

Ten years older: A-level

A recent article in *Sociology*, by Sarah Cant, Mike Savage and Anwesa Chatterjee (2020), called 'Popular but peripheral', investigates the current state of A-level sociology in our schools. The paper presents a bleak picture. The important findings depress us just as they will other readers. For our part the paper has an additional importance because it throws our own distant experiences of A-level sociology into relief. In what follows we meld our memories with some documents to give an account of long-ago experiences. But in so doing we add a note of correction to the history.

The conventional wisdom, to be found on the webpages of the BSA and repeated by the authors, is that A-level sociology had its debut in 1972. However, the date is wrong. The story of A-level sociology goes back to a syllabus of the early 1960s. In what follows we recover something of the history. From there we go on to suggest that the 1960s A-level GCE speaks directly to the conclusions reached by Cant et al. At this point we must come clean and own up to having been among the pupils who sat their exams for A-level sociology in 1964 and 1965. We find the paper interesting partly because our experiences were so different to those described in 'Popular but peripheral'. We give some indication of the nature of the difference and why we feel that it matters.

First, we turn to what Sarah Cant and her colleagues have discovered and what they have to say. 'Popular but peripheral' gives the results of a survey of schoolteachers' experiences of teaching sociology. The findings might be summed up in one word: anomie. Committed sociology teachers and their enthusiastic pupils pursue a subject that is perceived by others to be undemanding and lacking in intellectual rigour. School sociology is, it seems, not a proper discipline. It can be taught by anyone, sociology graduate or not, and is stigmatised as a soft option. At the heart of the article is a puzzle concerning undergraduate recruitment to British universities. The majority of the UK's prestigious Russell Group universities have undergraduate sociology programmes. However, when it comes to admissions, those universities accord less weight to A-level sociology than they do to other subjects. But here is the thing; the subject's negative image co-exists with its popularity, especially in non-selective schools. And, as an A-level choice, sociology holds its own:

The last issue of *Network* contained a feature on A-level sociology, sparked by a recent journal paper which said it was 'popular, but peripheral'. Gordon Fyfe and Denis Gleeson continue the theme with a look back at the origins of the exam, which is 10 years older than previously thought

"having only been introduced in 1972, it is now the eighth most popular A-level subject" (Cant et al. 2020: 38, our emphasis).

Cant, Savage and Chatterjee report an educational tragedy that is rooted in the selective processes that govern student A-level choices. The tragedy is not just that teachers and students of sociology find that what they do, however well they do it, is undervalued. It is also that, as the authors note, more privileged pupils are separated from the benefits of a sociological imagination. The findings point to a tragic vision, caught as the teachers are between the

needs and aspirations of supposedly less-able pupils and the indifference of the academically privileged who think sociology is not for them. In talking to teachers, the authors uncover the hidden injuries of academic politics as they are played out in our schools. It is not just that school curricula reproduce the rivalries between university disciplines⁴; it is that they secrete a vocabulary of invidious comparison. The currency that is the measure of their achievements is devalued and a discipline that illuminates inequalities of cultural capital is stigmatised. One can but share the authors' concern that, in the case of sociology of all subjects, social inequality is expressed in the fine grain of the 21st century school curriculum. There can be few better examples of what Pierre Bourdieu meant by symbolic violence: "a violence which is exercised by a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:167-8).

Perhaps there are ways in which university sociologists might help to challenge all this? Outreach work is certainly part of what university departments do. But Cant and her co-authors invite university teachers and the BSA to go further. Both might, for example, work together with exam boards and with schools. More broadly they might up their game as advocates for sociology within schools

‘The conventional wisdom is that A-level sociology had its debut in 1972 – but the story actually goes back to a syllabus of the early 1960s’

sociology's real birthday

by lobbying the Department of Education. There is some force to the suggestions about strengthening the relationship between school sociology and university sociology. As retired university teachers, we are out of touch with current practices. But the author's suggestions do resonate with our experiences many years ago as A-level sociology pupils. To go back to the beginning, there was an A-level sociology up and running nearly 60 years ago.

The Oxford University Delegacy of Local Examinations Board (OUDLE) set the A-level ball rolling in 1962, when its History Committee agreed to "give further consideration to the proposed syllabus in sociology at Advance Level suggested by the Clapham Common Centre". Some record of the shape of things, though apparently patchy, can be found at Oxford University Archives where the following documents are located: (i) a 1967 A-level GCE Syllabus for sociology and (ii) A-level GCE sociology examination papers for several years including the first exam paper dated 1964. The archival references for these and other relevant documents are LE 1/4, 1955-78; LE 42/ and LE 49/124-39.²

An article in the *Times Educational Supplement* (TES) provides more information about the syllabus, its philosophy and its gestation. Its author, James T. Mallins, was Deputy Head Teacher at the school we attended (a Catholic secondary modern school for boys, St Gerard's in south London). In common with some other teachers of the period, he had introduced a social science element into the school curriculum. So, in the TES (1964, Feb. 7: 341) and under the banner 'Sociology in the sixth form', Mallins announced approval by the Oxford Board of an A-level syllabus in



Denis Gleeson (left) and Gordon Fyfe

sociology. It had been compiled by him and was being followed by sixth formers at his Clapham school. Mallins reported that his pupils were excited and stimulated by a "subject in which they could see a direct relation between what they are studying" and familiar social facts "which they are often at a loss to comprehend" (TES, 1964, Feb. 7: 341).

C. Wright Mills's *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) had probably not crossed his desk. But Mallins encouraged awareness of the links between public issues and private troubles. Pupils were introduced to key concepts and to the importance of conceptual rigour. The backbone of the syllabus was, as can be seen from Oxford's archive,³ the social structure of modern Britain, including the distribution of inequality and power. The history of social survey work, elements of research design, and methods were covered. There was a broad emphasis on social policy issues and a concern to clarify the role of the welfare state in 1960s post-war Britain. When it came to textbooks, sociology doorstops had yet to appear. There was the somewhat dated Rumney and Maier (1953 [1938]), the more exciting profusely illustrated Broom and Selznick (1963) (which was then the American market leader), and, published just in time, was Tom Bottomore's *Sociology* (1962).

Other schoolteachers were introducing sociology in the early 1960s. However, we are not aware of another A-level at this time. Jennifer Platt (2003) notes that the BSA was advising teacher training colleges. Indeed, there seems to have been a growing interest in social science teaching for schools, with



general studies taking a more sociological turn. Writing in 1963, the sociologist Geoff Hurd discovered that many schools, both grammar and secondary modern, had assigned a place within their general studies programmes for social science topics. Hurd describes a sociology pilot, though not an A-level, at a Midlands boys grammar school. Significantly the programme was delivered by a university academic with classroom support from the school's senior history teacher. In reporting pupils' feedback, both positive and negative, Hurd noted that some embraced ambiguity and were attracted by a subject that seemed not to fit into the conventional arts-sciences framework of the grammar school curriculum.⁴

In the weeks that followed publication of Mallins's article there were responses in the TES correspondence columns. John Raynor at Edge Hill, though not unsympathetic, thought that "making sociology just another examination subject was the wrong thing to do". Moreover, the syllabus contained much that was too complex. He worried that pupils were likely "unable to distinguish between sound and unsound sociology" (TES, 1964, Feb 14: 370). Not so easy then! Edward Sheridan at Gravesend Technical College was more positive, arguing that teaching the rudiments of sociology would broaden pupils' horizons (TES, 1964, Feb. 21: 450). The first pupils sat their exams in the summer of '64. Later that year Mallins reported news of successful candidates pursuing sociology at a teacher training college and at a university (TES 1964, Oct. 9: 591). Did sociology belong in a school curriculum?

“The tragedy is, as the authors point out, that more privileged pupils are separated from the benefits of a sociological imagination”

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'How do we incite the im

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We recall discussions not so much about how easy it was, but about whether the intellectual demands of sociology were beyond the cognitive abilities of 16-year-olds. Oxford seems to have harboured doubters. But things were settled in October 1966 when the minutes of the delegates' meeting show that the University's Congregation had "voted against a resolution to remove General Sociology from the list of Advanced Level Subjects recognised by the University as qualifying subjects for matriculation" (Oxford University Archives, Minutes of Delegates Meetings (LE 1/4, 1955-78)).

In some respects, the Clapham story aligns with findings of Cant et al. A 1960s secondary modern school may confirm the stereotype of a subject not properly academic. Yet, that is not how things seemed to us at the time. Why that was so has much to do with the fluidity that characterised the English tripartite system from the late 1950s. The bond between education and occupation was less tight than it is today. But it was tightening in ways not anticipated by the authors of the 1944 Education Act, for by that time some secondary moderns were following GCE curricula. In 1962 St Gerard's acquired a sixth-form. Some of its teachers were uprating their skills and studying for diplomas and degrees. Mallins studied for the Diploma in Sociology at London University. It was in that way, no doubt, that he made contact with London-based university sociologists, some of whom, most notably O. R. McGregor and Basil Bernstein (both of London University), visited the school and met with fourth and fifth year pupils as early as 1961.

Mallins networked on behalf of his pupils and forged links with university sociologists. He secured access to London University's Senate House Library. He brokered their enrolment onto the university's extra-mural sociology diploma. There were meetings with Bernstein at his university office in Bloomsbury. Our memory is of Bernstein's commitment, enthusiasm and good humour at these encounters. There was occasional puzzlement on both sides of the desk when things were lost in translation. On one occasion, asked to explain why Max Weber was so important, Bernstein patiently summarised the ins-and-outs of the Protestant ethic thesis. Explanation was followed by a moment's silence before a voice piped up: "No, no. It's not your bloke Veber that worries me – it's Weber!"



St Gerard's Boys School, Clapham Common, London (1970). Reproduced by permission of London Borough of Lambeth, Archives Department. BL/DTP/UD/6/2/6/154

Among the things reported by Cant et al. is the apparent datedness of the curriculum. There is the familiar problem of reconciling the canon with contemporary relevance: yet another dead sociologist? The sociologists that St Gerard's pupils met and those about whom they heard were generally white males,

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some of whom have now been filtered out of the canon. But they were not all dead! Some were alive and kicking in the pages of a ground-breaking new weekly paper. *New Society* was launched in October 1962 as a complement to *New Scientist*. Edited by the Conservative politician Timothy Raison and selling for one shilling, it was devoured in the St Gerard's sixth form. Crucially *New Society* connected its readers with both established and up-and-coming sociologists. There was, too, a wider sociological imagination to be found in writers such as John Berger and Angela Carter.⁵

There were other fluidities which favoured curriculum innovation at Clapham. A new headteacher had arrived and was committed to a new vision for the school, and a second sociology teacher, Roy Bennett, was appointed. More widely there was the way in which the secular world of curricula and examinations regulated by the state was refracted through a Catholic ethos.⁶ And

Imagination of students?

there was change in Catholicism itself, which somehow made sociology relevant. Vatican II, with its turn towards the laity, had begun its deliberations in October 1962 and it seems likely that this was part of Mallins's 'social turn'. For Mallins, there was certainly a connection between his religious beliefs and his sociological imagination. He was interested, as he put it, in the "union of intellectual and scientific values with understanding, sympathy and moral purpose". But above all, as he explained, the point of it all was to "familiarise pupils with the academic atmosphere of higher education" (TES 1964).

The authors have surely hit the nail on the head when they call for collaboration between university departments, schools and the BSA. There is today, as there was nearly 60 years ago, more than one cage to be rattled. What was at stake in the 1960s, and what matters today, is the bigger picture of the social sciences in both schools and universities. What is the future for younger students and teachers when it comes to accessing independent and evidence-based teaching and research in sociology? How might we move beyond agendas that denigrate democratic education and shut down the opportunities enjoyed by the baby-boomer generation? How might we raise the profile of sociology in a transactional world where the complexity of human relationships is reduced to the simplicity of deals? And how, above all, might we incite the sociological imaginations of A-level students?

Notes

1. See LSE sociologist Donald G. MacRae's letter to *The Times* where he counters the charge of sociology's softness with his suspicion that "some degrees in natural science and technology might shock" (*The Times*, 1967: Friday, August, pg. 7).
2. Thanks are due to Timothy Loving, previously of the Oxford University Archives and now at Dundee University, who helped us by recovering the associated documentary evidence.
3. Oxford University Archives, Oxford Local Examinations: General Certificate of Education: Regulations: Regulations, 1970 (from LE 42/1)
4. C. P. Snow's two cultures were much in the air.
5. An early contributor was Laurie Taylor whose BBC Radio 4 programme conveys the ethos that was *New Society*.
6. See Davies, I. (1971: 126-7) on this aspect of Catholic school curricula.

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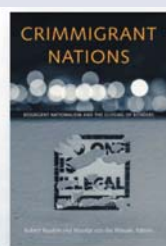
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Biographical notes

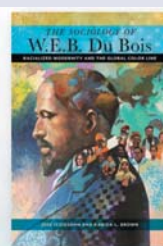
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