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## Ray Pahl's Sociological Career

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## Ray Pahl's sociological career: fifty years of impact

### Abstract

The history of a discipline records the careers of its practitioners as well as an account their ideas. Studying these careers reveals much about the particular people and their work, and also provides insights into general questions such as how disciplines evolve, and how impact can be achieved amongst and beyond academic peers. This article takes focuses on the career of R. E. (Ray) Pahl. It argues that his position in British sociology over the last half century can be attributed in particular to two things. First, Pahl was committed to asking sociological questions whilst being open to other influences; we call him an interdisciplinary sociologist. Secondly, his approach engaged simultaneously with theoretical, methodological and substantive elements of the discipline rather than treating them as areas of separate expertise. These key facets of his work help in understanding why his work has reached such a wide range of audiences, and in explaining his distinctive record as a sociologist within and beyond the academy, which long pre-dates current concerns with 'impact'.

### Introduction

Sociologists' careers are worth studying for reasons beyond the intrinsic interest of individual biographies. They act as markers of the discipline, how it is practised, how it is evolving, and whether sociologists' achievements are cumulative. These careers are inevitably diverse in terms of the work undertaken and the reasons for undertaking it. Familiar narratives feature the sociologist as 'a destroyer of myths' (Elias 1978: ch.2) and as a professional motivated by a sense of vocation (Weber 1970). More prosaic narratives framed in terms of contingency also exist. Skolnick (2003) describes herself as 'an accidental sociologist', and Runciman (1989) characterises himself as 'a reluctant theorist'. The issue of whether or not sociological knowledge is cumulative matters both at the individual and the disciplinary level. The mature scholar may 'stand on the shoulders' of a younger self, as has been argued regarding the later Marx (Walton and Gamble 1972). Radically different implications follow from Bauman's (1999: 27) characterisation of (at least some) sociologists becoming bored with problems in frustration being unable to resolve them, and moving on to fresh challenges.

Studying intellectual careers is methodologically challenging. Biographical accounts offer one approach. These can range from hagiographic to unremittingly critical, but Lukes's (1975) appraisal of Durkheim and Oakley's (2011) portrayal of Lady Wootton provide exemplars of the genre's possibilities when a researcher becomes immersed in the mass of material relating to an individual's career. In contrast, autobiographical accounts benefit from more immediate access to the subject's memory and archives. Halsey's (1996) *No Discouragement* provides one example, while there are several edited collections of autobiographical writings by the generation of sociologists who trained in the 1960's (Deflem 2007, Glassner and Hertz 2003, Sica and Turner 2005). Autobiographies risk the author being too close to the subject matter to deal convincingly with the selection of what goes into the account and what lines of interpretation are offered. A third way in which

career stories are told is through interviews. Examples of this format are Mullan's (1987) interviews with leading sociologists, and the more individually-focused sequences of interviews with Giddens (Giddens and Pierson 1998) and Bauman (Bauman and Tester 2001). These convey the merits of direct questioning relating to an agreed agenda. Elias's (1994) *Reflections on a Life* combines interview and autobiographical material.

There are relatively few studies of British sociologists' careers and their 'routine practices' (Platt 2005: 29). This article evaluates the career of R.E. (Ray) Pahl, who died in June 2011 aged 75. As Pahl himself noted (1984: 2-3), his career did not follow a simple, linear trajectory. His undergraduate studies in geography at Cambridge were followed by doctoral research based at the LSE, and appointment as a sociologist at the University of Kent in 1965 where he worked for three decades. He latterly developed associations with the Universities of Essex and Keele, and was still publishing in the final year of his life (Pahl and Spencer 2010). These institutional affiliations coincide with a succession of substantive foci. These began with doctoral research undertaken in Hertfordshire (Pahl 1965) that was followed by a decade of studying managers, corporatism and urban matters at the same time as he was involved in advising government bodies on the development of London, the city in which he had been born. In the mid-1970's Pahl's attention shifted quite deliberately away from urban sociology and planning to more work-related questions, including the impact of unemployment on households (although he still contributed significantly to the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* which was founded at this time). *Divisions of Labour* (1984) (which Pahl regarded as his best book [LINK TO SCANNED COPY OF BOOK COVER]) reports on this decade of intensive fieldwork focused on the Isle of Sheppey, which was geographically close by but sociologically far removed from the city of Canterbury where Pahl's institutional base of the University of Kent lay. The output of each of the subsequent approximately decade-long periods is dominated by the publication of a research monograph. One, *After Success* (1995), analyses the forces that compel individuals to seek upward mobility and the anxieties it tends to engender. The next, *Rethinking Friendship* (Spencer and Pahl 2006), based on research conducted at Essex, is concerned with the role played by informal social ties in community life. There is, however, more to these stages than this overly-neat summary can capture. Each stage contains work on several topics, and there are certain recurrent themes. Pahl's work returns frequently to the concern to bring a comparative perspective to bear, to the need to challenge accounts by authors who have a propensity for 'leaping to gloomy conclusions' (Pahl and Spencer 2004: 95), and to the link between private troubles and public issues.

Pahl's published work as a sociologist is extensive and pursues issues in many directions. It stretches back fifty years, and is made up of a dozen books, dozens of chapters in books, equally numerous journal articles, and hundreds of book reviews, as well as further hundreds of less formally academic pieces (Pahl 2009). It is remarkable for the extent to which he and his many collaborators engaged in debates that cross disciplinary, theoretical, methodological, institutional and international boundaries. Also remarkable is

Pahl's capacity to re-cast his agenda when it became apparent that arguments required revision. This happened, for example, when his initial standpoint on the opportunities for unemployed workers to carve out alternative careers in the informal economy turned out to be 'somewhat rash' (1984: 119). For Pahl, 'the best sociologists are those who do not get the answers that they want' (interview with Pahl by authors, 2008), whose projects are ones where the initial expectations prove flawed and necessitate deeper thinking. Various types of documents relating to Pahl's sociological career are available. These comprise an extensive body of works in the public domain that include autobiographical reflections, interview and lecture material, and archived materials that extend considerably beyond the published record of the research projects to which they relate. These materials have been supplemented by (unpublished) interviews conducted with Pahl by the authors, and by comments on earlier drafts made by third parties familiar with his work. They are drawn upon to support the argument that much can be learned from this particular sociologist's career by considering the disciplinary influences on his work, and his location in relation to theoretical, methodological and substantive debates, with a view to understanding his practice as a sociologist within and beyond the academy.

#### Disciplinary influences

A defining feature of Pahl's work is what we call 'interdisciplinary sociology', in which there is a very broad range of influences on the questions that are asked and the analyses that are developed within an approach that nevertheless has a firm sociological foundation. Pahl has been called a 'geographer turned sociologist' (Savage 2010: 5), and his own (2008) description of his early disciplinary shift 'from geography to sociology' locates the start of his sociological career as a postgraduate. He records that in his school and undergraduate studies in geography it was the social aspects of the subject that most engaged him, and his first book publication *Urbs in Rure* (1965), which came out of his PhD thesis, is praised by the geographer Jones for 'the way it ignores the distinctions between geography and sociology' (1965: 3). Jones supervised the thesis with the sociologist Westergaard, and their joint influence fed Pahl's lifelong fascination with what he called the 'tension between class and place' (2008: 107). It was a core interest in the analysis of change in the Hertfordshire countryside which was the subject of his thesis, and a key concern in the urban sociology focusing on London that occupied him for the following decade. Representative elements of this latter work were published as *Whose City?* (1975). The period from the mid-1970's to the mid-1980's saw Pahl and various colleagues pursue a different research agenda relating to unemployment and all forms of work, but his extended fieldwork on Sheppey was consistently mindful of the importance of the spatial context in which social processes of polarization were working themselves out. From Hertfordshire through London to Sheppey, answers to the question 'how much of the cake and for whom?' (1975: 8) developed a sociological argument with a strong geographical element.

Disciplinary influences on Pahl's sociological career extend well beyond geography. 'Always begin with history' was a favoured maxim of Pahl's, and the pattern of including historical material in the consideration of a sociological

problem was established at the outset (1965: ch.II). Soon afterwards he remarked 'that if historians and sociologists work closely together there are likely to be important advances in the understanding of urbanism' (1968: 36). His review of the field begins by referring to ancient Greece. His 1970 text *Patterns of Urban Life* traces the story of British cities over two thousand years, while his 1973 lecture *London: what next?* notes the long history of concerns about urban life. Quoting from an historical source about unrest in eighteenth-century London, Pahl observed that the city 'has presented us with distinctive problems in the past and will continue to do so in the future' (1973: 25). *Divisions of Labour* sets the scene for the analysis by considering 'past and present ways of work' (1984: Pt 1), while the analysis of contemporary Sheppey follows a discussion of 'the historical development of the Sheerness Naval Dockyard' (1984: 155). *After Success* compares modern anxiety with that found in the ancient world and in the middle ages, and complains of the 'very narrow time perspective' of 'much current discussion' (1995: 181). And *On Friendship* discusses 'friendship in the ancient world' and 'friendship in pre-modern Europe' as a counterbalance to 'the sociological presentism of much contemporary writing' (2000: 20, 61). Similarly, his consideration of social cohesion traces its history, commenting that 'If there ever was... a golden age in Britain it was certainly not in the nineteenth century' (1991: 354), thereby urging caution on commentators who contrast the dysfunctional present with a more attractive scenario set in the indefinite past.

Pahl's arguments about the value of historically-informed sociological analyses resemble Elias's (1987) critique of 'the retreat of sociologists into the present'. Like Elias, Pahl drew on diverse sources of historical materials. Some of them came to his attention serendipitously. The opportunity to conduct oral histories in post-communist Russia was unexpected (Pahl and Thompson 1994). It was also by chance that he shared a university staircase with 'a classicist and a specialist on Chaucer' who directed his attention to 'Greek and Roman approaches to hubris' and to the medieval poet Hoccleve respectively. However, this was not a random process of accumulating diverse points of reference; rather, it fitted a method of working driven by the desire 'to get empirical evidence' (1995: xi, 163) relating to social behaviour about which reliable source material may not be readily accessible. This preparedness to venture into different disciplinary fields led Pahl to various unexpected encounters, such as his engagement with Horney's psychoanalytical theories of the forces that drive individuals to pursue success.

Elsewhere in Pahl's work anthropological influences are readily apparent. They are particularly prominent in *Rethinking Friendship*, where Spencer and Pahl draw on the fundamental anthropological tenet that social phenomena are 'not universal across all cultures', an insight which comes from the discipline's capacity to learn from 'faraway places which most of us would otherwise never penetrate' (2006: 40, 30). The value of anthropological thinking is also acknowledged in Pahl's early writings, where 'studies in depth of rural and urban communities in various parts of the world, by social anthropologists' (1968: 285) are treated as a powerful reason to avoid styles of generalization that are insensitive to local context. Pahl later recalled that at

the time this was written his university department's culture 'was grounded in the social anthropology of the Mediterranean countries' (2000: viii). One of these countries, Italy, he described together with Hungary as 'two of the world's most interesting societies' (1988: xi). This comment related to the re-thinking of the categories of work prompted by the re-emergence of mass unemployment in the advanced capitalist economies in the 1970's and the parallel development of informal economies in state socialist societies. Pahl's analysis of Sheppey also had much in common with Wallman's (1984) argument. Both drew on anthropological ideas about households and their strategies in the formulation of new conceptions of work (Pahl *et al* 1983: 115).

Pahl's engagement with political economy also merits mentioning. Researching Sheppey led Pahl to think in terms of 'the local political economy' of which 'geographers and regional economists' were criticised for having lost sight through their tendency to concentrate on global processes. Pahl sought to achieve a more balanced approach by paying attention to 'local land and housing markets and how these are inter-related with the policies and practices of local employers and local and national government' (1985: 252-3). This was not a wholly new development in his thinking. His earlier work on urban managers had emphasised 'the need for comparative and historical analysis' in order to understand why places are so different despite apparently homogenising trends such as the development of citizenship and welfare rights. His concern then had been to highlight 'the context of *British* political economy' (1975: 279, 283, emphasis in original); other countries, advanced capitalist societies and Eastern Europe's state socialist societies (1977b), were different. The essential point highlights the political and economic forces behind spatial variations in patterns of who gains and who loses. In the Sheppey work this point was extended by linking the analysis of these forces to political action. Again the thrust of the argument advanced was that of local mediation of general processes, for example through immediate household circumstances. Such circumstances matter for how individuals 'experience social, political and economic change', and for how they respond to them. These arguments were linked to the re-examination of conventional categories such as production and consumption, at least 'as these are conventionally understood by economists' (Pahl and Wallace 1988: 136, 148). The Sheppey study highlighted 'the growth of self-provisioning' (Pahl 1984: 324), undertaking work of various kinds for oneself and one's household. This blurring of the production/consumption distinction means that political action becomes less easily attributable to a person's position in the production process.

This breadth of disciplines with which Pahl engaged over the course of his career calls for some explanation. It certainly reflects the variety of issues that he sought to address. These range from the impact of migration to the ways in which people get by in times of economic adversity, and from the foundations of community and social solidarity to the association between individual success and anxiety. One common element in this diverse agenda is Mills' concern to link 'personal troubles' with 'public issues' (2000: 8). Pahl refers approvingly to the rationale of tracing 'the connections between public issues

and private troubles' (1984: 7; see also 1980: 1; 1995: 15, 161; Spencer and Pahl 2006: 1), and it is instructive that Mills urged sociologists to engage with other disciplines such as history, psychology, politics, economics and anthropology. It is equally instructive this did not change Mills's identification as a sociologist rather than as a more generic social scientist. Pahl follows Mills in this regard, referring to sociology as 'my discipline' (1991: 349; see also Pahl and Winkler 1974b: 115), even though (unlike Mills) he had not studied sociology as an undergraduate. (Pahl is typical of his generation of sociologists in this respect [Platt 2003: 33].) For Pahl, neighbouring disciplines provide encounters which sharpen up sociological arguments, but the sociological domain remains distinct from those of neighbouring disciplines, driven by a distinctive set of questions. This approach leads us to describe Pahl as an 'interdisciplinary sociologist'.

### Theory, method, and substantive analyses

*After Success* contains an intriguing pointer to how such critical engagement might develop, in remarks that appear at the beginning and the end of the book. These question the faith in economic and technological fixes that underpins modern societies. In place of 'the economic fix, the technological fix', he recommends exploring the potential of 'the social fix' (1995: viii, 195). This expression of doubt about simple solutions that are proposed with the best of intentions as answers to complex social problems is a recurrent theme in his work. It is there in his early discussion of the work of planners as 'social engineering'. The training of planners to be 'tidy and orderly' (1970: 130) deserves, Pahl argued, to be leavened by sociological thinking; the latter has the potential to highlight the drawbacks of experts seeking to impose technical or spatial fixes on social problems. Pahl's scepticism is also present in the discussion of rising levels of unemployment and proposed solutions framed in terms of job protection. Gershuny and Pahl (1981) argued that such policy initiatives would be unlikely to provide lasting benefits in an increasingly competitive global economy, and might even have the unintended consequence of worsening the position of the most vulnerable workers. Pahl could thus be sceptical not only of those in positions of power but also of proponents of radical alternatives to the status quo. His statement that 'one must always be suspicious of the conventional wisdom' (1973: 5) and his description of scepticism as 'the sociologist's greatest strength' (1977a: 147) echo Marx's favourite motto, 'doubt everything'. In Pahl's work this scepticism extended to Marxist traditions of sociological thought.

Pahl's assertion that 'For most sociologists, their image of society derives from Marx' (1977c: 516) was an exaggeration even at the time it was written. Zeitlin's thesis that sociology has been 'largely shaped by the intellectual response to Marx's ideas' (1987: xi) is more convincing. This argument certainly holds for Pahl's own work. For all of Pahl's sceptical asides about the questionable value of sociological theorising, such as his and Wallace's remark about Raymond Williams being 'freed from the burden of sociological theory' (1988: 149), he did engage extensively with theoretical debates about rationality, identity, social cohesion, and social change. In doing so, he resisted explicit alignment with particular schools of thought, preferring to hold that 'there is something in all of them'. This was his judgement on the

Durkheimian, Marxist and Weberian theories (framed, respectively, in terms of declining social solidarity, a history of class conflict, and the growing role of the state) that were presented to him by local people in 'home-spun' form to explain the situation on Sheppey around 1980. Pahl describes these competing theories as 'inadequate in different ways', despite each having 'an element of truth in it' (1984: 188-9). Revisiting this issue, Pahl contrasted the 'experience-near theories' of local people on Sheppey with the 'experience-distant concepts' that he and his team brought to bear, and concluded that the variant forms of 'kitchen theory' that were rooted in local people's experiences deserved better than the labelling they received as false consciousness at the hands of observers wearing 'experience-distant sociological blinkers' (2005: 631-4). In Pahl's view, theoretical explanations that set 'personal experience' and 'general formulations' (1984: 3) in opposition to each other have limited value.

Pahl's account of people's practices emphasised their potential rationality. Discussing their Sheppey findings, Pahl and Wallace argued that 'Very often, households make very precise calculations about the balance of work between that which is paid for and that which they do themselves'. The argument also highlights agency by noting that 'households in the same material circumstances may choose to use these resources in fundamentally different ways, whereas those in different material circumstances, but with similar goals and values, may work to achieve similar outcomes and styles of life' (1985b: 379-80). At the same time, the presence of structural constraints is noted, as when Jim is quoted approvingly as saying 'If you're on social security and you're on x amount of pounds each week then you're trapped' (1984: 299). Jim and his wife Linda play a pivotal role in *Divisions of Labour* (1984: ch.11) as a couple whose experiences epitomise being at the sharp end of social polarization, in contrast to the fortunes of Beryl and George who are affluent workers. The difference between these two couples is not that affluence is the product of 'a rational work strategy' and poverty the product of the absence of rationality; nor is it accounted for by differences in capabilities, because 'if anything, Jim and Linda have a broader range of qualities and aptitudes and appear to be more entrepreneurial and energetic' (1984: 306, 309). Rather, the divergent paths of the two couples reflected forces beyond their control that left Linda and Jim short of money.

The analysis of households operating rational strategies at the micro level was complemented by the argument that at the macro level households were subject to a process of social polarization. The Sheppey research pointed towards 'increasing divergence between households with multiple earners and high income undertaking many forms of work and those households with no earners and low income' (Wallace and Pahl 1986: 120). The contrast was made between 'work-rich households' and 'work-starved households' (Pahl 1988: 603), with the latter reliant on the welfare state to provide them with an income which lagged behind that of work-rich households. This analysis of social polarization contained echoes of Pahl's earlier analyses of polarization, but also marked a point of departure. *Urbs in Rure* argued that in-migration of middle-class commuters into Hertfordshire villages generated 'a strong tendency for a polarisation of the community' (1965: 79). Because 'to buy a



house in the country... is an economic burden only the relatively affluent can afford' (1975: 23, emphasis in original), local workers were spatially segregated in rented housing. The two groups were also separated by their distinct cultures, with the result that 'the middle-class and working-class villagers moved in separate worlds' (1975: 26). Polarization in the Sheppey research still revolved around income and housing, but by this time and in this geographical context owner-occupation was not the preserve of the middle class; levels of owner-occupation on Sheppey were 69%, including 61% of manual workers. Pahl concluded from such findings that the key division was between the affluent 'middle mass' of households (which included affluent workers) and 'a deprived underclass... beneath them'. This line of social cleavage did not have a strict geographical expression, since Beryl and George and Linda and Jim could, Pahl argued, 'quite easily' (1984: 175-6, 320, 309) have been neighbours.

The Sheppey findings provided another instance of how social polarization is expressed in different ways. Pahl had argued that seventeenth-century London saw contrasting developments in the east and the west that 'drew the rich and poor further apart' (1970: 39), and his analysis of Hertfordshire villages was similarly couched in terms of familiar class categories. Pahl became increasingly dissatisfied with conventional class analysis, for several reasons. One was that to speak of the working class as homogeneous failed to register crucial developments relating to the growing affluence that allowed significant numbers of workers' households to enjoy levels of consumption (including owner-occupation) that set them apart from their more impoverished counterparts. These developments also blurred the conventional boundary between the working class and the middle class, both of which were contributing members to the emerging 'middle mass'. Pahl's estimates of the numbers in the different parts of this emerging stratification order were not quite those of Therborn's (1989) 'two-thirds, one-third society', not least because Pahl identified in addition 'a well salaried or capital-owning bourgeoisie of about 12-15 per cent' (1984: 320), but both analyses share the belief that polarization was producing a marginalized minority increasingly detached from the rest of society. This new line of cleavage brought with it a new politics in which expression was given to the desire of most workers for the '*petit bourgeois* respectability' (Pahl and Wallace 1988: 147) of home-ownership and family-based consumption. Pahl's targets here were the body of literature on collective consumption, and the schools of thought that prioritised class consciousness over other potential bases of identity, including that of locality (Pahl *et al.* 1983: 144).

This line of analysis led Pahl to engage in debate about the value of class analysis which was deliberately 'polemical' (1989a: 710). The debate prompted a lively correspondence (Lee and Turner 1996: Pt Two). In fact, class was only one of several key sociological concepts which Pahl subjected to critical scrutiny and found wanting in their conventional formulations. The pattern was set early on with his critique of the rural-urban continuum which concluded that 'any attempt to tie particular patterns of social relationships to specific geographical milieux is a singularly fruitless exercise' (1968: 293). The difficulty of classifying Sheppey as either rural or urban constitutes an

important part of the attraction of studying this 'industrial island' (1984: ch.6). The Sheppey research in turn prompted prolonged reassessment of the concept of work as Pahl sought to move beyond 'our present confusions about the meaning of work' (1988: 7). In making the case that there is much more to the sociology of work than the study of employment, Pahl again adopted a polemical style, criticising the more popular literature on the future of work for its 'naivety and superficiality' (1988: 750), and in particular its reliance on anecdote rather than scholarly research. In addition, sociologists of work were taken to task for being too ready to accept romanticised notions of work in the past, and his criticism of this 'over-simple "golden-ageism"' (1988: 18) echoed that developed two decades previously in his critique of the sociology of rural communities. Indeed, Pahl's penchant for challenging established thinking was evident in other fields, such as the sociology of the family (Wilson and Pahl 1988), suggesting some continuity in the mode of working across these very different substantive areas and career stages.

This characteristic way of working is exemplified in Pahl's account of how his interest in friendship had its origins in his 'attempt to demythologise the idea of community' (2000: 3). The approach involves identifying an issue of public interest on which both lay and sociological literatures exist, and subjecting these ideas to critical scrutiny. This includes asking basic definitional questions, such as 'what is friendship?' (2000: ch.1), and then looking for patterns by locating contemporary evidence in historical and comparative perspective. This comparative element is vital for challenging sociologists' propensity to operate within existing analytical frameworks, that is, to maintain 'a conservative attachment to the categories they consider most significant' (1993: 253) as he remarked in relation to conventional class analysis. Seeking to avoid the 'danger of being trapped in a prison of outmoded concepts' (Pahl and Wallace 1988: 135) carries its own risks. Imaginative pioneering work can lead to errors. As has been noted already, Pahl had to concede that the initial idea, derived from early ethnographic fieldwork on Sheppey, that the informal economy provided unemployed workers with alternative ways to get by was unsustainable in the light of the more systematic survey data that he went on to collect. An earlier innovation, Pahl's theory of urban managerialism which placed emphasis on the role in urban systems of professionals such as planners, housing managers and social workers, similarly had to be 'reconsidered'. He came to conclude that this was because, stated briefly, it 'ignores the constraints of capitalism' (1975: 268). A second risk of going back to conceptual basics is that the subject appears unresearchable. Pahl and Spencer report being 'wary of using the established methodologies of those concerned with social networks... because... they are frequently concerned with easily measurable attributes' (2004: 73). A similar point was made in relation to previous studies of elites, where Pahl and Winkler took a different tack to avoid 'building a conclusion into one's methodology' (1974b: 120-1). The most readily accessible characteristics of a phenomenon are not necessarily the most sociologically interesting ones.

Certainly Pahl's mode of operation took time. *Divisions of Labour* was the outcome of the best part of a decade working around the subject and employing in the research team a variety of research methods including the

tools of ethnographic, interview, survey, documentary and visual research. But although Pahl would concur with Mills's observation that 'empirical work... is a great deal of trouble' (2000: 205), he would regard this as the necessary price of getting at the required evidence. In his interview with Wilkinson (2006) he spoke of the empathy that comes from 'being involved with people over a long period'. Although *After Success* was ostensibly the product of five years' work through the various stages of reading around the subject, critical thinking about this literature, collecting and analysing data, and writing up, the book's core question of what drives people to work as much as they do involved a return to the agenda of *Managers and Their Wives* (Pahl and Pahl 1971) which twenty five years previously had explored 'why managers in industry worked so hard'. In addition, the methodological appendix of *After Success* includes the observation that 'when doing research one is often thinking about one's own life' (1995: xi, 43, 196), and this point is echoed in *On Friendship* (2000: vii). By the time *Rethinking Friendship* was published, friendship had been 'a personal as well as a professional fascination' for 'a period of more than thirty years' (Spencer and Pahl 2006: 8). Paradoxically, Pahl indicated on more than one occasion that the material that he was publishing might have been improved had he had more time (1984: viii; 1995: ix), and while he was not alone in that, it is a particular challenge to adopt a sceptical stance towards the conventional wisdom of a field of knowledge at the same time as fundamentally questioning the adequacy of associated theoretical and methodological approaches.

#### Conclusion: a sociological career within and beyond the academy

One question with which this article began is whether sociology is a cumulative discipline. Although Pahl eschewed locating his work within any particular sociological tradition, and despite his being identified by others as a Weberian for the purposes of the urban managerialism debate (Saunders 1986: 10), we argue that over the course of his career there are more points of connection to the Durkheimian tradition than there are to others. There are three reasons for thinking this. First there is the frequent engagement with the issue of social cohesion and social solidarity. This problem informs his work from the early investigation of the bases of community through to the more recent concern with friendship as 'an increasingly important form of social glue in contemporary society' (2000: 1) and as the basis of 'hidden solidarities' (Spencer and Pahl 2006). The article in which Pahl explores 'the search for social cohesion' necessarily goes beyond the contributions to this literature by Durkheim with which it begins, but the argument developed that 'Social glue appears not to be spread evenly – either socially or geographically' reproduces a distinctly Durkheimian agenda of looking at 'factors such as age and social status' as the sources of the 'social and geographical variation in social glue' (1991: 350). Further, there is a strong echo of Durkheim's aphorism that 'liberty... is the product of regulation' (1984: 320) in Pahl and Winkler's (1974a) argument about the inevitability of some form of corporatism. Any society with a complex division of labour needs co-ordination that cannot be achieved satisfactorily through either centralised state direction or free-market deregulation.

Secondly, Pahl is as insistent about the crucial importance of comparative thinking as Durkheim was when he said that 'comparative sociology is not a special branch of sociology: it is sociology itself' (1982: 157). Durkheim is mentioned explicitly by Spencer and Pahl as a model practitioner of comparative interdisciplinary work before they lament 'It is contemporary sociology's loss that those with strong historical and cross-disciplinary interests are in a minority' (2006: 242). This was a familiar theme in Pahl's work, as for example when he noted that typically studies of the informal economy 'are presented ahistorically and serious cross-national research barely exists' (1989b: 91), or earlier when proposing that 'a comparative perspective is vital if the study of rural-urban differences is to gain in rigour and if new conceptual tools are to be created' (1968: 280). Of course, insistence on the importance of a comparative perspective is not uniquely Durkheimian, but Pahl's comparative thinking is given a distinctly Durkheimian flavour by his use of this approach to deploy rigorously collected empirical data as a basis of criticising romanticised visions of the past to which there is an unattainable longing to return. Like Durkheim, Pahl was clear that social change makes such going back impossible, even if it were desirable, which he doubts. The critique of ideas of a golden age is pervasive in his work. In addition to the instances already cited he was critical of writers who deploy the notion of 'a "Golden Age" of work' (1984: 2), a 'golden age of traditional community life' (2005: 633), or more generally 'some tranquil and law-abiding golden age' (1995: 157). It is not the role of sociological research to generate 'utopian policies' (1991: 359), but rather to provide 'hard empirical evidence' (Spencer and Pahl 2006: 2) to inform policy-makers and in the process to steer them away from some of the more crass and counterproductive forms of social engineering.

Thirdly, Pahl's writings imply that people need 'social moorings', or at least that those individuals who do not have 'peers in locality or work-centred status groups' (1991: 350) are at risk of social disconnection. This is why the 'downward spiral of economic and social detachment' (Pahl and Wallace 1985a: 224) that social polarization visits on disadvantaged households is such a threat: it is not simply about lack of money, but also about poverty's wider consequences. Durkheim's concept of anomie receives a much briefer mention in *Divisions of Labour* (1984: 186) than sociologically-informed readers might expect to find in a book with that title, but it is more prominent in *After Success*, notably the argument that unfulfilled desires are a problem for people who have experienced upward mobility as well as those who have been downwardly mobile. Both are vulnerable to disconnection from stable identities linked to the shared morality of what Durkheim called the 'common consciousness' (1984: 121). It follows that Durkheim's views on the connection between 'material interests and moral concerns' (Pahl and Wallace 1988: 149) have continuing relevance to sociological analyses of the current malaise, even if the specific remedies that Durkheim advocated, such as occupational associations, have not stood the test of time as well as the 'sociological fundamentals' (Pahl 2000: 158) expressed in his writings. Pahl's work thus built on sociological predecessors, appreciating the value of their ideas but mindful of the need to reassess their practical relevance in contemporary circumstances.

Pahl's career frequently took him beyond the academy. This role is not necessarily a route to popularity for academics, either among the members of the wider society with whom engagement is sought or among academic peers. To the former he was often associated with emotionally-based championing of the causes of society's 'underdogs', while to the latter he risked being co-opted by 'the top dogs' (1977a: 130). In his discussion of his role as a sociologist involved in the planning process he quoted approvingly Burns' statement that 'It is the business of sociologists to conduct a critical debate with the public', and in the process do more than simply tell planners 'the proportion of managers in industry who will want second homes by the year 2000'. By drawing not only on their 'social concern' but also on a broader comparative perspective than that within which policy-makers tend to operate, sociologists are well-placed 'to consider which social problems have most chance of being solved at that particular time' (1975: 216, 231, 229, 224). Pahl was uncertain about the extent of the impact of his involvement in the planning process in the 1960's and 1970's (1977a: 148) but was in less doubt about his subsequent participation in the production of *Faith in the City* (Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas 1985). Pahl was one of 18 Commission members, but the imprint of his thinking is readily apparent in the book, notably those sections relating to urban policy, housing, work and unemployment. The statement that 'The process of polarization is a general one in Britain today' (1985: 23) could have come from any of Pahl's publications of the period, and it informed the overall analysis of the Report. The political climate of the time was not receptive to the Report's proposals for remedying the social ills identified, although it may have helped to make inner cities 'the matter of the moment' (Robson 1988: vii, emphasis in original) following the 1987 general election.

The impact of sociological research and reasoning may also come more indirectly. Pahl was conscious of this in his use of Linda and Jim's story in *Divisions of Labour* to bring the statistical analysis of polarization 'alive' (1984: 277), and he noted that story has moved some readers to tears (Wilkinson 2006). Part of this story had already appeared in *New Society* (1982), a magazine that was a favourite outlet for Pahl to publish short, journalistic pieces for a wide audience of people interested in social issues. Articles that focused on individual experience suited this purpose well and popularised a version of sociology that helps 'to make us conscious of the processes of which we form a part' (1995: ix). The case study of Linda and Jim's extended family that Pahl and Wilson undertook following the publication of *Divisions of Labour* prompted a comment about the other side of this coin, that sociological textbooks based on dated or partial evidence mean that students 'learn a sociology that is widely at variance with their own personal experiences' (Wilson and Pahl 1988: 262). Such sources fail to achieve sociology's potential of 'demystifying' (Pahl 1975: 12) the social world.

Pahl was not sanguine about sociology's progress to ever-greater achievements. It was a constant refrain in his work that sociologists are insufficiently committed to keeping their research up-to-date. His judgement on family sociology in a previous period was that 'The empirical basis was too

scanty to say much with any great certainty' (Wilson and Pahl 1988: 240), while in community sociology in the 1970's there was over-reliance on 'limited, partial and outdated' sources, because 'very little field research was undertaken' (1984: 5). Even that which was undertaken was open to criticism for not doing enough; Newby's *The Deferential Worker* prompted the comment that 'there is no evidence that he sat on a tractor or helped to repair a puncture in the middle of a soggy clay field' (1977c: 516). In the realm of theory, efforts to develop understandings of social order were deemed 'lamentable' and although he stopped short of concluding that 'there is a neat forty year sociological cycle of rediscovery', he was disappointed by the discipline's 'cumulative capacity' (1991: 358, 348, 349). In family sociology too, authors were berated for being prone to 'a curious collective amnesia' which 'undermines the potential for cumulative understanding' (Wilson and Pahl 1988: 234). In the process, Gans's remarks on 'sociological amnesia' (1999: ch.14) were anticipated.

Curiously, Pahl's own work provides more grounds for optimism about the health of the discipline. Pahl suggested that his thinking evolved in a fashion akin to 'a shake of the kaliedoscope' (1984: 3) rather than a neat linear progression. Certainly, his career followed a course that could not have been predicted at the outset. But his mindfulness of having 'over the years... shifted positions' (1975: 6) is quite consistent with an on-going vision of the sociologist as someone who conducts empirical research to challenge conventional wisdom, and to 'engage with the practical problems of the society in which they live'. Pahl was driven by a sense of urgency about realigning sociological agendas to emerging trends, such as social polarization and the changing meaning of work discussed above. He was thus right to argue that 'there is a pattern to my "line" of thought'. His discussion of how he had been working with the concept of the middle mass since 1969 and persevered with it even though it was 'substantially at variance with what was being taught in sociology courses' (1984: 3, 6) illustrates this point nicely, but there are many others that relate to the dramatic changes that unfolded during the half century that he was practising sociology. In this article we have proposed another level at which a line of thought can be identified, that of the Durkheimian foundations of his thinking, which underpinned his capacity to apply sociological ideas in new ways. This approach certainly served him well in his career as one of the most influential sociologists of his generation, judged by citation, undoubtedly (Halsey 2004: 176), but also by the many other ways in which we ought to assess impact. Indeed, his profile corresponds to that of figures in the long tradition of British applied sociological research that began with 'independent-minded individuals' such as Booth and Rowntree who had comparable interests in 'urban poverty and its relationship to employment and housing conditions' (Bulmer 1985: 7). This tradition's concern to map changing social conditions and thereby to feed in not only to policy-making but to broader public debate remains as important as ever. Byrne's comment that 'Things should be different and the work we do as applied social researchers matters in making them different' (2011: 192-3) is one with which Pahl would have wholeheartedly concurred.

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