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Beyond Drink, Drainage and Divorce? What the Sociological Society did for British sociology

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Introduction

The Sociological Society was established in 1903 on the initiative of Victor Branford, a business accountant who was a close friend of Patrick Geddes, the Scottish social evolutionist and city planner. No broader social movements, public events or other institutions are known to have been connected to, or involved in supporting, the idea of a Sociological Society at this time. Branford's and Geddes' own personal agenda were primary in its establishment – they wanted to use the Society as a vehicle for promoting Geddes' ideas and for securing him a university post in London (Renwick, 2012). But this tells us only part of the story, since the motives the Society presented to the public officially were not only much broader in scope and ambition, but had a more enduring impact.

Branford's official invitations pointed out that Britain lagged behind in the 'organisation of those general studies which – under the name of Sociology – are concerned with integrating the specialist studies of Man' (Sociological Society, 1903a). One of Branford's core aims, which he achieved, and which survives to this day in the form of the present periodical, was the establishment of a sociological journal. There were also no 'sociology' courses offered at university level and, Branford argued, the time was 'ripe' to bring together those who sought to lay the foundations of clear thinking about social problems (Sociological Society, 1903a).

The first official meeting of the Society took place on May 15th/16th 1903¹, in the Rooms of the Royal Statistical Society (RSS), with social anthropologists, social theorists, social workers, politicians, economists, and others present. An important attendee was James Martin White, a Scottish businessman, without whom the founding of the Society, the first sociological journal and the first sociology professorship, would have been financially unsustainable, if not impossible.

The official goals of the Society were 'scientific, educational and practical'. It aimed 'at affording a common ground on which workers from all fields and schools concerned with social phenomena may meet'² (Sociological Society, 1905a). As a result, the Society had a very diverse membership. The groups that made notable contributions in the Society's first few, and most active, years were – the eugenicists under Francis Galton; the supporters of Geddes' civics and a third, more diverse, group of social philosophers and reformers (cf. Halliday, 1968). Very soon, however, the three groups each went their own way, exposing the shaky foundations of the Society's organisation. After the eugenicists left to establish their own Eugenics Education Society and the social philosophers established themselves at the LSE under L.T. Hobhouse, Geddes, Branford and their allies continued to be the sole

active force within the Society (cf. Evans, 1986). For the rest of its existence – until the 1950s – the Society operated on a small scale, virtually existing only in name.

Accounts of the history of the Society lack in historical detail and accuracy of interpretation and leave fundamental questions un-probed. For instance, the underlying assumption guiding Abrams, is that what ‘was good for social reform was bad for sociology (1968, p. 106). As a result, his analysis of the Sociological Society is dominated by the idea that the Society would have been successful had it developed a general theory of society. It was because neither Hobhouse, nor Geddes, nor Galton succeeded in this, that, according to Abrams, the Society ended up merely stimulating the ‘fissiparous growth of pseudosociological factions’ (1968, p. 119). In its emphasis on theory as the only element of social research that can make such research ‘sociological’, Abrams’ account is presentist: applying to history an understanding of the nature of sociology that predominated in the 1960s when he was writing. It is also dismissive of legitimate, and indeed still unexamined, questions regarding both the historical background and the historical present of the Society: how did the Society’s *choice* to detach itself from the empirical tradition of social enquiry that developed in Britain during the nineteenth century affect the future of sociology in this country? And what was it that happened within the Society that contributed to its limited legacy?

Compared with Abrams, the studies published in *The Sociological Review* in 2007 take a more positive and appreciative look at the Society’s legacy by revisiting the contributions of Branford and Geddes. They aim to ‘recognise anew the importance of these forbears’ (Savage, 2007, p. 429); reclaim the importance of the social theory of Geddes (cf. Studholme, 2007) and retrieve Branford from obscurity, praising him for ‘envisioning’ a ‘theoretically and empirically grounded sociology’ (Scott, 2007, p. 479). Surely, however, a comprehensive historical understanding of the legacy of these figures, and their role in the Society, should involve not only an examination of their theories, ideas and vision, which *we* happen to see as relevant, but also an analysis of what they actually *did* with the opportunities that the establishment of the Society presented? This is not to argue that the theories endorsed by the leading figures of the Society do not deserve our full attention. But somewhat surprisingly, the theoretical framework left out of both older and more recent accounts, is Auguste Comte’s theory of sociology which, as I show, played a fundamental role in the decisions made by the Society.

A recent book by Renwick (2012) advances the study of the Society far beyond these earlier accounts. But like others before him, Renwick concentrates on a particular aspect of the Society’s development (its relationship with social-biological studies), without examining the Society’s *overall* contribution.

This article takes a different approach from the above studies. It doesn’t take it for granted that the Society distanced themselves from the nineteenth-century empirical tradition of social enquiry; it doesn’t take the biographical approach of the 2007 studies; and doesn’t examine the Society’s legacy in relation to biology or other related subjects. Instead, drawing on original and previously unexamined evidence, it maps the early history of the society focussing on why their attempts to establish sociology in Britain ended up only a small, tentative and ultimately unsuccessful step towards achieving this goal. Unlike previous studies, this article questions the links between the Society and the organisations that preceded and succeeded it. The article does not offer a *radically* new interpretation of the Society’s work but offers, for the first time, empirical evidence that both confirms and challenges some pre-existing notions about what the Sociological Society did for British sociology.

Institutional and intellectual context

The Sociological Society was the first institution in the UK to call itself ‘sociological’ but it was not the first social science organisation to be established here. Three nineteenth-century institutions may be considered as significant forerunners.

The first, the Social Science Association (1857-1886), was established as a union of smaller reform groups including charity, commercial, cooperative, temperance and educational organisations working in areas of social reform where reform was most pressing. In the sociological literature, the work of the Association has been described with the derogatory term ‘Drink Drainage and Divorce’; with Abrams (1968) and Soffer (1982) being the most prominent critics, arguing that the approach of the Association was a major factor in frustrating the development of an academic and a more theoretically sophisticated sociology. This interpretation has more recently been forcefully challenged by Goldman (2002), who, unlike his predecessors, considered the contributions of the SSA in their historical context. Goldman’s work invites us to reconsider the fate of the tradition of empirical social enquiry when sociology finally got established institutionally. However, I have found that this tradition was met with overall neglect and indifference in the Sociological Society. *Direct* links between the SSA and the Society appear to be weak to non-existent; the one reference to the SSA in the archives of the Society does show a slight negative attitude towards the SSA on the part of Branford, but, aside from this, the Society made no acknowledgement of, and paid no tribute to, the SSA, neither to criticise nor praise its contributions.

The second institution, the Statistical Society of London (SSL) was founded in 1834 with the aim of reforming political economy by broadening its scope and turning it into an inductive, evidence-based social science (Goldman, 1983). For most of the nineteenth century, the SSL focused on collecting new, or analysing already existing, statistical data, related to the most pressing social problems in Britain. For this, they relied on basic statistical techniques, such as the method of averages (techniques of statistical inference were developed from 1880s onwards).

Abrams argued that the SSL too had a negative influence on the development of sociology in Britain since its work was not theoretical and, instead, emphasised empirical inquiries. For this reason, Abrams did not question the fact the Sociological Society distanced itself from the work of the SSL; after all, a Sociological Society had to be about sociology, not statistics.

However, it must be noted that although the SSL did not develop a general theory of society, their understanding of social science was not a-theoretical. When the work of the SSL is examined in the context of the contemporary understanding of what constitutes a scientific enquiry, we see close parallels between the understanding of statisticians and scientists with regard to views on the role of theory in science (cf. SSL, 1840, 1843, 1851; Herschel, 1830 [1851]). And it is because the statistical movement represents the first attempt to study society using the approaches which have resulted in major advances in the scientific study of nature since the 1600s – *that the historical relationship between the statistical movement and the sociology of the Sociological Society should be questioned*. It is beyond the scope of the present article to analyse this relationship in full detail, but I will be able to at least suggest some of the broad factors that help us explain why the statistical tradition was excluded from the Society, despite its aims to pioneer a wide, integrating and all-embracing sociology.

Finally, there was the London Positivist Society, established in 1867, and the closely related English Positivist Committee. These institutions endorsed Comte's social philosophy which included a particular understanding of sociology as a general science that united all existing social science specialisms and used the comparative method to analyse the development of social evolution (Comte, 1875). The positivists, however, failed in their attempts to popularise Comte's views and achieved virtually no success in developing and adapting them to the British social, political and intellectual scene (Bryson, 1936). In addition, leading scientists, economists and statisticians denounced Comte's philosophy as unoriginal and pretentious (Whewell, 1866; Jevons, 1875; Sidgwick, 1885). However, direct *institutional* links between the Positivists and the Sociological Society are difficult to find, except for the fact that Frederick Harrison, who had been a president of the Positivist Committee in 1880-1905 also became the president of the Sociological Society in 1910.

The Sociological Society, therefore, had weak institutional links with all of the major nineteenth-century social science institutions; but, crucially, whereas the Society showed a dismissive attitude towards the intellectual contributions of the SSA and the SSL, it embraced unquestionably, as its intellectual credo, Comte's idea of sociology.

The attempted contributions of the Sociological Society

I

As I have already mentioned, the credibility and potential of Comte's philosophy were seen as doubtful on many fronts. Moreover, Comte's idea of sociology had been met with outright rejection in the circles of the statisticians and political economists, particularly when in 1878 a follower of Comte, J. K. Ingram, proposed that the statistical section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science should be reformed into a sociological section (Ingram, 1878; Sidgwick, 1885). The hostility and confusion surrounding the Comtean idea of sociology hadn't disappeared by the time when the Sociological Society was founded. Sociologists, it was claimed in 1904, were a disjointed 'company of mystics' in which 'every man has a different interpretation to give'; the general view was that there was not 'any united thought or concentrated view to be learnt from sociologists' and that 'one comprehensive science' won't take the social sciences very far (Speaker I in Branford 1904a, p. 124; Speaker C in Branford, 1904a, p. 122-123).

When the Society attempted to organise the first formal discussion about sociology in Britain, that discussion failed to resolve the problematic issues at the heart of Comte's idea of sociology or redeem Comte's vision of sociology after it had been so strongly rejected. The first President of the Society, James Bryce, simply assumed that their vision of British sociology was not only feasible, but well-grounded: 'I trust, however, that it will not be difficult to justify the Sociological Society' (Bryce, 1905, p. xiii). His justification was limited to repeating what was already well-known – there was, as yet, no distinctly British sociological theories and there were no 'sociology' courses taught in British universities. But Bryce made no attempt to explain why this was the case; why this situation should change and whether following Comte's idea of sociology can deliver that change.

Branford took a similar approach. He himself pointed to the 'hostility', 'indifference' and 'misunderstanding' prompted by the very word 'sociology'; and to

the fact that while some acknowledged the need for sociology but denied the relevance and legitimacy of the work, others totally denied the possibility of a general study of social phenomena (Branford, 1905a, p. 10). This is an apt *description* of the problems facing sociology but neither Branford, nor anybody else in the Society took on the task of effectively addressing these problems and proving the critique wrong in practice. Branford instead assumed that following Comte's principles was sufficient for the establishment of theoretical and applied sociology as long as sociologists develop the ability to think both philosophically and scientifically (Branford, 1905a, p. 16). But how the cultivation of these abilities would come about, how these abilities would become manifest in the methodology of sociology and how sociologists would on the basis of these abilities address the problems of modern society – was not discussed. In addition, the articles in the Sociological Papers, presented at the Society between 1904 and 1907, did not engage at all with the idea of sociology as a general science. Contributors, including prominent members such as Galton and Geddes, did not even mention how the specialist subjects of their own study would contribute to the establishment of the 'great' science.

The situation was not much different in 1907 when the most active period of the Society was coming to an end. In his inauguration speech, Edward Westermarck, the Finnish philosopher and ethnographer, who became a part-time professor of sociology at the LSE in 1907, acknowledged that sociology was still perceived as 'too vague' and 'too full of far-reaching but unproved generalisations'. He went on to confess that he considered 'these objections to contain a great deal of truth' but, like others before him, failed to suggest any constructive solutions (Westermarck, 1908, p. 26).

The only person who attempted to address some of these challenges and indicated a possible solution was Karl Pearson. Pearson was not an actual member and had 'a certain want of sympathy with the Sociological Society' due to what he believed was the unscientific character of the subject (Branford, 1904b). Pearson reluctantly agreed to attend one of its meetings in order to preside over the reading of a paper by Galton. In his address, Pearson called the Society 'a herd without its leader', expressing grave doubts that the Society could function effectively and sustain itself without an established leading figure to 'set bounds' to sociology and 'prescribe its functions' (Pearson, 1905, p. 52).

Although Pearson's argument had eugenicist connotations – he put emphasis on *an exceptional individual* who would create the rudiments of the science – his argument was not at all illogical and perhaps closer to a feasible solution than any of Branford's suggestions based on Comte's strategy. It was not so much an exceptional individual *per se*, but the kind of coherent strategy, the pulling together and effective co-operation that such an individual embodies that was needed. Branford, however, did not accept Pearson's argument, calling it 'good theology', 'bad science' and 'a creational hypothesis' (Branford, 1905b, pp. 26, 28). He re-stated that 'the progress of sociology is in quite normal fashion' and that 'all is well with our science' (Branford, 1905b, p. 40).

Yet what happened to the Society in the next couple of years, proved Branford's soothing remarks as ill-judged and if it wasn't an exceptional individual, then British sociology was certainly lacking something. The discussions that took place in the Society either didn't acknowledge this or failed to agree what this thing was. Despite the fact that the Society revived the discussion about sociology, its members merely re-stated the problems that sociology faced, without contributing much to their solution.

II

The second attempted contribution of the Society is closely related to, but distinct from, the first. The Society offered a friendly platform for discussing the nature of sociology and coming up with a suitable definition of its subject. However, various factors interfered with the success of these attempts.

A selection of the definitions of sociology that appeared in a discussion in the Sociological Papers displays a remarkable diversity. It was claimed that sociology was ‘a specialism under physiological psychology’; ‘the science of history’; ‘the same as philosophy of history’; ‘the continuation of politics’; ‘the Philosophy of the Social Sciences’; ‘the science of General civilisation’; ‘a *Method* applicable to all social sciences’; ‘convertible with philosophy’ and ‘the science of social facts’. In the end it was even claimed that any attempt at a definition would be useless at the current stage because sociology was not yet developed and ‘definitions do not anticipate sciences, but they succeed them’ (Various authors, 1905, p. 211-258).

The first report of the Society argued that the discussion, in which all these definitions appeared, successfully re-affirmed that sociology was ‘the corpus’ of all social sciences; an ‘endeavour to synthesise the researches of all social investigation’; and an ‘endeavour to construct a theory’ (Sociological Society, 1905b, p. 20-21). But through what is a mere re-statement of the Comtean principles, the report obscured what had really happened in the discussion. A brief look at the definitions show an obvious lack of agreement. A longer, more careful look, indicates even more remarkably, a lack of **dis**agreement: definitions coming from all directions, without a single unifying thread or sense of coherence, showing just how little the participants had in common with each other. The members of the Society did believe that there was something out there called ‘sociology’, like the eighteenth-century belief in a mystical Southern continent that was worth finding; but when asked where it lay, everyone pointed in a different direction.

None of these definitions suggested that sociology was involved with the direct investigation of social problems on the basis of empirical – statistical or any other – evidence. Instead, the emphasis was on the construction of theory. Sociologists, such as Abrams, who approved of this idea because it corresponded to *their own* idea of sociology didn’t see this episode in the early history of sociology as problematic. But when we look at the Society’s concepts of social science in the context of the history of social science in the UK in the nineteenth century, we see a fundamental rift with the long tradition of social empirical inquiry in the UK. The important point is not whether the Society’s understanding was right or wrong; but the fact that the route they chose was not inevitable; it wasn’t even the already established route in the British context. The Society may not have been very successful in agreeing on what sociology was; but if their definitions exerted any long-lasting influence, it was to legitimise the *choice* that sociology wasn’t going to be about empirical investigation.

III

The third attempted contribution of the Sociological Society was the introduction of sociology into academia. Sociology was first introduced as an academic subject with this name at the London School of Economics (LSE) in 1904. Lectures were given by Hobhouse; Westermarck; A. C. Haddon, an anthropologist; and Lafcadio Hearn who

lectured on Japanese civilisation. All but Hearn were members of the Sociological Society. In 1907, Hobhouse became the first full-time professor in Sociology, while Westermack took a similar part-time appointment. Hobhouse occupied the Chair till his death in 1929 and Westermarck – till 1930. For twenty-five years these two men were academic sociology in Britain (with empirical social science developing in other circles, such as LSE's Social Science and Administration Department which was established in 1912) and with them they carried the conviction that lay at the heart of the Society, that sociology was a philosophical and a theoretical subject.

Sociology courses

As the person who sponsored the first sociology lectures, James Martin White, a friend of Branford and Geddes, had an important say in what these lectures should entail. Martin White had decided to invest in sociology because he thought it was vital for sociological knowledge to be spread among the public and members of parliament, who, in his own experience, appeared to be ignorant of the subject (Sociological Society, 1904, p. 21). He recommended 'the study of the more general and philosophical aspects of sociological science' and felt there was a need to 'create a body of academic opinion in favour of re-organising the curricula of social studies' in such a way that they more adequately recognised 'synthetic sociological conceptions' (Martin White, 1903). Unlike others in the Society, Martin White did not hesitate to emphasise that in addition to constructing a scientific theory of society, sociology should aim to "indicate the bearing of such knowledge on practical life" (Fincham, 1975, p. 32).

The 'Martin White lectures' were introduced according to plan in 1904. They focussed on the study of social institutions, ethnology and comparative psychology and social ethics applying, essentially, a Comtean approach – emphasising the comparative method and theoretical examination of the history and evolution of civilisation in different societies (LSE Calendars, 1904-1929). In addition to the 'Martin White lectures', in the period 1904-1920s, under sociology, the university offered other similarly oriented courses as well as a course on *Logic and Scientific Method* and a more practically oriented course on *Methods of Social Investigation*.

An insight into the understanding of sociology at the LSE and the role of the sociology courses in the social science curriculum can be garnered from the list of potential audiences. Despite their focus on social philosophy and abstract theory, the courses were not advertised as likely to be of interest to academicians, but to professionals with clear practical orientation, mostly future local state administrators (LSE Calendar, 1904). Sociology, therefore, appears to have been seen as a kind of enlightening 'liberal arts' second-role complement to a variety of other core subjects that would be preparing one for one's profession.

Fincham (1975) suggests that the final make-up of the sociology courses depended less on what Martin White, on behalf of the Society, had to offer as sociology; and more on the academic situation at the LSE. According to Fincham, the LSE was initially reluctant to accept sociology because they were already teaching many 'sociological' subjects, such as economics, social administration and statistics. They had little incentive to re-organise existing courses and sociology had no choice but to fill a gap in the curriculum, taking up the task to teach social theory and social philosophy.

But Fincham overestimates what sociology had to offer at this early stage. Even if the Society wanted to compete with the already established subjects at the LSE, they

simply were not in a position to teach a variety of sociological specialisms. They did not have the people to teach these specialisms (there were no statisticians or social administrators heavily involved in the Society); plus there was a limited number of people prepared to take up the post and deliver on the Society's understanding of sociology. Those who *were* prepared, like Hobhouse and Westermarck, had already limited their work to the theoretical approach. As we saw earlier from the list of sociology definitions, the Society had already agreed that sociology wasn't going to be about empirical investigation. There was little chance that they would have made a different choice, had the academic situation at the LSE been different. Paradoxically, in its attempt to encompass all social sciences and unite them following Comte, sociology turned itself into a specialism that fulfilled the role of 'liberal education', a trend that continued throughout the twentieth century.

Some members of the Society welcomed the fact that the Society was able to successfully promote sociology in this way at the LSE. It was argued that the fact that empirical and reformist social science was already being taught under a different title at the LSE meant that sociology could devote itself to philosophical and comparative analysis. This was seen a good opportunity for British sociology to go beyond the empirical work on 'Drink Drainage and Divorce' that had originated in nineteenth-century organisations such as the SSA and, to one commentator's regret, had taken over American sociology (Sociological Society, 1904, pp. 22-23). Similar views were expressed fifty years later at the closing meeting of the *Institute of Sociology* (established in 1930 as a result of the merging of the *Le Play House* and the Sociological Society; cf. Evans (1986, p. 34)), at which the empirical direction in which American sociology had developed was called a 'mistake', which had led to American sociological departments being 'limited to the handling of concrete social questions' (Farquharson, 1957, p. 2).

Ironically, American academic empirical social science had developed largely through the incorporation of empirical methods first developed in Britain; for British sociologists to brand it 'a mistake' in 1957 at a time when American sociology was flourishing, and British sociology was closing down its one of its two representative institutions, demonstrates the delusional character of at least some leading sociologists at the time. There is every reason to believe that these attitudes persisted within British academic sociology circles long after the demise of the Sociological Society and its filial institutions.

Hobhouse: Professor of Sociology

After Branford had given up the idea that Geddes would be a suitable candidate for the chair (Renwick, 2012), he privately told a close friend that 'something ought to be done to secure him [Hobhouse] for Sociology' (Branford, 1907). 'His is', Branford continued, 'the one personality round which the whole movement, at present inclining to be dispersive, might be crystallised and concentrated' (Branford, 1907).

Branford's motives in wanting Hobhouse were, it seems, largely driven by practical concerns. Geddes' failure to win support in the Society combined with the fact that, in 1907, Hobhouse had lost his job, This and the fact that by then Hobhouse had gained some experience in teaching sociology, opened up the possibility of Hobhouse's candidacy. However, when recommending him for the Professorship, Branford did not point to Hobhouse's sociological contribution or academic competence. He emphasised that Hobhouse would more easily accommodate the

variety of sociological views that existed in the Society and contribute to their successful co-ordination because he was less strongly committed to one particular approach to sociology. It is perhaps ironic that, after rejecting Pearson's criticism that the prospects for the Society were slim without an exceptionally capable individual, Branford's decision was based on Hobhouse's *'personality'*. The Professorship was, therefore, not so much a sign of the increasing strength of sociology in academic circles, as yet another attempt to *remedy* problems within the Society and, ultimately, deeper problems within British sociology itself.

A further indication of the weak and tentative beginning of Hobhouse's career and, indeed of sociology as an academic subject, came from Hobhouse's inaugural address. Instead of outlining his plans and ambitions for the future of sociology, Hobhouse talked about the 'roots of modern sociology'. The address was similar in focus and purpose to the 'propagandist'³ pieces of the founders of the Society. It repeated the well-known Comtean principle – 'the problem before us as sociologists is to bring together in vital connection the inquiries which hitherto have been pursued apart' (Hobhouse, 1908, p. 21) – but again, no suggestions were made as to the realisation of this ideal. When we also consider Westermarck's inaugural address as a part-time Professor of sociology, delivered at the same time as Hobhouse's, in which Westermarck admitted that many of the criticisms that sociology was facing were in fact true, it becomes difficult to view the academic establishment of sociology in Britain as an auspicious event.

Once the professorships were established, Hobhouse and Westermarck began teaching sociology as a special subject that was initially part of the BSc Economics, and from 1920, became a separate degree. Their lectures changed little over the period of their professorships – Hobhouse taught 'Social Ethics', 'Sociology and Ethics' and 'Social Evolution', while Westermarck taught on early customs and social institutions. Their courses had a wide scope, in the sense that they discussed social phenomena in general terms; but they were not an example of sociology reaching out to other social science fields and methods, with the view of incorporating them into one comprehensive science. The open approach to teaching sociology which derived from the Comtean understanding of sociology as a general science resulted in a situation in which *any* social science topic could be taught under sociology. And so it happened, that over the course of the next twenty years, sociology taught courses on subjects as diverse as India, ancient Greece, social psychology and social structure. The upshot of these first attempts to establish sociology in this country were that sociology remained an ill-defined and marginalised subject that failed to establish its own clear boundaries.

Apparently, Hobhouse himself did not feel confident in his abilities to promote sociology in academia. Up to 'the early years of the war' Hobhouse 'had been wont to speak despondently about his own lectures on sociology'; he complained of 'his failure to get the field of studies and research clear' and even indicated 'some thought of resigning the chair' (Branford, 1929, p. 276).

The event that is said to have changed 'the sociological atmosphere' in Hobhouse's mind, was the completion of an encyclopaedic article on sociology (Branford, 1929, p. 276). Whether or not this article had a huge positive impact on Hobhouse's psychological state, the article had little impact on the state of British sociology in and outside academia. Ultimately, it said nothing new about sociology – Hobhouse maintained that sociology was 'the synthesis of the social studies'; that 'it may be taken to cover the whole body of sociological specialisms' and that its 'object of discovery' was 'the connecting links between other specialisms' – all of which

showed that sociology had changed or developed very little since it was introduced into academia (Hobhouse in Hastings, 1920, p. 654).

Hobhouse's legacy is mixed. Those, like his successor Morris Ginsberg, who valued his contribution to social philosophy, maintained that he had the 'rare power of combining metaphysical speculation with detailed painstaking empirical investigation' and praised his work as 'the most comprehensive and successful attempt in recent times whether in England or abroad towards a systematic sociology' (Ginsberg, 1929, p. 144). Others, who focused on his role in establishing academic sociology, argued that his tradition of 'theory and encyclopaedism' was 'unfashionable' (Spratt, 1957) and 'fatal to sociology in England' (Soffer, 1982). Without committing to either of these rather extreme views, it is reasonable to say that Hobhouse's contribution was limited to *sustaining* the rather dormant existence of sociology at the LSE. Since the introduction of sociology into academia was mainly due to Branford, with the financial support of Martin White, *and not to the progress made by the Society*, the professorships contributed little to the expansion and popularisation of sociology and even less to the fulfilment of the wider ambition of turning it into a general science. As with its other attempted contributions, the Society's attempt at establishing sociology as an academic subject had long-lasting consequences for British sociology largely because of its *limited* success, exposing once again the shaky foundations of the Society's idea of sociology and the difficulties surrounding its implementation in academia.

IV

The fourth attempted contribution of the Sociological Society was a sociology journal. From 1904 to 1907, the Society published three volumes of the *Sociological Papers*; and from 1907 onwards, it began publishing *The Sociological Review (SR)* on a quarterly basis.

The founding of a journal on similar lines as the *American Journal of Sociology* or the *Revue Internationale de Sociologie* was seen as a 'chief function' of the Society (Branford, 1903); as the achievement that justified its coming into existence, since 'English students of sociology were seriously handicapped for want of such journal' (Sociological Society, 1903b). But regardless of the Society's conviction that the *Papers* would remedy a serious problem that needed urgent solution, the publication of the *Papers* was met with mixed views.

The press and a few popular foreign periodicals sent many positive comments, acknowledging that the *Papers* 'secured a footing in the scientific world' by 'its collection of expert comment from all the leading countries' and that they made a valuable contribution towards clarifying for the public the meaning of the term 'sociology' (Sociological Society, 1906). But the reception of the *Papers* in academic journals was rather negative.

One British review acknowledged that the *Papers* brought together the work of social scientists from a variety of fields; but it also pointed out 'the miscellaneous and tentative character' of the contents, which was seen as an indicator that the sociological literature was still uncoordinated (Jones, 1905, p. 440). Another review questioned the relationship between sociology and anthropology - 'in what relation do we stand to the professed sociologists?' and 'How is their field of work going to be distinguished from ours?' - criticising the *Papers* for neither directly raising, nor directly answering these questions (Burne, 1905, p. 120). An American review

further criticised the Papers by questioning their attempt to provide a common forum to sociologists: 'In England there comes together a body of specialists in one or another social study, who discuss many problems, each man from his own standpoint' (Davis, 1908, p. 152). And finally, a review in the *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, questioned the Society's reluctance to engage with statistics:

But surely a sociologist, biologist, or meteorologist who handles the statistical data of his science in complete ignorance of statistical method is quite as bad as a statistician who deals with the data of a science of which he has no special knowledge? (Yule, 1907, p. 518).

The idea of methodological co-operation between statisticians and sociologists was not completely absent from the discussions during the first few years of the Sociological Society (Webb, 1907). But, it would appear that neither statisticians, nor sociologists were able to give any clear indication of how this co-operation could be achieved in practice.

The lack of co-ordination and of any clear sense of direction which emerged from the *Papers* and was reflected in these reviews, continued to manifest itself in the *SR* in the years that followed. Under the editorship of Hobhouse between 1907-1910, the *SR* published on subjects like crime and magic, Islam, Indian agriculture, vital statistics and so on; thereby struggling to build up its own distinct style and character. Hobhouse's resignation from the editorship in 1910 was 'accepted with great regret' (Sociological Society, 1910) but with an overall agreement that despite his valuable work, his 'general line of editorial policy tended to depart from the scope and aims of the Society' (Branford, 1929, p. 276). Once Branford took over as editor, the last strong link was broken between academic sociology at the LSE and sociology at the Sociological Society which, by this time, was represented by only by a small circle around Branford and Geddes.

But the journal itself could not resolve the essential problems that sociology was facing, including how sociology would differentiate itself from the many specialist disciplines that were already in existence; and how it would organise specialist knowledge into a coherent whole. The journal may have stirred up the popular imagination and enthusiasm about the sociological ideal of an all-embracing social science, but it fell far short of turning this ideal into a reality; in fact, the journal only served to show the difficulty, if not impossibility, of such a task.

Conclusion

The Sociological Society set itself a difficult and unprecedented task. In their aspirations, its founders were led by the noble ideal of creating a unified and co-operative community of social scientists who could study society *together*. However, the conclusion of the Society's most active period was marked by the bitter realisation that neither the Society itself, nor the establishment of academic sociology and of a sociological journal, could make this ideal come true.

In 1911, in an open discussion on 'the things one expected from a Sociological Society', a critic admitted that 'indictment' of the Society could be regarded as 'an act of ungraciousness'; but as someone who had waited 'ever since the foundation of the society for elucidation by it of certain problems and month after month met only with disappointment', they thought it necessary to speak out. Their forlorn hopes 'of

seeing this synthetic idea emerge' had been 'uniformly disappointed' (Nivedita, 1911, p. 244-245).

Branford's response to these critiques was ambivalent. He himself had already admitted that although the Society had 'furnished a platform for the presenting of the results of independent investigation' they could not 'pretend to have carried out [...] much of Bryce's [the President's] programme' and that this was 'particularly true with reference to the proposals for co-operative research' (Branford, 1908b). In response to these critiques, he acknowledged that they contained 'much truth and relevance' and even went on to question the whole legacy of the Society:

Has the Society generated amongst its members the thrill of a common enterprise; or has it merely now and again gathered together manifold representatives for some temporary common end (Branford, 1911, p. 248)?

But despite his frankly depreciative remarks, Branford was not prepared to hold the Society fully responsible for its lack of success and instead argued that the problems it had were due to 'its social milieu':

Behind the question – What is wrong with sociologists and the Sociological Society? lies the deeper question – What is wrong with society itself? [...] Are not indeed those shortcomings of the Sociological Society [...] the very characteristics which make our contemporary occidental society so fertile in personal initiative, sectional amelioration and material progress, so sterile in unifying these partial achievements into collective spiritual uplift and concerned social advance? (Branford, 1911, p. 249)

It is not uncommon for sociologists to use such arguments to explain their problems at a time of crisis⁴. But even if the 'social milieu' was not favourable to the type of sociology it was promoting, the Society's internal problems, as I have shown here, no doubt played a major role in the Society's lack of success and its ultimate fate.

Thus, after a couple of vibrant and eventful years, the Society led a quiet and marginal existence for a few decades. During the 1910s it continued to hold meetings and organised various study groups and lecture seminars (Institute of Sociology, 1935). In 1920, the Society was incorporated into a bigger organisation called the *Le Play House*, together with the *Civic Education League* and the *Regional Association*. The *Le Play House* organised two conferences, one on the 'Correlation of the Social Sciences' in 1922 and one on 'Living Religions within the Empire' in 1924 (Institute of Sociology, 1935). During this period the Society's activities were almost exclusively confined to the civics approach to sociology. Eventually, in 1930, the Society with its associated bodies was incorporated into *The Institute of Sociology* which closed down in 1957.

Why should the legacy of the Sociological Society be important, if its struggle to establish sociology in Britain resulted in disorganisation, fragmented scholarship and unrealised ideals? The development of sociology during the first half of the twentieth century, was not inevitable. It was not entirely pre-conditioned by the existence of other social science organisations preceding the Society, as Abrams argued; nor could it have been a direct product of the 'social milieu', as Branford said. It was the events, and, more importantly, the *choices* made by the Society, that played the major role. It was these choices – choices about a philosophical ideal on which to establish sociology; about a definition of sociology; about a Professorship and a Journal and about an organisational strategy – that had more influence on the course of sociology in Britain than anything that the Society ever did to act upon these choices. Once

sociology was associated with a particular choice of words, thinkers and institutions established by the Society, *regardless of whether these choices bore fruit or not*, it was very difficult for sociology to re-organise itself into something different. It took another fifty-sixty years before a different group of people could take advantage of the radically changing social and political environment in order to make fresh choices about what sociology would be, how it would be studied and about its role in society.

Notes

1. According to Branford, this is the date which is ‘the most correct date for the founding of the society’ although subsequent accounts point to different dates in that year (Branford, 1926).
2. The list did not include statisticians.
3. ‘Propagandist’ is Branford’s own description of his writings in one of his personal letters (Branford, 1908a).
4. See Abrams (1981) for a similar explanation of the 1980s sociology ‘crisis’.

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