Social Futures?: the Sociology of Substance and Shadow - a Collection of Papers from the 2003 British Sociological Association Annual Conference

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Introduction

1.1 This is the second of two collections of papers from the British Sociological Association (BSA) Annual Conference 2003 to be published within *Sociological Research On-Line*. The conference was titled *Social Futures: Desire, Excess and Waste*. The call for papers invited delegates to interrogate currently dominant academic, political and media discourses within western societies which emphasise and celebrate the 'progress' and 'freedoms' associated with recent global 'development', technological change and contemporary cultural experience. Five conference streams were devised in order to pursue this overall aim: Belonging and Isolation; Consumption and Waste; Winners and Losers; Technological Dystopias; Escape Strategies. There was also an Open Stream. Over 120 papers were presented at the conference and there were two highly engaging plenary sessions, one presented by Beverley Skeggs (then at the University of Manchester) and one by George Ritzer (University of Maryland).

1.2 Approximately 80 papers presented at the conference were submitted for publication and two members of the organising team read every one of these. We initially selected papers for publication on the basis of quality and originality but as so many achieved the standards we set, we finally selected those which most directly engaged with the conference aim and themes. The papers presented here were originally presented within the Belonging and Isolation and Winners and Losers streams, and they have all been updated during 2004/5. We particularly feel that this collection challenges the one-dimensional and simplistic representation of contemporary social life and emerging social and cultural trends, which is offered by the above-mentioned dominant discourses. Consequently, these papers also re-assert the importance of a critical and reflexive sociology for a *social* future.

The Papers

2.1 Our innovative and challenging collection of papers exemplifies in many ways the processes of transition that sociology is involved with, both as subject and object. On the one hand, much of the most interesting and provocative literature to emerge from recent sociology identifies the transitions from modernity to late modernity or post modernity as its object. Authors such as Bauman (1992) and Giddens, Beck and Lash (1994) have concentrated on the transformation of social relations that have unfolded over the course of the last few decades. On the other hand, sociology itself is subject to the same transitions that it recognises as its own particular arena of analysis. Such changes could potentially revolutionise theoretical practices within the discipline. To be sure, this challenges sociology, and sociologists to engage with the theoretical spaces created in this process.

2.2 Directing a contemporary sociological gaze toward potential social futures invariably necessitates a glance towards history. Consequently, this collection of papers constitutes what one might term the sociology of substance and shadow. When sociology turns its attention to social futures it adopts a number of varying approaches. As this collection of papers illustrate, sociology explores social futures by employing multi-directional perspectives. In switching on the academic floodlights, be they theoretical or empirical, sociology illuminates not only its substantive subject but also the shadows of that subject's past and future. In light of the cultural turn, our intention when organising the conference was in part to re-emphasise the continuing significance of social, economic and political structures that have an enduring influence on people's lives. Equally, our collection of papers represents an important challenge to those discourses that fail to detect the important complexities and contradictions often concealed by emergent social and cultural trends.

2.3 The Belonging and Isolation stream brought together papers examining the often invisible isolation of

some people and groups, which is created by the contemporary emphasis on, and the rhetoric of, social progress and individualism. The stream provided an opportunity to consider the relationships we have to others, which are often overlooked in this individualised present and imagined future, and which for many provide the substance of everyday life. It also highlighted the frequently ignored rituals of belonging which hide in the shadows of social progress. In this stream many papers explored the shifting meaning of identity in a contemporary social world, and engaged with the possibilities this provided for the future.

2.4 The paper by Grundy and Jamieson confronts this question by analysing how young people define their identities within an evolving European landscape. Here we find sociology scrutinizing notions of identity within the context of potential social futures by drawing on ideas of politics, history, culture and geography. Young people in this study are making sense of their place in the social world through localised and regionalized identities, rather than identifying themselves as young Europeans. The imagined future of a European community, best understood through the changing identities of young people, for whom a European landscape seems to offer freedom from the constraints of class and national identity, remains exactly that: imagined. Young 'Europeans' themselves appear to make sense of their social world through a sense of place on a far smaller scale, and they continue to understand this through more traditional social dynamics.

2.5 In thinking about the rationale for incorporating a Belonging and Isolation stream within the conference, questions concerning rites of passage were clearly central. We were especially interested in assessing the ways in which rites of passage still shape notions of belonging, and the manner in which they define our understanding of inclusion and value. The paper by Head deals with this issue by focusing on the dynamics integral to processes of social change experienced by lone mothers. Head's analysis sketches out the context in which lone mothers establish a sense of belonging with their children and other lone parents as a means through which they cope with processes of social exclusion. Her study provides a glimpse into the hidden world of lone mothers by exploring the significance of 'home' where it provides both a place to hide, as well as a place to escape from, for families in disadvantaged areas.

2.6 Bott also explores the significance of personal social space, but in a somewhat different way to Head. She considers the ways in which contemporary living has created new versions of old social inequalities. Her findings suggest that the negotiation of shared physical space in the home, where employers share space with live-in servants, is explained and managed through traditional racialised constructions. While Head and Bott are exploring the meaning of intimate social space for very different groups, their work highlights the persistence of traditional understandings of class, gender and 'race'. The challenge of change and its substantial impact on the way we appear to live out lives has not it seems disrupted the shadow of inequality.

2.7 So, it might be argued that in exploring, both theoretically and empirically, the transformation of social relations that many sociologists believe we are presently witnessing, these papers occasionally revisit a number of more established themes that are experienced differently in a contemporary world. While the papers presented here from the Belonging and Isolation stream highlight a sociology of substance, through their examination of visible and significant social changes, they also in doing so make visible the shadow world created alongside.

2.8 The two papers which here represent the Winners and Losers stream (Crow and Mythen) also consider the issue of Social Futures, in the context of globalisation, technological change and cultural transformation, both substantively and epistemologically. However, not only do they call for a re-think of currently dominant political and media discourses around social progress, they also present a critical analysis of some powerful sociological discourses pertaining to social and cultural futures. In doing so, they also simultaneously engage with the substance of contemporary social change and the shadow of sociology's traditions and history.

2.9 Graham Crow's 'Toward a Sociology of Endings' offers a highly original and thought-provoking discussion of social change and how sociologists make sense of it. Crow observes that sociological commentaries on the future are frequently built around the claim that we are witnessing the beginning of a new phenomenon as a result of an existing one coming to an end. He goes on to argue that these often powerful and seductive claims actually exaggerate the discontinuous nature of social change, and that a more nuanced account of the processes involved in beginnings and endings needs to be developed. This 'nuanced account' should simultaneously recognise the enduring persistence of structures of power and inequality within 'new' social arrangements.

2.10 Gabe Mythen presents a critical analysis of the academic 'risk society' thesis of Ulrich Beck. The validity of Beck's claim that the differentiated winners and losers of industrial modernity are now merging into a global pool of 'risk citizens' (pp.3-4), in turn supported by an assumption that a fundamental shift has occurred within the political economies of western capitalist societies, is the key issue explored. Utilising

highly contemporary issues to illustrate his argument (such as the bombings in New York, Madrid and London and hurricane Katrina), Mythen argues that while the sheen of Beck's thesis is inviting, processes of capitalist globalisation are reconstituting, rather than radically reconfiguring, the logic of social distribution and social structures of power and inequality. According to Mythen (p.13), 'material resources still govern lifestyle choices and the scope of risk reduction strategies available to the individual, indicating that the social distribution of risk remains tightly fastened to the politics of wealth and poverty'. It can be suggested that not only media discourses of risk and 'social bads', but also sociological discourses inspired by Beck can act to conceal the endurance of traditional structures and patterns of power and inequality and act as a mechanism of political control.

We do hope you enjoy reading these papers and we are proud to present them to you.

References

BAUMAN,Z. (1992) *Intimations of Postmodernity* , London: Routledge

BECK,U., Lash,S. and Giddens,A. (1994) *Reflexive Modernization*, Cambridge: Polity Press