

# LIFE AFTER 40 OPENS UP FOR A BROAD CHURCH

During the past year the British Sociological Association (BSA) reached its fortieth anniversary. Over the past six months the BSA's executive, of which I am a member, has organised a number of events to celebrate. First it organised a dinner, back in late October, for all members of the past and present executive committees. The dinner was hosted by the then-president of the BSA, Professor Bob Burgess, to mark the first inaugural meeting of the association.

The after dinner speaker was Professor Joe Banks who entertained us all with an account of the early meetings which were held at the London School of Economics (LSE). Indeed, the origins of the association, and British sociology, are to be found at the LSE, particularly among the early postwar students and those who were associated with the work of Professors David Glass and Morris Ginsberg. All of those who attended the first meeting are now eminent sociologists and many of them are just about reaching the age of retirement. This was, therefore, an important cohort of people for setting the style and characteristics of British sociology.

Although British sociology has developed a body of theoretical knowledge, one of its key characteristics has been the way in which it has been involved in the development of public policies and politics, especially of a social-democratic kind. Indeed, Professor Banks pointed out how eclectic was this group of social scientists who first assembled in the autumn of 1950 – many of them were later associated with the separate development of social science and social administra-

tion, first at the LSE and later at other universities.

But he also pointed to the major contributions of sociologists present at that meeting – and at the celebratory dinner – such as Professor Halsey, who has just retired as head of the department of social and administrative studies at Oxford, and Professor Michael Banton, of Bristol University, for his pioneering work in the two areas of race relations and the sociology of the police. A second aspect of the celebrations was the organisation of a major public lecture to demonstrate the continuing contribution of sociology to the understanding of contemporary issues in society. Professor Howard Newby, chair of the Economic and Social Research Council, gave that public lecture at the LSE – perhaps for old times sake – in mid-February.

It was an excellent lecture both in its theme – of the contribution that sociology can and should make to wider issues of the environment – and for how the concerns of sociology can and should be broadened to take account of issues that historically have not been of central concern. Of equal importance, however, was the fact that Professor Newby demonstrated the respectable credentials of sociology, not only in his lectures but because he himself has been intimately associated with the growth and develop-



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ment of sociology as a discipline in the past 20 years. He also celebrated his continuing involvement with the BSA itself.

The third and final part of the celebrations was a special dinner held on the first evening of the BSA's annual conference, held last month at the University of Manchester. Perhaps despite the conference theme of health and society this dinner was by any lights an extraordinarily successful event, attended by over 350 members of the association and others attending the conference. (Readers might be forgiven for wondering why sociologists have seen fit to cele-

brate sociology's fortieth anniversary with such an orgy of eating – the answer is probably to be found with the President of the BSA at the time!) The after dinner speaker at this event was Professor Sheila Allen, who also entertained us with another "walk down memory lane" and by celebrating the continuing successes and achievements of sociology. In particular she pinpointed the critical and crucial contributions to the development of British sociology, highlighting especially women's work and feminist perspectives, of which she herself has been such a vital and influential contributor.

What these various celebrations also show is that sociology is now a vibrant part of academic life; taught as a discipline in its own right in almost every institution of higher education in Britain. It is also a very popular subject a A level as well as being considered part of an array of new courses in vocational and other access type skills. *Pace* Mr Major the growth, success and popularity of sociology as an academic subject both in school and in higher education demonstrates the importance of something more than "commonsense".

Educational qualifications in general, and in sociology in particular, are clearly seen as of value, and especially for a wider understanding of "society". And that understand-

ing is based on more than mere "commonsense", which may be both theoretically and empirically informed. The particular achievements and insights of sociologists show how important a careful and theoretically informed analysis of society and social issues is to the understanding of contemporary developments. The role that some eminent sociologists are currently playing in areas of public policy development bears witness to this. Of particular note is the very recent appointment, which Sheila Allen drew our attention to, of Lord Gary Runciman to chair the newly-established Royal Commission on Criminal Justice. In part, at least, it demonstrates the importance of Runciman's pioneering work on class and people's feelings about it, in terms of the thesis of "relative deprivation", which also is more than about "commonsense".

Other keynote sociologists in public policy analysis and development are Baroness Blackstone and Sir Ralph Dahrendorf. But sociologists do not just have public status and prestige in politics. There are a few who have achieved such status for their twin contributions to serious academic scholarship and to creative writing. Perhaps the most outstanding here is the feminist sociologist, scholar and novelist Ann Oakley. What they all show is that sociology is indeed a mature discipline, fully capable of helping us to understand and shape the contours of a future society. Hopefully when the BSA comes to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary, at the end of the year 2000, it will still be in excellent shape and contributing to the mature understanding of "society" and the vitality of academic life.