



# FACT AND FANCY IN SOCIAL ANALYSIS: PRECONCEPTIONS AND PREJUDICES OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL ESTABLISHMENT

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The Government has had since 1979 an enemy more consistently critical of its every effort at social reform than the Labour Party. This is the intellectual establishment in the universities and the media who control social policy thinking.

Its composition is diverse. There are economic and social historians weaned on Stalinism in their distant youth. There are academic social scientists trained up in the nineteen sixties to equate sociology with socialism. There are social researchers who started out on their careers investigating social problems as the best arena they could find for combining a decent salary and respectability with opportunities to give expression to their deepseated antipathy to capitalism. There are social policy analysts whose concern is less for objective evaluation of legislation properly enacted as a result of initiatives by the elected government than for investigative exposés of the presumed folly of policies they happen themselves to disapprove of on ideological grounds.

There are media "experts", particularly in television, who routinely present artfully constructed programmes designed to demonstrate - whatever evidence and common-sense might seem to suggest - that government measures are misconceived and socially damaging. There are pressure groups such as the "Poverty Lobby" which insist dogmatically on the absolute veracity of their own sectarian accounts of social life and social conditions in Britain.

The ideas and assumptions which these social analysts trade on are largely provided by the discipline of sociology. Government supporters and other friends of individualism, freedom, enterprise, and traditional morality tend to dismiss sociology much too easily and glibly (and sometimes snobbishly). They treat it as if it were a nonsense subject and a soft option, a utopian gospel of no account in the real world. *This is a serious mistake.* It allows pernicious notions to go dangerously unchallenged, and permits minority opinions to provide the frameworks which shape interpretations of the social world.

For example, it is generally believed, and I have no reason to doubt it, that the technical quality of British polling research is good. Even this leaves, however, considerable scope for error and bias arising from agenda setting, assumptions, and interpretation. I am currently working on research exploring preconceptions in recent polling research.<sup>1</sup> It may turn out that such factors had a part to play in a recent serious mistake in an NOP exit poll of the European elections. According to the *Observer* of June 25th, 1989:

The BBC is conducting a post-mortem after the exit poll for the European elections showed a twelve point gap between Labour and Conservative, when the actual result was only a six point difference.

The error went in the Labour Party's favour, I should add, and its heavily publicized announcement on the BBC's top news programme is believed to have had a considerable effect on the Government's standing just before a crucial European summit meeting. No doubt we should all be relieved that, as the *Observer* report concludes, "NOP is also checking to see if its adding up of the results was correct."

We scarcely need Freud to remind us that "silly little mistakes" in arithmetic as in other spheres are sometimes shaped by deep and powerful forces. It is some of these biasing forces I explore here. It seems to me that their destructive effects can only be prevented by that kind of work which I have called in my book *Seeds of Bankruptcy* "sociology's self-critical homework".<sup>2</sup> Since sociology is in its nature exposed to serious dangers of error and abuse at the boundaries between knowledge and ideology, fact and opinion, a concept of bias is needed in terms of which to patrol these boundaries, and a continuing commitment by social researchers to the tasks of bias detection and error control.

Such work is neither popular nor highly regarded, to put it mildly. Its practitioners tend to be dismissed as agents of Thatcherism, condemned as undercover employees of the CIA, accused, as I have been recently by Professor Robert Moore in the house journal of the British Sociological Association of "intellectual thugery", or charged, as by Michael O'Donnell in a recent issue of the BSA's *Network* with "selling out" to Thatcherism and, in his deliciously insouciant phrase "accept[ing] uncritically the Thatcherite order of priorities".<sup>3</sup> Indeed O'Donnell even refers, as if it were an incontestably evident and presumably pernicious social phenomenon, to "the Marsland effect". At least it's a novelty for a sociologist to be accused of effectivity of any sort!

Despite these problems, critical scrutiny of the ideas which influence social analysis is essential.

For in most fields of sociology and in much social research, grave weaknesses are evident. In industrial and political sociology, in the sociologies of development, education, youth, health, welfare, and almost all the rest, current British work is *dominated by assumptions, frameworks, perspectives and literatures which arise from and give rise to the one-sided anti-capitalism and pre-ordained anti-democratism I have examined in Seeds of Bankruptcy.*

## QUIS CUSTODIET?

If these one-sided influences on social analysis, and their biasing impact on public debate about social policy are to be countered, careful examination of contemporary British sociology is needed.

This is not easy. Even the title of this paper - and the overall argument it implies - is contentious and challengeable. It makes two presumptions which many of my colleagues in the discipline do not, apparently, accept.

First: that fact is distinguishable in principle from fancy. Of course this does not mean that truth is easily identified, or facts ever finally or incontestably established, nor that mistakes may not be made. It does entail, however, an indefatigable commitment to testing assumptions, propositions and theories, and willingness to acknowledge that bias of all sorts is persistently threatening, and its effects always corrigible. It requires serious methodological backtracking on the spurious campaign against so-called "positivism" in which British sociology has involved itself since the sixties.<sup>4</sup>

I will not argue that case here, but simply call in evidence a statement by Paul Edwards, a member of the Industrial Relations Re-

search Unit at Warwick University which had itself been charged, probably correctly I think, with bias. "I would suggest", he says:<sup>5</sup>

that a defence of objectivity is both possible and desirable but that the tendency in recent debates has been to obscure this. We can date the start of the process as 1962 when Gouldner published *Anti-Minotaur*, his celebrated attack on the 'myth' of value-freedom ...

Since that time Gouldner's criticisms have merged with others, notably the view that 'facts' and 'values' cannot be separated because the selection and interpretation of facts depends on a theoretical position. Yet this view does not carry the implications which it is often assumed to have. The correct assertion that we require theories in order to assess facts implies neither that facts exist only in theories nor that an objective stance is impossible.

My second presupposition is that there is an establishment in modern British sociology which somehow reflects, sponsors, reinforces and polices some particular sub-set of sociological ideas, and outlaws alternatives. I cannot demonstrate this, but I am confident at least that a particular set of notions does have what their proponents would themselves call "hegemonic force" in British sociology.

These notions - essentially collectivist, anti-capitalist, anti-democratic beliefs - are not ethereal but find their expression and maintain their influence through the professional, academic, and educational apparatus of the discipline, which is itself fairly effectively controlled by a self-recruiting establishment. This view entails no conspiracies and allows for a significant degree of diversity, but it does certainly mean:

- \* That contemporary British sociology falls a long way short of the Popperian ideal of an open community of scholars.
- \* That this foreclosure is damaging.
- \* That the damage it causes includes the privileging of certain sorts of utopian fancy, and irrational resistance to the truth of certain classes of facts.

### EVIDENCE OF BIAS

As I have said, I am not able to identify this supposed establishment definitively and then read off its views mechanically. Instead I propose to examine briefly the perspectives and views of a number of obvious candidates for membership within it. These are the following:

- \* The authors of the major textbooks and the examiners of instruction in introductory sociology.
- \* The Open University.
- \* Key influentials at the ancient universities, specifically Anthony Giddens and A. H. Halsey,
- \* One much-heralded, recent introduction to sociology, by Abercrombie and Warde.
- \* Influential "moderates", so-called.

This is obviously too much to handle thoroughly, but in a fuller version my argument ought also to include: the British Sociological Association; the Economic and Social Research Council; the key journals; and not least the application of sociology in social policy and social research.

In relation to all these, I should make quite clear what I am arguing. I am *not* proposing any witch hunts. I am *not* suggesting any censorship. I am merely seeking to show that across the board of establishment sociology a certain set of assumptions and perspectives is predominant, that this approach is to a significant degree fanciful and immune to demonstrable truth, and that their monopoly needs breaking up to allow sociology to become more pluralistic, more competitive and less likely as a result to protect itself against the reality it pretends to explicate.

### TEXTBOOK FANTASIES

In relation to my first target I am pretty confident of my evaluation, since I have carefully studied most of the introductory teaching material, including course outlines, examination papers and 36 of the most commonly used textbooks at 'O', 'A', and introductory degree level. I have reported different aspects of this in four publications: *Bias Against Business*, *Seeds of Bankruptcy*, *Neglect and Betrayal*, and *Against Advertising*.<sup>6</sup>

There is in all the material I examined a very little conservative analysis (this however is exclusively collectivist and paternalist), a great deal more explicit Marxism of various sorts than is generally acknowledged nowadays, and a preponderance of other sorts of socialism.

In almost all of this material - which is the primary instrument for the initiation of young people into sociology - a socialist agenda of debate is taken as given, and to a very large extent the socialist side of all the various arguments involved is more or less strongly supported.

On the basis of my analysis the conclusion I have reached is that the discipline expresses and enshrines a one-sidedly anti-capitalist mentality. Counter-evidence and counter-arguments representing the positive significance of industry and business are systematically neglected.

The free market, pursuit of profit, and competition are central and probably indispensable mechanisms in the successful operation of liberal capitalist societies. Yet all three are either neglected or one-sidedly denigrated in sociology.

- \* Marketing, sales, and advertising are given much less attention than their objective importance requires, and treated with routinely negative bias where they are examined at all.
- \* Centralisation, bureaucracy, planning, and state control are treated as unchallengeable facts of life in modern society.
- \* Public dissatisfaction with collectivist welfarism is largely ignored, and well-established criticisms of the Welfare State are neglected.
- \* The extent of poverty and of inequality in Britain is grossly exaggerated, and the two are regularly confused. Marxist and socialist assumptions are imported into textbooks covertly, with the effect that a narrow and sectarian conception of economic equality is presented as if it were the sole criterion of social justice.
- \* Sociologists' accounts of work are pathologically negative, focusing largely on industrial relations problems, job dissatisfaction, and alienation. There is scarcely any attention to the positive significance of work for individuals or for society, in the shape of profits, improved standards of living, job satisfaction, or quality of life.

### UNCRITICAL TREATMENT OF COMMUNISM

Underlying all these biases, there is apparent throughout introductory teaching materials in sociology a general ambivalence about the validity and value of democracy, and about the importance of freedom by comparison with equality. By the same token, the Soviet Union and other socialist societies are treated much less critically than objective analysis requires.

I will follow up this last point a little further, since it is at least as much in relation to the political as in relation to the economic values and institutions of capitalism that established opinion in sociology demonstrates its cavalier disregard for the facts.

The materials I have studied present to students a consistently sceptical view of the validity and value of liberal democracy. This takes four main forms:

- \* Exaggeratedly positive treatment of non-democratic societies, especially communist societies.

- \* Constant resort to a utopian (often socialist and egalitarian) framework for evaluating liberal democracy.
- \* Exaggeration of the weaknesses and inadequacies of liberal democracy.
- \* Gross underemphasis of the advantages and strengths of liberal democracy.

In 'O', 'A', and introductory degree level materials, all four of these distinct types of prejudice against liberal democracy are present. They come combined in different packages, but in almost all the material I have examined they are strongly evident. This is at the same time a serious failure of scholarship, and a dangerous influence on young people's minds. For coached one-sidedly towards scepticism about the genuine validity of political democracy, they are easy prey for ideological fashioning by those who are the enemies of liberal democracy, free economic institutions, and freedom itself.

One might imagine that even apologists for Soviet society would be at least a little circumspect in their support for the claims of communist regimes about their democratic credentials. In fact it is common for sociologists to accept these claims at face value, and to pass them on to student readers as if they were something better than downright lies. For example, in *Sociology for 'O' Level* Jones and Hill<sup>7</sup> state unblushingly that:

There are various types of democratic government to be found in countries as different as the United States of America, Britain, and Russia.

While they confidently classify fascist and Nazi regimes as totalitarian, and therefore undemocratic, they treat communism rather differently:

It is *possible* to argue that Russia, although claiming to be a democracy, is, in practice, a totalitarian state. It is difficult for any individual to make a final statement about this because *we all have different ideas* about the importance of individual freedom and its relationship to the security of society as a whole.

This reflects a fundamental political ambivalence which is characteristic of the book as a whole. Their view of Marx illustrates this perfectly:

In some of his writings Marx shows himself to be a sound sociologist; in other writings he shows himself to be a social prophet and a preacher of revolution. It is necessary to be clear about which aspect of Marx one is looking at. In this book we have attempted to use his ideas about class and his concept of alienation.

It seems a rather uncritical appraisal of Marx which leaves them thus free to accept, and to expect their readers to swallow, his theories of class and alienation. Small wonder that authors so unexact in their evaluation of Marx are incapable of decisive judgement about the transparently totalitarian nature of a society organised in his name.

Others are even more one-sidedly sympathetic to non-democratic societies. Thus on communist societies Hawthorne proposes that:

As a means for economic development the one-party Communist state with a centrally planned economy has shown itself, even in huge countries like Russia and China, to have had great success; and economic development is almost certainly in the interests of the people eventually, even if terrible mistakes and hardships have to be endured on the way.<sup>8</sup>

Even with that question-begging "eventually" added, this is not a judgement with which many East European specialists would concur. The issue is certainly at the very least open enough to require that the statement should have been qualified if a suspicion of bias was to be avoided.

Again, her comparison of population policies in India and China is naively favourable towards the latter. In the first place, the dis-

cussion is framed in terms of a spurious contrast between Malthusian and Marxist theories of population, as if this were the only or even the real choice of approaches which is available. Then she pays remarkably little attention to the immense costs the Chinese people have had to pay, and are still paying, for whatever dubious benefits they may possibly have gained. Indeed her overall judgement on the effects of communism in China betrays a similar naive hopefulness to that the Webbs, Shaw, and other fellow-travellers displayed in relation to the Soviet Union at a similar stage in that unhappy nation's history. "Even observers most hostile to communism", she says:

... have agreed that although the rural population is still poor by European or American standards, it is much more comfortable than it was before the revolution. This has been possible because the Chinese are able to introduce social changes that would not have been possible in a non-communist society.

One could think of few less appropriate terms to describe the condition of Chinese society during the chaotic oppression of the Cultural Revolution than "comfortable". Her readers are allowed not so much as a suspicion of civil war, large scale liquidation, and refugees by the million. As to the special contribution of communism to Chinese development, how curious that the Chinese leaders themselves are now urging and putting into effect an advance along "the capitalist road". But rather than acknowledge this, she draws her readers' attention away from it by focussing on the alleged relative failure of population policy in democratic India.

### "BOURGEOIS DEMOCRACY"

Next an example at home rather than abroad, from the consideration of British democracy provided by Brown in *Fundamentals of Sociology*:<sup>9</sup>

The development of democracy has been the progressive extension of 'citizenship' to the masses. But, as we have just seen, in the way that democracy is currently working, large numbers of 'citizens' appear to be outside the system. What is more, the current orthodox definition of democracy appears to endorse this exclusion in the name of efficiency and stability.

He does not indicate which citizens in "large numbers" he believes are excluded from democratic power. However, he provides something better than a clue by moving directly to an account of "the marxist view of capitalism", and a quotation which stands democracy on its head in a routine marxist manner:

Bourgeois democracy performs the function ... of securing and maintaining the consent of the masses to their own exploitation and subordination ...

The cloak of democracy is, of course, only one means by which a 'false consciousness' is created amongst the masses. The long-term effects of schooling and the short-term influence of the media are also very important in maintaining the hegemony of dominant values. These are all processes by which rulers in capitalist societies actively seek legitimisation for their power and it is in this sense that democracy is a legitimating device rather than a description of reality.

Ambivalence is perhaps, after all, too generous a way of characterising such attitudes towards democracy - it is downright, biased negativism.

### ONE-SIDED FANTASY

One further example suggests the order of fanciful disregard of counter-arguments and counter-evidence characteristic of most such sociological work: Hambling and Matthews, in a thoroughly tendentious analysis of nationalisation, suggest implausibly that:<sup>10</sup>

Organisations like the railways run more efficiently if they are controlled by one board of management.

Their touching faith in British state organisations is paralleled - and trumped - by their starry-eyed view of socialist state machinery. Thus of the Soviet Union they say at page 103 that:

It is difficult to see how a virtually medieval empire shattered by the First World War and the civil war which accompanied the Revolution, could have transformed itself into a modern industrial state without very definite direction by the government. The history of the newly emerging African states would seem to suggest that a democratic form of government is not suitable for a country undergoing rapid social and economic change, for there too, totalitarian systems of government have developed.

Again on Soviet youth organisations (page 103):

The branches [of the Party] which are organised for children and young people - the Young Pioneers and the Komsomol - are like Sunday School, the Scouts and the Youth Club all rolled into one. Through them children are given instruction on the ideas of Karl Marx and Lenin, on which the political and economic systems of the USSR are based. Pioneer Palaces have been built in many large towns and cities where children can go and take part in all kinds of activities. These buildings are very often superbly equipped with sporting, drama art and craft facilities, libraries and music rooms. With such lavish provision for their leisure, no child living near to a Pioneer Palace could ever complain, as young people in Britain are constantly complaining, "I'm bored - there's nothing to do".

And finally on Cuba, they claim at page 114 that:

There can be no doubt that the revolution has released the majority of Cubans from a terrible existence. The new government has an impressive record. Output in all areas of production has increased, and new farming methods and industries have been set up. The peasants are obviously better off; they have new houses, better roads, free medical care and free education. Everyone has been encouraged to work in the revolution. In 1961 an illiteracy campaign was launched with the aim of teaching even the oldest peasant to read. Young people and anyone else who had had some education went into the villages and set up reading classes. In this sort of way the people are made to feel that they too are responsible for the success of the revolution. They are urged to work hard, not to enrich themselves, but as part of a co-operative effort to improve the standard of living of the whole country.

They worry, it is true, in case the "enthusiasm" does not last, and in case young people, forgetful of pre-revolutionary oppression, demand "other kinds of reward". But they make no mention of the millions of refugees from Castro's paradise, of economic catastrophe and inefficiency, of Cuba's dependence on Soviet subsidies, of the fact that "encouragement" to help in revolution is at the point of a bayonet, or of the total absence of freedom. They are here grossly one-sided, and their bias has its source largely in their naive faith in a planned society.

Throughout all the material I examined in *Seeds of Bankruptcy* - the core introductory reading material of the discipline - this kind of one-sided fantasy - negative in relation to free societies and their potential, naively positive in relation to alien political and social systems condemned by the best of their own people - is typical.

#### OPEN UNIVERSITY - CLOSED MINDS

At least the weaknesses I have referred to in the previous section are moderated by the diversity of the teaching and learning situations they potentially affect - hundreds of different schools and colleges, thousands of different teachers and lecturers with wide scope for (if no guarantee of) divergent and alternative use of the material. The Open University by contrast works to a huge near

monopoly market of distance learning using a system which positively encourages a homogeneous orthodoxy.

I examined the Open University's central texts - which are also much used in other courses at 'A' level and Degree level - in *Seeds of Bankruptcy*, and found them much as I have described earlier, particularly Worsley's *Introducing Sociology* which has sold half a million copies to date.<sup>11</sup> To that I want to add now just two points. First the key role of Stuart Hall, and secondly one example, out of many, of the one-sided and dogmatic material Open University social scientists tend in general to provide - Martin Loney's *The Politics of Greed*.<sup>12</sup>

Professor Hall is unarguably an interesting, sophisticated, and influential writer. Even in a genuine free market of ideas, his would sell better than many. On the almost closed circuits of the Open University - which has been by far the biggest source of enthusiastic mail I have had in a large postbag provoked by *Seeds of Bankruptcy* - they tend to be treated as self-evident and incontestable facts, rather than the largely speculative, rather extreme left theories which I believe they are.

All his work consists of course of an elegantly souped-up version of Gramsci's slender distillation of Marxist theory and his own unhappy experience under Fascism. It is this irrelevant fantasy out of which all Hall's supposedly concrete analyses - of law, race, politics, youth, and the market - flow.

Most recently his application of what one might call rubber Marxism - it stretches in all directions but never breaks - to the contemporary condition of Britain has produced the notion of authoritarian populism - an *ad hominem* (or rather *ad mulierem*!) concept which already figures influentially in the literatures of several sub-fields of sociology and in exam papers at all levels. Yet like the concept of *repressive tolerance* at an earlier stage of the extreme left's obfuscatory denial of the validity of freedom and progress under capitalism, this newly fashionable weapon in the war against liberal democracy is as opaquely illuminating as it is plausibly inaccurate.

What the left is seeking to deny by the use of the notion of authoritarian populism is the regrettable popularity from their point of view of their political opponents' policies, and the British people's evident preference, even at some cost, for coherent leadership rather than the divisive squabbling which has seemed, at least until very recently, to be the only alternative on offer. It is a concept calculated precisely to divert attention from awkward facts towards comforting fancies.

Martin Loney's *The Politics of Greed*, which is not at all untypical of the current Open University line in sociology and social policy, could much more properly be characterised as "intellectual thuggery" than anything I have managed to achieve so far, or even aspire to. It is a dogmatic sectarian onslaught on the whole trend and every aspect of social policy development since 1979. It makes no pretence at appreciation of what it criticises. It provides its readers with none of the relevant counter-arguments or counter-evidence. Yet this ferocious tract is widely used not only in the entertainment business, as it were, of first degrees but also in the rather more serious business of training social workers, nurses and even police officers. I really do think Open University teaching material in the social sciences needs careful scrutiny, and encouragement to move towards a more balanced, careful, and realistic approach.

#### ANCIENT PIETIES

Even if everyday teaching of sociology in most schools and colleges were shaped by the influence of textbooks and syllabuses designed to keep social realities at bay, and even if a recently invented instrument of mass higher education such as the Open University had succumbed to the temptation of supplying comforting fairy tales to its major clientele in the state welfare sector, we might expect to find a different outcome at the ancient univer-

sities. After all Oxbridge long held out against any serious encroachment at all by sociology.

Now of course at Oxbridge as in most other parts of the Higher Education system there is work of great distinction, variety in perspectives, and some awareness of the problems I am addressing.

But consider the key influentials in each case - at Oxford A. H. Halsey and at Cambridge Anthony Giddens. I come to John Goldthorpe later. At this point I should reiterate what I stated in the introduction to *Seeds of Bankruptcy* (page 5). I am not intending that any critical comment I make should be directed at individuals as such, either in their private or their professional capacities. My target is arguments, influences, and the effects of established and establishment opinion in sociology.

Professor Halsey has always been absolutely clear in his anti-Marxism and equally in his support for socialism. His selection to deliver the Reith Lectures both recognised and powerfully reinforced his public stature as a leading figure in the sociological establishment. In the preface to his book *Change in British Society*, based on his Reith Lectures Halsey states his objectives as follows:<sup>13</sup>

to provide ... a short but comprehensive introduction to the information needed in order to form a view of the direction of 20th Century social history in Britain and to offer a sociological interpretation of that history.

What he actually provides, in my judgement, in a book which is widely used as a textbook at the Open University and elsewhere, is selectively limited information appropriate to justifying a very narrow, indeed sectarian, view of British social history, and a sociological interpretation constructed primarily out of his concern for the achievement of equality, this latter construed in a particular socialist fashion.

The economy as such - actual production, distribution, investment decisions, management, work - is hardly touched on at all. Even when the huge increase in GNP and vast improvements in standards of living are admitted, they are immediately re-interpreted away in terms of relative deprivation, and used as ammunition in his primary argument for equality and fraternity.

It is for this fundamental concern with socialist equality, for his crucial scholarly and political work at the establishment of comprehensive education, and for his commitment to that "ethical socialism" which is the title of his most recent book that Professor Halsey and his influence within the sociological establishment stands.

Professor Giddens' case and the nature of his influence is rather different. But its effect is similar - to persuade those exposed to it that some version of the socialist vision is properly a component of sociological analysis and to legitimate a socialist agenda as sociology's primary framework of analysis.

For all his prolific and sophisticated eloquence supposedly addressed to abstract theoretical issues, Giddens occasionally lets a simple cat out of his ample, complex bag - as when, in *Sociology: A Brief But Critical Introduction* (page 169) he urges the importance of a commitment "to outflank Marx from the left".<sup>14</sup>

The same partisan spirit is evident in his foreward to Bilton's *Introductory Sociology* - one of the three best selling textbooks which, even more than Haralambos' or Worsley's books, tendentiously protects student readers from the slightest awareness of social reality and systematically sabotages any possibility of their comprehending sympathetically any alternative interpretation of the condition of British society - even in the exceptional cases where they are presented at all.<sup>15</sup>

Of this book, of which I have said one might be forgiven for thinking it was written in Moscow rather than Cambridge, and before Gorbachev I would have to add now, Giddens says:

This book in my opinion is simply the best and most comprehensive introductory text currently available ... [it] will

deservedly become the standard introduction to sociology in schools and colleges.

Since then Professor Giddens has gone on to produce a large and growing list of books through Polity Press which appears to be devoted largely to the same narrow, and from my perspective sectarian and fanciful, view of social life and of sociology. We can be confident they will all appear on standard reading lists.

Thus, despite some influential and powerful exceptions, the sociological vision provided by the leading lights of the ancient universities is scarcely less unidirectional, barely more open-mindedly pluralist than the meagre illumination of our contemporary society by 'O' and 'A' level authors and teachers, or by Open University experts.

## MONOCULAR VISION

A standard line of criticism of *Seeds of Bankruptcy* has been that the material I analyzed is old, outmoded, and no longer in use. In fact I covered all the major texts in use when I began the research, most of them are still appearing on new reading lists, and 18 of the 36 date from the eighties.

One of the texts produced by Polity Press is Abercrombie and Warde's *Contemporary British Society*, published in 1988.<sup>16</sup> I turn next to a few comments on this very recent book.

It seems to me - despite enthusiastically welcoming reviews in the usual journals, and despite the greater sophistication of its arguments compared with many of the books I examined earlier - to be much of a muchness with them on most important points. The picture it draws for students of contemporary Britain is irredeemably negative. Its emphasis in every sphere it touches on from work, through class and education to health and politics, is on supposed problems and presumed failures. Of positive qualities and real advances hardly a word, and these generally mitigated by forceful reminders of persisting or - relatively speaking - exacerbated inequalities.

Their map of London with a list of places mentioned in the text is a faithful indicator of what *they* are after in a sociological analysis - ethnic conflict, unemployment, industrial decline, and trade union struggle. The whole structure of the book reflects this. After a very brief introduction it starts with a long chapter on work written almost entirely from an unmitigatedly pessimistic left perspective - ownership and control, economic organisation and management, the labour process - pure Bravermania this, Trade Unions and Industrial Relations, Professions, Deindustrialisation, and a final swoop into unemployment.

This is the prelude to almost 100 pages on class, including the usual poorly argued allegations of social rigidity and low social mobility, and chapters each of about 50 pages on gender and on ethnicity and racism.

Thus by page 269, more than half the book, the student has already been one-sidedly overpersuaded into the conventional sociological view of Britain as a realm of dark injustice and deep division, where the people stumble through the baffling complexities of capitalist modernity blindly towards a frustrated dream of equality somewhere beyond, somewhere far beyond, the rainbow of critical sociological analysis.

Innoculated thus against social realities or alternative visions, student readers are well prepared for chapters on the family, locality, education, health, the media, deviance and - curiously postponed - politics, in all of which the usual preordained conclusions to the conventional tendentious arguments are presented as if they were important recently discovered facts.

The chapter on deviance includes a section unblushingly called "Towards a police state?". The chapter on education concludes with the dubious proposition that "The experience of compulsory educational competition serves to legitimate general social inequality". The chapter called "Culture and Media" includes 11 pages on religion - this 2% of the book being the only space in a

volume called *Contemporary British Society* devoted to a topic of profound importance, and the only sphere of British sociology which has so far escaped infection by established prejudices.

Finally in their chapter on politics they state - *as if it were an uncontentious proposition* - that the British state

plays a subordinate role in the American military defense system, as evidenced by the siting of American-owned and controlled cruise missiles on British territory."

They include a section on "The Secret State in Britain" which concludes, with some oversimplifications, one might have thought, as follows (page 508):

The police are powerful because they have the scope to exercise discretion. Amongst millions of law-breakers, the police decide who to stop on suspicion, and they do so in terms of a number of crude stereotypes of who looks like a criminal. The security services also enjoy a very high degree of autonomy in their operations and operate largely outside the law. The elected parts of the state have little idea of what security services do, or of the scale of their operations.

Again, one of four summary conclusions to their section on the state reads as follows:

The state is fundamentally patriarchal and racist in its composition and in its policies.

This might make a reasonable starting point for discussion, but it seems a curiously one-sided and challengeable conclusion.

And they conclude their analysis of recent changes in welfare policies as follows (page 514):

These changes in the provision of welfare services are significant. They undoubtedly have some deleterious effects both on clients and on workers in the services concerned. Clients suffer hardship, misery, inconvenience, workers are reported to be demoralized, more prone to absenteeism, and dissatisfied with the service being given to the client. These changes are consistent with the general political values of neo-Conservatism, as well as being a response to the crisis of public expenditure.

The suggestion here that the elected government is intent on maximising the hardship of welfare clients and committed to worsening the demoralization of welfare workers is perhaps enough, along with their unqualified characterisation of the British state as patriarchal and racist, to indicate fairly clearly just what sort of polity *this* Polity Press book is in the business of encouraging student sociologists to favour.

#### **"SAME DIFFERENCE": MODERATE VERSIONS OF IMMODERATE FANCIES**

Even if I succeeded in persuading readers of my general case in relation to Marxists, so-called Left-Weberians, and Ethical Socialists, it could be countered by pointing to the important work of 'moderates' in political terms quietly undertaking careful empirical work of the sort which may with luck increasingly shape our textbooks, our reading lists, and our arguments over the next ten years.

Characteristic of the best of such work are the recent influential studies of John Goldthorpe and his colleagues on social mobility and Gordon Marshall and his team at Essex.<sup>17</sup> I could also add Howard Newby's stream of work on rural society, Ray Pahl's work, and other large-scale empirical research programmes besides.<sup>18</sup> However I will restrict my brief comments to Goldthorpe and Marshall. I lean in part in this on a thorough critique by Saunders.<sup>19</sup>

John Goldthorpe expends considerable energy, care, conceptual acuity, and empirical effort on the assessment of recent social mobility in Britain. He discovered that on his own - reasonable and sensible - definitions no less than 28% of male members of the

top class had started life in the working class, and that as few as 25% of class 1 had been born into the top class. Moreover 15% of men born into the two highest classes had fallen into the working class. Again in general terms he reports that inter-generational mobility chances have been improving in recent years, intra-generational mobility has not weakened, and that in his terms and despite the recession the overall class system has become more fluid.

Yet after all and despite all this the main emphasis in his interpretation, and the gloss which is put on the research in secondary sources is that:

No significant reduction in class inequalities has been achieved.

What he means is that *relative* chances of mobility have remained roughly constant. QED the caste system lives.

Marshall and his colleagues report similar findings - indeed, with different definitions admittedly, they found that a third of people in classes 1 and 2 were recruited from classes 6 and 7. Yet they too conclude with unpersuasive pessimism as follows:

The post-war project of creating in Britain a more open society through economic expansion, educational reform and equalitarian social policies has signally failed to secure its objectives.

These Alice in Wonderland conclusions, as Saunders calls them, relate to a society, British society in recent times, whose social fluidity and rates of mobility could be rivalled only by a society ravaged by war or plague, or subjected to a communist type and level of occupational and social selection and de-selection - to whit massacre.

Thus even moderate scholarly empirical researchers seems strait-jacketed by the fanciful domain assumptions, the *a priori* utopian frameworks of analysis, the same implausible theoretical concerns as sociologists less guarded and more explicit in their basic left-collectivist loyalties and intentions.

#### **THE ROUTE TOWARDS OBJECTIVITY: COMPETITIVE PLURALISM**

I believe my analysis suggests - it will take a book to demonstrate it - that the contemporary British sociological establishment is so much influenced by its partisan political beliefs that much sociological analysis falls significantly short of the level of objectivity which is feasible and required. As a consequence of these beliefs being cocooned against critical scrutiny, much of what sociologists tell their students about contemporary social life is fanciful rather than factual. In the wider world the consequence is serious distortion in the framing and interpretation of social research, and an intellectual atmosphere which inhibits rational social policy debate.

It seems to me that the way forward is for establishment sociologists to acknowledge these weaknesses, and to welcome and encourage analysis which springs from different, more individualistic, basic assumptions - conservative, liberal, libertarian, and socio-biological among others. Given a genuine theoretical pluralism such as would result, the normal competitive processes of scholarship and science might then operate effectively to sift out wheat from chaff, and shift British sociology back towards the precarious but essential condition of objectivity - without which truth must remain a mirage and knowledge a morass of mere opinion.<sup>20</sup>

This would not, of course, mean that sociology would become any less critical. Rather we would find criticism directed at a wider range of targets than those which have become usual in recent decades, and different grounds of criticism would be adopted. We would also find, I suspect, that sociological analysis would gain, in work in its evaluative mode in relation to contemporary Britain, not inconsiderable scope for positive appreciation as well as negative criticism.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, perhaps just occasionally we might find

objective grounds for actual celebration - for example of freedom, democracy, the family, friendship and love, locality, the market, the British people, our nations, and our state.<sup>22</sup>

### THE IMPACT OF SOCIOLOGICAL BIAS ON SOCIAL RESEARCH

In a recent article in the *Independent* Rupert Cornwell observes that:

The modern Soviet Union is short not just of sausage, washing powder, sewing machines and toothpaste. Today it possesses virtually no management and accounting skills, no reliable statistics, few who truly understand market economics. Not only is a dulling egalitarianism built into the system; out of this has grown a pernicious and pervasive culture of envy - witness the resentment at high prices, high wages and high profits of co-operatives, those permitted tiny blooms of private enterprise.

We already have more than enough of these weaknesses even in liberal capitalist, even in democratic, Britain. If the one-sided vision of established sociology is allowed to maintain its monopoly of ideas unchallenged for much longer - anti-capitalist, collectivist, utopian, and socialist - we shall find it impossible to correct these weaknesses, or ever become the enterprising and prosperous society Britain could be.

Empirical social research - including at its core systematic polling studies, attitude research, and evaluation - is one of liberal society's most indispensable tools in the continuing process of self-examination, self-criticism and experimental development which genuine modernism demands and socialist societies lack. If errors and weaknesses in sociology such as those I have examined earlier are not addressed seriously, the implications for social research would be grave indeed:

- \* The findings of social research would become increasingly biased and distorted.
- \* Recruitment of adequately trained researchers by governmental and other research agencies would become increasingly difficult.
- \* Public support for social research would diminish.
- \* Faith in the feasibility of objective analysis of social tasks and problems would falter, and the domain of naked ideological opinion would be dangerously enlarged.
- \* Rational social policy analysis would be prevented, and even sensible debate about social policy alternatives would become difficult.

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