, 'the term sociology is coming increasingly to be a central symbol in the popular ideological preoccupations of our time' (1959: 553). He argued that the profession would come under increasing pressure from being more in the public eye: 'it will be exposed to more distortion and misunderstanding than before' (1959: 559). He saw it as a fundamental responsibility of the sociological profession, 'to maintain high standards of scientific competence and objectivity' (1959: 559).

This position may be contrasted with Michael Burawoy's recent Presidential Address to the ASA published in 2005, in which he called for an engagement with 'public sociology', precisely what Parsons feared. In fact, Burawoy's radical public sociologists predecessor – C. Wright Mills (1959) and Alvin Gouldner (1973) – had developed their critiques of the professional sociology of the type advocated by Parsons in the period immediately prior to the launch of *Sociology*. Thus, British sociology both grew *and* professionalized while, at the same time, imbibing the sensibility of anti-professional critiques. Even where British-based sociologists did not accept these critiques wholesale, their 'orthodoxies' were more nuanced and open to critical influences, especially those embedded in the classical tradition endorsed by Mills. This is evident when comparing the British and US responses to Burawoy's call for public sociology.<sup>2</sup> In Britain, the mainstream response was favourable, and criticism generally on his terrain, in line with the fact that the sociology published in this journal has typically been both professional *and* engaged with topics with a clear connection to publicly relevant issues.

None of this is to suggest that the last 40 years have been defined by consensus; battles have been fought and won (and lost). Marxists engaged with non-Marxists. Feminists rightly challenged the dominant approaches for their gender-blindness. Interpretivists took issue with realists and vice versa. The point is not that these debates were not fierce with serious issues at stake, but that they could be conducted within the pages of the same journal is a significant credit to the various editors and editorial boards. Rigorous *and* engaged, theoretical *and* empirically relevant seems to be the character of British sociology as demonstrated by *Sociology* from its inception.

So what did we expect when we issued the call for papers? When we asked for reflections upon Sociology and its Public Face(s) we had meant something other than reflections on public sociology. In fact, the call for papers pre-dated Michael Burawoy's Presidential Address, although we quickly anticipated that this would come to define the terms of the debate. We were wrong. We had misunderstood the ethos of the journal. What we got – understandably and rightly – were some important reflections on Burawoy's specific argument, but also a more urgent wish to engage with substantive problems of the discipline across a wide range of topics. These include the nature of methods and the relation between sociology within and outwith the academy; postcolonialism and the conceptual organization of sociology; institutional racism and the role of sociological concepts in formal public settings; the relation between biology and sociology; the need to attend to both structural/historical location and individual agency in understanding public sociologists; the history and influences of social movements such as feminism on sociology; and the importance of creating space for distinctively sociological arguments in the public domain.

We think the articles fit together well as a representation of the public face(s) of sociology, but this representation is multi-faceted, like a mosaic. Each article has been selected on its merits, but the result is an issue in which the whole is undoubtedly greater than the sum of its parts. As editors, we have enjoyed reading the papers and putting them together as a collection, and have been intrigued and surprised by the unintended conversations that occur across them. In this respect, this special issue continues the long conversation that the journal has encapsulated over the last 40 years and looks forward to its future manifestations. May this conversation continue to be civil *and* heated, catholic *and* mutually engaged. May it generate agreement *and* disagreement in equal measure. The editing process has stimulated our thinking about the public role of sociology and how we can help to continue the debate in our own current roles as President of the BSA and Chair of the Sociology Council of Heads and Professors, but the most important message is that Sociology Matters and that *Sociology* has mattered and continues to matter – Happy Birthday, *Sociology!*

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The publication of this issue also marks the career of Jennifer Platt, former President of the BSA and Emeritus Professor at the University of Sussex. In the first issue of *Sociology*, Jennifer was co-author of an article setting out preliminary findings of the *Affluent Worker* study (itself a landmark of the newly professional British sociology). In the same issue, Joe Banks referred modestly to his own brief history of the BSA and hoped 'that some future historian or sociologist interested in the social background of knowledge will on some occasion take the association as a case study and so correct whatever biases have entered into this account' (1967: 8). Jennifer wrote that history – *The British Sociological Association: A Sociological History* (2003) – and published it as part of the celebration of the BSA's 50th anniversary. She has 'corrected' many 'biases' in

this book and in other publications during her illustrious career. It is an enormous pleasure to us as editors that Jennifer Platt should also be a contributor to this special issue celebrating *Sociology* over the last 40 years. For us, she is a sociologist who has embodied the best values of professional sociology in Britain over the same period.

## Notes

- 1 Thanks to the current editors of the journal, Graham Crow and Catherine Pope for all their support. Thanks, too, to Libby Marks at the BSA office for her invaluable editorial support and to Taylor Bowen of Aegis Peer Review Management for his patient explanation of the mechanics of online editing to the mechanically and technically ungifted.
- 2 See, for example, the symposia in *Social Problems* (51[1], 2004), *Social Forces* (82[4], 2004), *Critical Sociology* (31[3], 2005) the *British Journal of Sociology* (56[3] 2005).

## References

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This Special Issue is dedicated to the memory of Dr Anne Witz 1952–2006, a very special sociologist.