RETHINKING SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Edited by
David Robbins
with Lesley Caldwell,
Graham Day, Karen Jones
and Hilary Rose

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1 Introduction: Rethinking Inequality

The study of inequality has been a central project of sociological enquiry, past and present, to the extent that it does not so much constitute an area or specialty within sociology as the very stuff of the subject itself. In British sociology this engagement with the issue of inequality has taken a particular form. The investigations of late-nineteenth century poverty by Rowntree and Booth established a research tradition whose influence has persisted until the present day (Booth, 1903; Rowntree, 1901). The periodic re-discovery of poverty and deprivation in welfare state Britain (Titmuss, 1958, 1960; Coates and Silburn, 1973; Townsend, 1979; Field, 1978, 1980) builds on the tradition of the nineteenth century pioneers.

Given that the political contexts in which the tradition emerged and developed were characterised by class conflict and compromise, it is hardly surprising that it focussed primarily on the inequalities of class and that the deprivations of the working class were its most characteristic object of study. The emphasis on class did not, however, exclude a concern with the position of other disadvantaged groups: women, children and the old (Land, 1969; Piachaud, 1979; Townsend, 1963; Wedderburn, 1968).

It was not so much its subject matter which distinguished research in this tradition as the way in which inequality was conceptualised and studied. The style of the research was characterised by certain distinctive features which must be understood in relation to its methodological orientation and the political contexts in which it developed.

In the first place the 'British tradition' has been predominantly concerned with particular aspects of inequality; those of income, educational achievement and, to a lesser extent, wealth. This can be partly explained in terms of a political concern to monitor the workings of a welfare state established to contain the mobilisation of radical sentiment prior to and during the Second World War. The post-war political context was predominantly social democratic, in that the redistribution of income and wealth by the welfare state was seen as the remedy for class inequality. This was consistent with a sociological tendency to

define 'classes' as clusters of manual and nonmanual occupations distinguished primarily by the extent to which they possessed these resources. A related political emphasis saw increased social mobility through educational reform as an important means of breaking down 'the barriers of class' in British society (Fenwick, 1976; CCCS, 1981). In both cases there was a congruence between prevailing political concerns and the aspects of inequality highlighted by contemporary sociology.

Important as these influences were, it seems likely that the focus on income and educational achievement was also the result of the methodological orientation of mainstream British sociology. Positivist orthodoxy required that social life be described in terms of sets of variables that could be operationalised and measured empirically. The distribution of income and educational achievement fitted this methodological bill to perfection. In contrast, aspects of inequality which were not readily amenable to quantitative measurement tended to disappear from view. The perspective was, by its nature, silent on the distribution of economic and political power and on issues of cultural and legal domination and subordination.

The distinctive character of the 'British tradition' is not confined to its concentration on particular aspects of inequality but extends to the way in which these inequalities are conceptualised in _distributional_ terms. The empiricist inclinations of the studies implied not only the focus on empirically measurable types of inequality but also the operational definition of the categories across which such inequality varied. Social classes disappeared behind the terminology of 'income brackets' and 'quartiles', or at best, were treated as aggregates of occupations. As a result inequality was conceptualised as the differential distribution of desirable goods (e.g. money, educational qualifications) between more or less arbitrarily defined categories. There was a tendency to lose sight of the fact that inequality is inherently _relational_: the deprivation and powerlessness of one group following as the necessary consequence of the endowment and power of another. Also lost was an appreciation of the extent to which these relations of inequality are the axes of continuing conflict and change.

These shortcomings are reflected even in that work in the 'British tradition' which recognises that inequality is the expression of a social relation as well as a pattern of distribution. Townsend's thesis that poverty is both socially relative and objectively definable (Townsend, 1979, 1981) is instructive in this respect. He argues that the minimum requirements of normal social life are consensually defined in a society at a particular time and that the poor are those members of society who possess insufficient resources to maintain this minimum level of social commitment. Critics have questioned whether a clear-cut definition of 'normal social life' exists and, if it does,

whether participation in it is abruptly terminated below a given level of resources (Piachaud, 1981). More fundamentally, however, Townsend's reliance on social consensus precludes any sustained consideration of poverty and inequality as the outcome of relations between social groups: relations characterised by conflicts of interests and the unequal distribution of economic and political power. Townsend's victims are poor in relation to 'society's standards' rather than in relation to powerful and privileged groups who are able to realise their interests at the expense of those of the poor.

In summary, we suggest that the characteristic features of the 'British tradition', both substantive and conceptual, can be understood in relation to an empiricist methodology and a concern with an essentially social democratic politics of redistribution. This is not to deny the continuing vitality of work in this tradition or the potentially radical implications of its findings. The conclusions of any genuinely empirical study are not predetermined by the theoretical foundations upon which it is constructed. This accounts for the apparently paradoxical consequences of this research, which, through its 'rediscovery' of poverty and the exposure of continuing inequalities in educational achievement, has been crucial in undermining Fabian political strategy and social democratic theorising.

This brief characterisation of an influential tradition of research has been offered in order to provide a background against which the contributions to this volume may be usefully appraised. Their diversity indicates that sociologists are studying new aspects of inequality in new ways. The established tradition is being challenged by new approaches which reflect the changes that sociology has undergone in the last fifteen years - the abandonment of the hegemony of functionalist theory and positivist methodology in favour of a proliferation of 'perspectives' and, crucially, a closer engagement with the continental tradition of Marxist analysis. The work on inequality in this volume also reflects the appearance on the political scene of new and non-class based political movements.

Conceptually, the most obvious theme that unites the papers is the rejection of a distributional notion of inequality in favour of a relational one. The paradigmatic object of study is not the deprived social group but the unequal social relation, manifested in a variety of forms.

The range of subject matter covered by the papers indicates the way in which a long-standing concern with class-based inequality is being complemented by a renewed emphasis on inequalities associated with race, gender and age. This emphasis is represented by Amos, Gilroy and Lawrence's critique of the sociology of race relations, by Purcell's investigation of women workers and by Fitz and Hood-Williams' analysis of the subordination of wives and minors within the family. For all these authors the deter-

minations of class remain crucially important. Given that most of the contributions to this volume reflect, directly or indirectly, the revival of interest in Marxist analysis, it could hardly be otherwise. What does characterise the above contributions, however, is a sensitivity to the way in which the determinations of class are cross-cut, in a complex way, by those of race, age and gender. Indeed these authors are explicitly critical of those accounts in which the determinations of race, age and gender are simply reduced to those of class and, as a result, vanish from sight. This criticism cnn be levelled against recent empirical studies of educational achievement, occupation and social mobility (Halsey, Ridge and Heath, 1980; Goldthorpe, 1980) in which 'methodological' constraints appear to have dictated the exclusion of any consideration of women. As Amos, Gilroy and Lawrence note, this criticism can also be extended to much work in the Marxist tradition in which an overriding concern with class causes the specificity of racial, sexual and familial subordination to be ignored.

This sensitivity to the inequalities associated with race, gender and age reflects political developments in the 1970s. This is exemplified by Amos, Gilroy and Lawrence's critique of the substantial body of sociological literature concerned with the issues of 'integration' and the 'race relations problem' (Zubaida, 1970). One of the consequences of accelerating economic decline has been the precipitation of a crisis of policing in the inner cities. The rhetoric of 'integration' has been replaced by that of 'law and order' as the state has sought to maintain its control over black communities. Out of the escalating confrontation between police and blacks emerged a distinctive politics of black resistance and it is from this perspective that the authors mount their attack on the theoretical and methodological assumptions that underpin much sociological research on race relations. The need for a relational approach to racial inequality is forcefully argued. They insist that the problems of black communities should not be explained in terms of the peculiarities of black cultures and family structures but in terms of the complex of social relations that locks those communities into a position of subordination in capitalist societies characterised by institutionalised racism.

The influence of contemporary political developments is also reflected in the increasing sociological concern with inequalities related to gender. The resurgence of feminism in the 1970s entailed a critique of established forms of both social democratic and socialist politics. Not only had social democratic reform exhausted its repertoire without substantially affecting the continued subordination of women but, it was felt, the politics of the socialist left was organised in such a way as to marginalise the issue and to deny the specificity of women's experience (Rowbotham, Segal and Wainwright, 1979). Consequently there emerged an independent sexual politics which not only subjected social democratic and socialist politics to critical scrutiny but

also extended its critique to the academic discourses that underpinned them. Given sociology's extended silence on questions of gender, its sexism was quickly exposed and influentially criticised (Rowbotham, 1973; Jones, 1973). The result was the initiation of work, often by feminists themselves, which sought to write women and gender relations back into the theory and practice of the discipline (Roberts, 1981).

These developments are reflected in Kate Purcell's sensitive ethnographic study of the way in which female manual workers experience inequality. She relates the 'passivity' of these women to a culture of 'fatalism' which provides the medium through which their everyday experience is interpreted. Although the attitudes, beliefs and life-style of the women workers provide the main focus of her study, Purcell makes it clear that their 'fatalism' is grounded in the social relations that define the subordinate position of women in both the workplace and the family. It is not the cause of women's subordination but a learned response to it and, as such, can be unlearned.

The impact of the women's movement has also been reflected in a substantial and continuing revision of received sociological wisdom concerning the family. Despite Engels' early contribution (Engels, 1884) there has, until recently, been a tendency for marxists to neglect the family and familial relations, presumably as a result of an overriding concern with class relations. (1) Noting this, Fitz and Hood-Williams echo recent feminist work (Barker and Allen, 1976; Beechey, 1979) in insisting that the subordination of wives and minors is not simply a function of the class position of the male family head but is also determined by the patriarchal relations that prevail within the family. They develop this theme through an examination of the disjunction between familial and capitalist production, as witnessed by the diverse legal forms in which property is owned and transmitted within these two spheres. Familial property relations are diachronic, occur between legally (and usually biologically) related groups of agents and are mediated through mechanisms of inheritance and settlement. In contrast, capitalist property relations are synchronic, take place between formally free and substitutable agents, through free alienation via the law of contract. The nature of familial property relations in England at different historical conjunctures is examined through a study of the legal rules of inheritance, which specify the socially approved family form. Although the rules have changed over time and in relation to capitalist development they have, until recently, specified family relations of firmly patriarchal type. The present legal equivalence of husband and wife in the rules governing diachronic transmission merely indicates the increased importance of synchronic transmission in the reproduction of patriarchal family relations, a development resulting from the imposition of death duties.

Again the relational nature of inequality is stressed. The

dependency of wives and minors is the necessary consequence of the legally sanctioned dominance of the male family head. This treatment of age relations in the context of the family contrasts starkly with most existing sociological literature, which tends to categorise 'youth' and 'the old' as distinctive groups which constitute 'social problems'. The increasingly violent resistance of working class youth to social control has provoked the attention of sociologists of education, deviance and culture (Willis, 1976; Cohen, 1972; Hall and Jefferson, 1976) while 'the old' have by and large, remained the subject of research oriented to social policy (Townsend, 1963, 1973). Despite the increasing interest in inequalities associated with age, systematic study of age relations remains sparse.

Recent sociological work is not only distinguished by a relational conception of inequality but also by an emphasis on the cultural, ideological and political dimensions of domination and subordination. These are issues upon which the 'British tradition' has been largely silent, except in its tendency, criticised by Amos, Gilroy and Lawrence, to invoke the cultural peculiarities of a group to 'explain' its deprivation. A concern with the cultural dimensions of inequality is exhibited by a number of the contributions and must be viewed in relation to the general movement in recent British sociology towards an engagement with the issue of culture. This movement was given impetus by the writings of E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams and has been theoretically reinforced by the assimilation of continental work, notably that of Althusser, Gramsci and the Frankfurt School.

Essentially these developments entail a critique of the approach to culture adopted by much marxist analysis and by the 'sociology of knowledge' tradition, in which the focus is upon cultural _objects_: typically, systems of knowledge and belief, or artistic creations of various types. The characteristics of these cultural artefacts are explained in relation to a social order constituted 'outside' culture, defined in terms of a particular set of economic and political relations. Recently this reductive approach has come under increasing criticism and substantial revisions have been proposed. These involve a shift of emphasis from cultural objects towards the 'cultural practices' or 'cultural production' through which such products are created. Although 'cultural production' refers, in the first instance, to 'artistic and intellectual activities', this definition is extended to include 'all the signifying practices - from language, through the arts and philosophy, to journalism, fashion and advertising' (Williams, 1980, p.13). The materiality of cultural production is also emphasised: cultural production utilises particular means of production to create products which are both material and cultural objects.

Adopting this approach implies that forms of cultural production are not simply derivative of a pre-given social order; rather, they are crucially involved in the constitu-

tion of that order. Effectively, all social practices are cultural practices in that 'signifying systems' are implicated in them, providing the means through which a social order is 'communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored' (ibid.). At the same time a distinction is usually retained between social practices in general and practices which are manifestly cultural in that their primary object is the production and distribution of representations: conceptions and images of the world inscribed in 'texts' of all kinds - written, visual and aural (CCCS, 1981, pp.27-8).

This reorientation is the subject of continuing debate and its implications have, as yet, been only partially absorbed into the mainstream of sociological work. Nevertheless, some of the contributions can be usefully read in relation to the general tendencies implied by these innovations: the broadening of the concept of culture to include a whole range of commodities and practices, and the treatment of culture as constitutive of economic and political processes. In Purcell's contribution, for example, 'fatalism' refers to both the beliefs and practices of women workers and both interprets and constitutes the unequal social relations in which they are implicated. It is, however, Featherstone and Hepworth's discussion of 'consumer culture' and the 'new middle age' that most closely mirrors the concerns of the new sociology of culture. The interest of this contribution lies in its emphasis on the role that culture and cultural change plays in the constitution and transformation of inequalities. They argue that the celebration of youthful bodily stereotypes by 'consumer culture' in the advanced capitalist societies opens up new inequalities not just between different age groups, but also between the sexes and between different classes. These stereotypes pose social and psychological problems for the middle aged and are particularly hard on middle aged women. Such problems are compounded for members of the working class who are less likely to have access to the means of maintaining a youthful bodily appearance.

Featherstone and Hepworth's discussion of 'consumerism' and its implications for the imagery of age also exemplifies the broadened conception of culture favoured by recent sociological analysis. 'Consumerism' does not refer to a discrete belief system, but rather to the changing complex of meanings attached to and signified by commodities and their consumption.

In contrast, McCrone, Bechhofer and Kendrick tend towards a more traditional approach to cultural analysis. They are concerned with a particular cultural representation (in their terms 'a myth'): that of the inherent egalitarianism of the Scot. Although this myth is situated historically as the product of specific forms of academic and literary production and although it may be used to legitimate the inequalities that prevail in Scottish society, they emphasise that, of itself, the 'myth' carries no fixed ideological message. In an argument that echoes Barry Barnes'

demonstration of the contradictory ideological purposes to which the belief that 'all individuals are born equally endowed with talents and abilities' may be put (Barnes, 1974), they argue that the myth of egalitarianism is cultural raw material that can be worked into a variety of ideological schemes, radical or conservative.

This highlights an issue at the heart of contemporary debates around culture: the relation between the concepts of 'ideology' and 'culture'. In some accounts (Althusser, 1971) the concept of ideology has been extended to the point where, as Williams warns, it is in danger of 'repeating the history of "culture" as a concept' (Williams, op.cit, p.28). McCrone, Bechhofer and Kendrick's contribution indicates the need to restrict the designation 'ideological' to particular cultural representations and their production, in a way which retains the concept's explicitly critical reference (Larrain, 1979). Ideologies, it may be suggested, are systems of representation which are elaborated in such a way as to serve the interests of social groups by legitimating, naturalising or rationalising certain social relationships and practices. The concept implies a specifically contextual reference. The ideological significance of representations is not 'fixed' in the representations themselves but lies in the meaning that they acquire when deployed in particular ways in concrete social contexts.

In contrast to the general cultural concerns of the contributions discussed above, Bonnett, and Clarke, Taylor and Wren-Lewis, are concerned with ideology in this restricted sense, specifically, that of the new Right in contemporary Britain. The rise of monetarist ideology with its attendant anti-union and 'law and order' themes marks a significant break with the repertoire of consensus, corporatism and technocracy that has been most characteristic of the politics of social democracy in postwar Britain. The emergence of a political ideology which, in the name of 'improving incentives', requires British society to become increasingly unequal calls for a considered and critical response by sociologists.

Clarke, Taylor and Wren-Lewis analyse the coverage of the 1979 British General Election and, in particular, the way in which that coverage aided the ideological offensive of the Conservative Party. They conclude, firstly, that the coverage was organised entirely in terms of Parliamentary politics, to the exclusion of women's issues or the problems of the black community. Secondly, they demonstrate that despite the formal balance maintained between the coverage given to the two main parties, issues were defined and discussed in terms dictated by the Right.

The analysis suggests that the presentation of the election and its issues was mediated through the conventions of a 'discursive formation' predicated upon the cultural and professional practices of television journalism. It is argued that these practices contribute to an inequality in

the power to define political issues which systematically disadvantages the minor parties and extra-parliamentary groups and which, at least in 1979, disadvantaged the Labour Party and the Left. In these respects the paper reflects the concerns of contemporary cultural analysis in that it moves some way towards an exploration of the relationship between ideological representations and their mode of production. It also points to ways in which the analysis could be extended and developed by further investigation of the relationship between the conventions of television journalism and the social and technical relations of television production and by an examination of the ways in which these conventions structure the visual as well as the discursive dimensions of political coverage.

Bonnett's contribution usefully complements that of Clarke, Taylor and Wren-Lewis. His discussion is less concerned with the popular presentation of the ideology of the new Right, than with the relationship between the rise of monetarism and the political and economic context of Britain in the 1970s. This implies a more 'conventional' approach to ideological analysis which centres on the relationship between the nature of ideological representations and structurally defined interests of classes, class fractions and other social groups. While acknowledging the typical complexity of such relationships, Bonnett examines the nature and success of monetarist ideology in relation to the interests and political effectiveness of different fractions of British capital. A congruence between monetarism and the interests of finance capital is argued and substantiated through a study of the role of the intellectual representatives of the City in prosecuting the ideological and political campaign for monetarist policies.

This focus on the current situation draws attention to the crucial role that political processes play in the structuring and restructuring of unequal social relations. Prevailing patterns of inequality are not merely the product of economic relations, they are also the consequences of state policies, which, arising out of the temporary resolution of political conflicts, are continually contested. In its engagement with these issues Bonnett's contribution reflects the influence of important debates within the Marxist tradition over the state, political power, and social classes and class fractions (Holloway and Piciotto, 1977; Wright, 1978; Urry, 1981). While some positions in these debates relate state action to a general logic of capitalist development, rendering it necessarily functional for capital, others emphasise the autonomy of the political and the contradictory consequences of state interventions

Bonnett inclines towards the latter view. He notes the difficulties in imputing objectively definable interests to particular fractions of capital (let alone capital-in-general) and questions the capacities of different fractions to frame and promote political programmes that yield results that will actually serve their interests. In the British

case the economic position of finance capital may have been a necessary condition for the success of the monetarist campaign but it was not a sufficient one. The political organisation and ideological effectiveness of the representatives of finance capital and their allies were also crucially important. However, the hegemony of monetarism is unlikely to be long continued. The effects of monetarist policies are inimical to the interests of many manufacturing capitals and deepening recession will ultimately threaten important aspects of the City's own activities. In this situation, monetarist ideology and policy is vulnerable to new initiatives.

Similar themes, but in relation to popular struggles, are taken up by Piven and Cloward's analysis of the current situation in the USA. In their discussion of the economic and political consequences of American unemployment benefit programmes they take issue with sociologically functionalist and politically pessimistic arguments that welfare provision unproblematically serves the interests of capital by defusing popular protests and discontents. Although such concessions may serve the interests of political elites by safeguarding electoral majorities, they ultimately act against the interests of capital by decreasing the effectiveness of unemployment as a means of checking workplace militancy and holding down wages, hence the current political and ideological offensive against them. Moreover the consequences of such policies are not confined to the economic level, but include the creation of a new political consensus in which the state is held to be responsible for economic management and the provision of welfare. In this situation campaigns by representatives of capital to reverse welfare policies are likely to encounter popular resistance, opening up new possibilities for the political mobilisation of labour. The state becomes the site of conflict between the contending forces of capital and popular political movements, conflicts whose outcomes cannot be straight-forwardly read off from the economic dominance of capital but also depend on a complex of specifically political factors.

In summary, it is clear that recent work is moving beyond narrowly economic definitions of inequality to examine its legal, cultural, ideological and political determinants and consequences. In doing so it reflects certain well-defined developments in sociological theory and practice over the last decade. These other dimensions of inequality cannot, ultimately, be understood independently of 'economic' inequalities but neither can they be treated as the unmediated consequences of them. Also, as argued earlier, this is accompanied by a related shift from a distributional to a relational conception of inequality which, in ruling out 'blame the victim' strategies, has implications for the explanation of inequality.

At one level, these shifts are the result of the methodological re-orientation that has characterised much recent

sociology. The distributional concept of inequality was rooted in the methodology of survey work. In contrast the methodological orientation of work in this volume is significantly related to the influence of conflict theories, which necessarily emphasise the relational nature of inequality. This is particularly true of marxist analysis in which, paradigmatically, the subordinate position of one class or class fraction is the necessary condition of the advantaged position of another.

At another level, the work in the volume reflects the changing political context of the 1970s. As argued earlier, there is a resonance between a distributional conception of inequality in sociology and the concerns of a social democratic politics of redistribution and social mobility. In the same way, there is a correspondence between a relational conception of inequality, with its emphasis on inequalities as axes of conflict and struggle, and the sharpening political conflicts of the 1970s. Similarly, sociological emphasis on the cultural and ideological dimensions of inequality reflects the fact that the new politics of sex, ethnicity and age is pre-eminently a cultural politics.

There is, then, an important sense in which the implications of different conceptions of inequality are not confined to the choice of methodologies for academic work, but reach into the realms of political strategy. The political implications of the work in this volume point in quite other directions than those indicated by the 'British tradition'. A relational conceptualisation of inequality implies that progress towards greater equality entails transforming the complex of economic, cultural, familial, sexual, racial and political relations through which inequalities are constituted.

This question of the political implications of new ways of theorising inequality is addressed in the final paper, Corrigan's discussion of 'differences'. He points to the dangers in the kinds of theorising and political practice which attempt to erase differences, because they can only be conceptualised in terms of disadvantage. If differences constitute the basis of hierarchies an obvious tactic is to minimise or erase them, claiming, for example, that women are 'just as good' as men or that blacks are 'no different from' whites. Subject to this approach the politics of equality becomes the politics of uniformity. Corrigan's plea is for new kinds of analysis which account for differences without conceptualising them as departures from the norm - the metropolitan, the white, the male, the young - and for a politics which sensitively takes account of differences of historical experience, material situation and 'culture', seeing them as a source of strength, not as a problem to be minimised and overcome. It is a plea that speaks directly to the questions raised by a whole range of contemporary political struggles, most obviously those of women, of racial communities in the cities and of culturally distinct groups in the 'peripheral' areas of Europe. As such it

clearly demonstrates the political relevance of the sociological rethinking of inequality exemplified by the work in this book.

NOTE

(1) For an important exception see Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter, 1976.

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2 White Sociology, Black Struggle

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INTRODUCTION

Sociology fails in its attempt to construct an adequate understanding of race relations, it remains irrelevant to the black experience. The sociology of race relations has constructed a 'pathology of black life' which informs not only the policy makers but also 'common sense' understandings of 'race'. (1)

The period after the Second World War saw large scale migration to Britain from the Caribbean and Asia and this sparked off an interest in 'black' people themselves as well as their 'effect' on the British public. It is ironic that the first sociological studies undertaken in the late forties and fifties looked at black communities in the dock areas of Cardiff and Liverpool, areas of long standing settlement, (2) rather than at the newly-arrived pools of labour power, ready to serve the needs of Britain's declining and stagnant industries.

But this is not to say that there was no tradition of research to draw on. In addition to the anthropological studies of black people in various regions of the world, there were also a number of studies of black people in the colonial situation, and the ideological concepts utilised in these accounts were wheeled out again once the colonial problem had become Britain's own internal problem. This work highlighted examples of the processes of discrimination and prejudice, the lynch pin of a great deal of sociological literature in the fifties and sixties. In much of this early research racial ideas and feelings of racial superiority (3) were traced back to the colonial period and as such had a history which was worthy of study, but the importance of race as a structuring feature of the British social formation was obscured and went unanalysed. (4) The commitment was to the understanding of racial ideas, and the 'race problem' was perceived as a matter of getting white people to be more tolerant of blacks by making black culture more understandable. This political project became the basis of the 'sociology of race relations'. The very stress on race relations demonstrates the focus on the interpersonal relations between blacks and whites. The job of interpreter

required informing the policy makers and opening up Britain's black communities for scrutiny by the 'academic and objective' gaze of the researcher.

In John Rex's terms, blacks wanted to be assimilated and the task of the sociologist was to aid the process. (5) The problem therefore, was one of integration. However, this argument is premised on profound misunderstanding at best, rampant paternalism at worst.

In order to understand the present state of the sociology of race relations we propose to look at the historical development of that sociology and to draw together its various strands. Our starting point is those studies which concentrated on blacks as immigrants and the problems they were said to represent to white society. Sheila Patterson's research in Brixton (6) is one example of a piece of sociological research that is still discussed on sociology courses today, even if her conclusions are viewed with scepticism. She talks of her sense of shock on seeing black people on the streets of Brixton. Given that that was what she had gone to study her surprise is enlightening to say the least. She claimed that the same sense of 'culture shock' experienced by white residents on seeing black people was the reason for the tensions existing between 'immigrant' and 'host' communities. The 'immigrant/host' model employed by Patterson assumes a passive search for acceptance on the part of the immigrant group and a benevolent, though occasionally hostile, reception on the part of the host community upon whose largesse the immigrant group depends.

A factor underlying this type of sociological research is the sociologists' inability to accept their own irrelevance, in the sense that black people don't need researchers to interpret their lives for them or to make them more accessible and acceptable to white society. The existence of black communities, controlled by black people and over which the agents of the state have no control is perceived as a frightening development. 'Radical alternatives are bound to arise. The most threatening will be those which are set up by minorities for minorities'. (7) The autonomous growth of those communities has gone hand in hand with the growth of a revolutionary politics which it is not within the framework of bourgeois sociology to comprehend. Therein lies the problem.

The early work on blacks as immigrants shifted to a concern with them as settlers. The pattern of sixties legislation, increasingly strict immigration controls accompanied by race relations initiatives, became the model for the development of good race relations. (8) The degree of consensus between state strategies and the needs of capital during the period signalled a certain degree of political and economic stability but the honeymoon was shortlived.

The introduction of black labour to Britain was the solution to an economically problematic labour shortage. Without

such labour the main bastion of the 'post war settlement', the Welfare State, would not have come into existence in the way that it did. (9) Sociologists, radical and otherwise, were themselves lulled by the settled nature of British politics: struggle as an impetus for change was seen as irrelevant to the reality of life for the majority of the working class. It was in this climate that sociologists studied the effects of Britain's new found prosperity on the working class and produced the 'embourgeoisement' thesis, which postulated the erosion of traditional working class values with the increasing material success of the class. Class struggle was seen as dead, dying, or expressed only in its institutionalised forms.

By the end of the fifties that hegemony was beginning to disintegrate as the contradictions between the economic and social needs of the British social formation became sharper. The liberal phase - the open door policy - was coming to an end but this had little impact on the work of sociologists until the mid-sixties, when they found that they too were endorsing the positive effects of immigration control for internal race relations.

This period has been characterised as 'the highest stage of social democracy' with its emphasis on equal opportunities for all, but the extension of these opportunities to black people required that their numbers be strictly controlled. Restriction would aid their eventual integration. Roy Jenkins defined integration 'not as a flattening process of assimilation but as equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance'. It was a vision which dovetailed with the analysis of racism in terms of the effects of discrimination and prejudice on black people. Having identified the 'problem' as one of discrimination and prejudice the next step was to solve it, something easily accomplished by legislative means.

The sociology of race relations took its place with a number of other social work/social problem issues within the social democratic tradition. What underlies this vision of cultural pluralism? What is its definition of racism, of race relations, of culture? The importance of racism as a means through which the developing crisis was perceived and as a framework within which that crisis was to be experienced, was missing. (10) The emphasis was on race relations, but race relations simplified as cultural relations and lacking any political dynamic, that is, a set of relations outside the wider class/power relations obtaining in the society.

The academic centre for work on 'ethnicity' is the Social Science Research Unit on Ethnic Relations established at the University of Bristol in 1971. The Unit's task was to investigate a number of issues within the black community. The ethos of the Unit was not immediately policy-oriented, although the type and nature of their work has ensured its