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**Citation for published version:**

Scott, J, Crow, G & McKie, L 2023, 'Historical perspectives on British sociology's future: An interview with John Scott', *Sociology-The journal of the british sociological association*, vol. 57, no. 2, 1107490, pp. 315-324. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385221107490>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1177/00380385221107490](https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385221107490)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

Sociology-The journal of the british sociological association

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## Historical Perspectives on British Sociology's Future: An Interview with John Scott

Sociology  
2023, Vol. 57(2) 315–324  
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DOI: 10.1177/00380385221107490  
journals.sagepub.com/home/soc



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### Abstract

John Scott's career as a sociologist spans more than 50 years, during which time he has written or edited more than 40 books among a total of more than 200 publications. The breadth of his interests and his service to the discipline in various roles including as President of the British Sociological Association and chair of the Sociology sub-panel for the Research Assessment Exercise and the Research Excellence Framework make him particularly well-placed to comment on sociology's history and its trajectories. His 2020 book *British Sociology: A History* presents a painstakingly researched account of the discipline's shifting fortunes in which its practitioners have responded to intellectual opportunities and practical challenges to promote vibrant and multifaceted debate about the nature of social structures and the direction of social change. In the interview that follows he responds to questions from Graham Crow and Linda McKie to argue that knowledge of the discipline's history has a key role to play informing today's sociologists of the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead.

### Keywords

founding figures, future, history, sociology, turns

**Graham Crow:** In your book *Social Theory* (Scott, 2006) you take issue with Alfred Whitehead's dictum that 'a science that hesitates to forget its founders is lost'. Why cite that quote from Whitehead?

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**John Scott:**

Whitehead's statement was a standard quote used in essays and examination questions when I was a student in the late 1960s. The reason that it was used by my teachers and examiners was to encourage discussion of the view that any science develops through the discussion and criticism of ideas, not through the exegesis of the works of those who were described, at the time, as the 'founding fathers'. Whitehead was making the point in relation to all sciences and those who asked us neophytes to discuss his statement were trying to get us to consider the view that sociology could advance only if it followed the example of physics and the other natural sciences. Physicists, it was held, do not constantly discuss the life and times of Newton, Hooke or Boyle; they formulate hypotheses and test these through experiment and empirical observation. So, we were being led to consider whether sociology should follow Comte's positivist methodology and Popper's method of conjecture and refutation.

We have all now come to reject positivism, or at least the rather crude form of positivism that figured in so many texts of the 1970s and 1980s. We now have a more rounded understanding of the appropriate methodology for sociology – and we still spend a great deal of time discussing the works of the founders. I think that there is a great value in this; nevertheless, there was an element of truth in what Whitehead was saying.

The valid core of Whitehead's assertion is the view that science – any science – develops through a discussion of ideas and that it is totally unimportant what any particular theorist 'really' meant when he or she used an idea. Thus, we should be discussing 'organic solidarity', 'elective affinity' and 'surplus value', not Durkheim, Weber or Marx. The important question is whether any of these concepts can be useful in empirical research or can be reformulated in order to improve its usefulness. It may help us if we have a clear understanding of what Durkheim meant by organic solidarity, but our interest in what Durkheim actually said is limited to what it contributes to the usefulness of the concept. Durkheim's views are not important in their own right. I would say the same about Weber and Marx, and about Parsons, Foucault, Butler and Bourdieu.

There is another consideration. We are increasingly told to avoid discussing the ideas of Dead White Males, with the emphasis on the word 'dead', and to concentrate on more recent considerations. Indeed, some publishers have begun to suggest, or even to require, that texts should contain no references to works published before 2000: 'Old ideas bad, new ideas good.' This is totally misguided. The discussion of ideas and their relevance must focus on the *best* discussions, regardless of their date of production. In some cases that may be 2022, but in other cases it may be 1951, 1897 or 1844. The sole criterion should be the quality of the contribution, not its age or the mortality of its author.

Having said all that, there are very good reasons for retaining an interest in the founders. It is important for any practitioner to have a knowledge of the history of their science. Physicists do have an interest in the lives and ideas of Newton, Einstein, Bohr and others, and we sociologists, too, should be interested in the lives and ideas of those who

have contributed significantly to the development of our subject. All that we have achieved is dependent on their achievements. The importance of this was recognised by the great advocate of scientific sociology Robert Merton, who wrote a book with a title taken from Newton's statement that any scientific advances that he made were due to 'standing on the shoulders of giants'.

**Linda McKie:** In what ways can knowledge of sociology's history contribute to understanding its current and future trajectories?

**John Scott:** A knowledge of the history of sociology is important in at least two respects. First, it is central to our identity as sociologists. It gives us a sense of our own position in the great collective enterprise of understanding the social world. Second, it helps to stop us from introducing an apparently novel idea that has already been invented and studied by others. When our memory of our history is short, it is all too easy to reinvent the wheel.

In recent decades, sociologists have often pointed us in 'new directions' that will take us forward from the misleading and one-sided assumptions of established sociology. All too often, these new directions prove to be exactly the opposite: they involve an unseen and unacknowledged return to ideas that were once widely discussed but have been forgotten (or never known) by those who are unfamiliar with the history of the subject.

There is an assumption that as the world is constantly changing, so our theories and concepts must also change. There is much truth in this, but it is also true that some ideas are of lasting significance and can continue to inform social situations that are radically different from those to which they originally applied. Modern societies may no longer have feudal superiors or patrimonial rulers, but they do still have modes of production and systems of authority.

We must retain a knowledge of the development of our discipline, of the ideas that have emerged and been discussed throughout its history. This is a matter not only of retaining a knowledge of the founders and the 'classics', but also of our recent history. So much of the sociology of the 1950s and 1960s, for example, is unknown by those who have entered sociology since the 1980s. Each generation knows less – and is taught less – of the generations that preceded it. As a result, we lose sight of the giants on whose shoulders we stand, and we are in constant danger of reinventing their insights and discoveries, and we make slower and more uncertain progress than would otherwise be possible.

Marx put a very negative spin on this, holding that 'History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce.' I wouldn't go as far as that: past ideas are not always tragic, and new ideas are not always farcical. However, it is certainly true that there is both tragedy and farce in repeating ideas when they are bad ideas. We must learn from the mistakes made by our giants as well as from their achievements.

I should, perhaps, give an example of what I mean. Foucault's ideas on knowledge, power and expertise have been, quite rightly, influential. What is frustrating to those who know something of the history of sociology is that his ideas relate closely to the ideas of sociologists writing in the 1950s and 1960s who explored power, conflict and expertise

in the development of the professions, their strategies of professional control through the monopolisation of knowledge and occupational closure, and their ability to shape the identities that are imposed on subjects whose power to resist is limited. These ideas were developed, among many others, by American sociologists Eliot Friedson, Anselm Strauss, Erving Goffman and Howard Becker, and were pursued in Britain by Terry Johnson, Robert Dingwall and Noel and José Parry. Foucault makes a number of extremely important additions to these arguments, but those additions were seen as novelties rather than extensions. Might Foucault's influence have been both greater and deeper if he and his followers had had a better-informed awareness of this prior work? I am strongly of the opinion that we could make greater and more rapid intellectual advances if we all knew more of the history of social thought and research so that we could improve on old ideas rather than consigning them to the dustbin of history.

Ideas of the centrality of culture, of social construction, of the role of language, of the duality of action and structure, to name just a few key ideas, have been at the heart of classical sociology, yet all have been presented as novel discoveries and markers of an intellectual 'turn' and new direction at various points in the last 50 years.

Perhaps I should address, again, the issue of the Dead White Males. When considering the history of the discipline it is essential to be both accurate and comprehensive in the coverage of all who contributed, in whatever ways, to the development of the subject. While it is correct to recognise that men – and especially white Europeans – have been the most numerous contributors to that history and that many of them are now dead, there can be no excuse for ignoring the achievements and contributions made by women and those of non-white ethnicity. DWMs should figure in these discussions only to the extent of the significance of their contributions.

**Graham Crow:** How do Auguste Comte's ideas about prediction figure in this history?

**John Scott:** Comte took a particularly strong view about our ability to know the future, and I don't go along with him. He held that we can use our knowledge of 'laws' to predict historical trends and so can act in ways that will ease the process of social change. I have much sympathy with Popper's view that we could predict the knowledge that we will have in the future only if we already have that knowledge. Future knowledge is necessarily unknown. The implication is that the future is open-ended and we can, at best, project possible futures on the basis of past trends. This was the view of Norbert Elias in his reformulation of Comte's developmental view of knowledge and history.

A knowledge of history can be an excellent base for developing ideas, and it can be a good guide to how to move forward, but it is no substitute for the crucial work of theorising, observation and comparison through which sociology will actually develop.

**Graham Crow:** Have Norbert Elias's (1987) concerns about the retreat into the present been heeded?

**John Scott:** Elias's argument was concerned with what he saw as the failure of sociologists of the 1950s and 1960s to place the present in its historical context. He stressed the need always to consider the development of the present from definite past conditions. He developed this view in his study of the development of manners, the development of the state and court society, and the development of the sociology of knowledge. This was the view that he applied to the understanding of contemporary sociology as much as he did to the understanding of contemporary societies.

I think that Elias is wrong about the sociology of the past. The sociology of the period of Marx and Weber, on which he concentrates, was not exclusively concerned with issues of history and development. He considers as 'sociological' only those who wrote in the traditions of Marx and Weber (and, of course, Durkheim). If he had had a better understanding of the history of sociology, he would have recognised the large number of studies, especially statistical studies, undertaken in 19th-century Germany, France and Britain. We need think only of the great studies of Charles Booth in London, Seebohm Rowntree in York and local studies such as that of Maud Pember Reeves in Lambeth. Durkheim sponsored a series of empirical studies in the *Année Sociologique*, and Weber carried out a study of Polish migration into eastern Germany.

Regarding our present, therefore, there can be no 'retreat' from the past. Our sociology is just as much of a mixture of contemporary studies and developmental studies as was the case in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Sociology is a collective enterprise that encompasses a whole variety of equally legitimate approaches: historical and contemporary; quantitative and qualitative; concerned with action and concerned with structure; and so on. Limiting sociological attention to just one strand of that vibrant enterprise is a recipe for disaster.

**Linda McKie:** What aspects of today's sociology would be recognisable as such to its founding figures (both male and female)?

**John Scott:** If they expect it to be cast in the image of their own work, they would probably recognise very little as being sociological. Weber might recognise some, Durkheim quite a lot, Wollstonecraft and Martineau would recognise some recent work. However, sociology as a collective and diverse discipline has moved on considerably from those founding figures. The important question, perhaps, is whether work today would be recognised by them as 'sociological' even if it is not directly in the image of their own work. How tolerant would they be of a collective and diverse discipline?

These founders did not always see themselves as 'sociologists'. Martineau may have seen herself as a sociologist in the sense meant by Comte, Spencer and Durkheim, who saw themselves as unambiguously building a new academic discipline of sociology, and both Simmel and Tönnies contributed to the professionalisation of sociology. However, Weber

was highly ambivalent about adopting the professional identity of a sociologist, and Marx certainly did not see himself in that way. All would, I think, recognise *something* of present-day sociology as recognisably continuous with their own work, but none of them would recognise the totality of sociological work as constituting the future that they envisaged for their efforts. This is a sign of the advances that we have made. Standing on their shoulders, we have achieved far more than any of them could have envisaged. We should be proud of those achievements and not cower in the shadows cast by those that we idolise.

**Graham Crow:** In British sociology, how might its history be periodised in relation to how its practitioners have conceived the discipline's character and purpose?

**John Scott:** I recognise, very broadly, four periods: a period of precursor social thought; a 'classical' period from the late 19th century until the Second World War; a post-war period of expansion until the mid-1970s; and the period since then.

The early period was one in which there were a growing number of attempts to understand the development of social life. Although this was most marked in the liberal individualism that resulted in classical political economy, a number of conservative and Romantic writers, influenced by German idealism, took an interest in the social institutions of the family and community that tied economic relations into a larger 'society'. None of these writers described themselves as 'sociologists', nor did they see themselves as contributing to an academic discipline, but they did – unintentionally – lay the foundations for an intellectual enterprise that would be taken up in the wake of Comte's announcement of a new science of 'sociology'.

Principal among the classical sociologists was Herbert Spencer, though he was joined by the now all-but-forgotten John Robertson and Benjamin Kidd in a self-conscious attempt to establish a chair in sociology in the British university system and to professionalise sociology. Their efforts were complemented – though 'rivalled' might be a better term – by a number of empirical and statistical researchers, culminating in the work of Booth and Rowntree. The leading figures in the professionalisation of British sociology in the years between 1900 and the 1930s were Leonard Hobhouse and Patrick Geddes. With intellectual and financial support from the Fabian socialists, sociology was established as a degree subject at LSE, where Hobhouse was appointed as a professor. A professional association and a journal were established at the same time through the efforts of Geddes's acolyte and fixer, Victor Branford. Various schools and training centres in 'social studies' and 'social science' were established at various universities across the country and became bases for a certain amount of sociology teaching and research.

The Second World War was a natural point of punctuation in this disciplinary development. Students were called up into the forces and teaching was largely in abeyance until 1945. Chelly Halsey has described the return of a post-war generation of sociologists who were critical for the subsequent development of sociology. These young sociologists took up posts as the university system opened up to sociology. They shaped the concerns of sociology in the 1950s and trained those who would fill the new departments

of the 1960s. This was the period of the so-called social democratic settlement and a generation of sociologists saw themselves as working largely in support of the Labour Party programme of social renewal and reconstruction through improvements in education, housing and social justice.

This period was ended by the political and financial crises of the 1970s, which ushered in a new orthodoxy of neo-liberal market economics. The abandonment of social policies of intervention reduced the already weak interest that political decision-makers had in sociology. Critics of the subject were in the ascendant and their derogation of the intellectual status of sociology was, undoubtedly, fuelled by the over-blown claims that sociologists had made in the 1960s and by the self-identification of many as radicals and revolutionaries.

In this period sociologists were on the defensive, fighting cuts against the subject and fighting their denigration as peddlers of ‘Mickey Mouse’ degrees. The ‘scientific’ claims of the preceding generation – misleadingly characterised simply as ‘positivism’ – were abandoned and many looked increasingly to France and Germany for theoretical inspiration. Sociology in this period did develop a powerful and productive commitment to small-scale and qualitative work, though this aroused opposition in what I have called the Great Methodology Wars.

This qualitative and Franco-German influenced sociology has been almost wholly beneficial in reorienting the sociology of the 1950s and 1960s. A great deal of ethnographic work was produced that broadened and deepened the knowledge produced in the earlier period. Sociology became more diverse in its subject matter, showing the power of sociological analysis in a variety of new areas. The negative consequence of this reorientation, however, has been that the earlier work has been almost completely written out of the disciplinary history. New entrants and those who pursue ‘new directions’ often have little awareness of the achievements of earlier generations of sociologists that might usefully inform their work.

**Graham Crow:** Looking at these periodisations, what best explains what causes the shift from one period to another?

**John Scott:** My answer is largely implied in my discussion of the periodisation. There are two key factors. First, there are general economic conditions and their implications for the funding of Higher Education. Second, there is the political context that determines whether particular disciplines are seen as valuable contributors to policy priorities. Post-war expansion took place in the context of economic growth and a social democratic Keynesianism that saw sociology as a valuable contributor to the project of social reform. The 1970s marked a reversal in these political and economic conditions, initiating a period of contraction in state expenditure, a growth of neo-liberal expectations of ‘value for money’, and a scepticism about the status and relevance of sociology.

I might speculate that we could be on the verge of a new period in British sociology. Neo-liberalism became more problematic in the early years of the 21st century



and its demise was hastened by the economic crash of 2008 and the subsequent depression. The frameworks of regulation and monitoring associated with neo-liberal audit culture have been weakened by Brexit and the Covid pandemic. We seem to be in a period when there is a search for political alternatives, on both the left and the right. The growth of neo-liberalism brought about a change in the direction and content of British sociology; might its demise point to yet a further reorientation of sociology? I'd hope to see an improved understanding of its history forming a part of that reorientation, but the future of the discipline will depend not on my views but on what we collectively choose to make of the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

**Linda McKie:** How useful do you find it to frame this question in terms of 'turns'?

**John Scott:** I regard the claims for intellectual 'turns' that forge a new direction and departure from previous concerns as being, at best, overstatements and, at worst, lacking in any knowledge of the history. Changes described as 'new directions' are often not that; they are, more often, reinventions. The so-called 'cultural turn' of the 1980s arose as a critical response to Marxist and materialist approaches to consciousness and meaning. What was not noticed, however, was that much other theory of the time was centrally concerned with culture. Parsonian and structural-functional theory, for example, took culture as a central explanatory variable and saw social order largely in terms of value consensus. While they overemphasised cultural integration, they certainly did not ignore culture. What the 'turn' really involved was not a 'discovery' of culture but a reformulation of some of the ways in which culture was already being seen.

I tend to see the history of a discipline in terms of trends, extensions and reformulations rather than revolutionary turns. Paradigm shifts are very rare in any discipline, and particularly so in a discipline such as sociology that is marked by substantial diversity within a broadly shared conspectus and not by a monolithic framework of 'normal science'. This is the way that I would see the differences between the sociology of the post-war expansion and that of the period since the 1970s.

**Graham Crow:** What conclusions do you draw from attempts to re-shape British sociology that failed, such as that of Geddes?

**John Scott:** I wouldn't want to claim that Geddes could have introduced a 'new direction' for British sociology. Like Hobhouse, Geddes was an evolutionary thinker, though he adopted a more rigorously Darwinian 'selectionist' approach that stressed the importance of relating forms of social life to the adaptive responses made to determinate environmental conditions. Thus, he stressed a regional focus and ecological concerns akin to the regionalism that

developed in American sociology and was developed by the Chicago sociologists in their model of the city. If his ideas had been enshrined in the development of British sociology, it would have been very different – for better and for worse, no doubt.

Geddes and Branford failed to establish their vision of sociology because they refused to engage in intellectual debate. Geddes's overbearing assumption was that only he had access to the truth, and this alienated those with the power to institutionalise sociology. His influence was limited to the margins of sociological work.

**Linda McKie:** What future lies ahead for the discipline as sociologists engage with emerging futures being shaped by environmental, decolonial, democratising and other forces?

**John Scott:** I am optimistic about the future of sociology. Our achievements so far give firm grounds for that optimism. We have overcome the 'navel gazing' and self-doubt that characterised the early 1970s and have, for the most part, stopped denigrating our own discipline. We have achieved great successes that have led to a period of high achievement that should give us a sense of great pride in what we and our predecessors have achieved. We should be knowledgeable about and proud of our history, building the future of the discipline on the shoulders of those giants of the distant and recent past. We are all part of a collective discipline in which an intellectual division of labour among those wanting to contribute to the further growth in sociological knowledge can achieve more than warring disputes between contrary positions.

Co-operation in an intellectual division of labour implies plurality and diversity. Sociology has been constantly renewed by meeting the challenges posed by new perspectives and by the encroachment on our concerns by other disciplines. A comprehensive understanding requires that all possible viewpoints are considered and taken seriously. The perspectives that we seek to combine are differentiated by gender and sexuality, by ethnicity and class, by age and generation, and by global environmental and colonial locations. The curriculum and research agenda have been positively reconstructed as a result of the concerns raised by women and by BAME [Black, Asian and minority ethnic] and LGBT+ [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender+] critics, and a long overdue 'decolonisation' of intellectual work is beginning. Only a discipline that has been thoroughly and enthusiastically diversified can provide the cooperative basis for theoretical progress. The world faces great problems in environment, medicine, artificial intelligence, economic and political matters, and in the social conditions and consequences of those challenges. The world needs sociology and the insights that it offers into the human condition more than ever before. We have an opportunity to make a huge contribution to awareness of and understanding of those problems, and also to addressing them. We must not let that opportunity fade away.

Governments may not fund us on the scale, relatively speaking, that they did in the 1950s and 1960s, and they may not appreciate the things that we can tell them, but it is our duty – and, I would say, our pleasure – to build a sociology for the future.

### Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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**Linda McKie** is Executive Dean for the Faculty of Social Science and Public Policy at King's College London. She was previously Head of School at Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh and Applied Social Sciences, University of Durham. Linda is currently Principal Investigator on the UKRI, Healthy Ageing Programme project, 'Healthier Working Lives', which considers retention, recruitment and job experiences for workers aged over 50 in the residential care sector. She is also the UK lead for the Trans-Atlantic Platform project 'En Route to Recovery: Diversity and Vulnerability in Care Work during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic'.

**John Scott** has been Professor of Sociology at the Plymouth, Leicester and Essex Universities and also taught at Strathclyde University. He has held Honorary Professorships at Bergen and Copenhagen Universities, and is currently a Visiting Professor at Essex and Exeter Universities. He is a Fellow of the British Academy, of the Academy of the Social Sciences and of the Royal Society of Arts. He was awarded a CBE in 2013 for Services to Social Science, and the BSA Distinguished Service for Sociology award in 2014. His broad interests include the history of sociology, social theory, social structure and research methods.

**Date submitted** January 2022

**Date accepted** May 2022