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The Uses of Sociology for Real-time History

David Kynaston *

Abstract: *»Der Nutzen der Soziologie für die zeitgenössische Geschichtswissenschaft«*. This paper was transcribed from a talk presented by David Kynaston at a seminar on Social Science Data Archives for Social Historians: creating, depositing and using qualitative data, organised jointly by the Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) and the Institute of Historical Research (IHR), held at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London on 25 November 2003. This paper presents the author's experience of doing research for a social history of Britain between 1945 and 1979 using data and documentary evidence drawn from some of the classic sociology studies archived at ESDS Qualidata (University of Essex).

Keywords: sociology, contemporary history, social history, qualitative data, secondary analysis, archives.

1. Introduction

I think much of the material at Essex is a treasure trove. I've always been a qualitative rather than a quantitative historian—something that has caused problems at times in the past with economic historians—and I remain "an old dog reluctant to learn new tricks".

Over the last year and a half, I've been researching a new project, intended to be an attempt to write a history of Britain between 1945 and 1979. A history which I want to be not so much high political in orientation, but rather a social history with a political edge. Today I would like to make four broad points, and a fifth, perhaps slightly self-indulgent one. If there's time, I will give one or two examples, just for a bit of flavour, from two or three of the classic collections at Essex.

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2. Four Points on Secondary Analysis

My four main points are as follows:

2.1 Sociology as a source for social history

I have been struck by the extent to which contemporary historians, or historians of contemporary Britain, have more or less ignored sociology. Of course, sociology, since I guess roughly the late 70s, certainly the 80s, has had a pretty dim reputation—one thinks of Malcolm BRADBURY's "*The History Man*" (1975) and so on—by sharp contrast to the prestige that was attached to sociology back in the 60s, when all those new University departments opened. As a result, the eyes of perfectly sensible historians tend to glaze over when they hear the s-word. And yet if one is writing a social history, the undeniable fact is that it was the job of sociologists in the 1950s, 60s and 70s to chart the changes in that society. If one doesn't go to them, who does one go to for that?

2.2 The value of original fieldwork materials

There was often quite a long gap between when the sociological fieldwork was done and when publication took place. I think the gap has become shorter these RAE-conditioned days but in the old days you're talking six, seven, eight, even ten or eleven years. What often happens in an ensuing historical account is that, if a nod is made towards the work of sociology, it comes into the narrative or analysis at the point of publication rather than at the point of fieldwork. As I say, there is often quite a big difference between them. Take, for example, "*The Affluent Worker*" study by GOLDTHORPE and LOCKWOOD (1968a, 1968b, 1969)—that was actually done in Luton in 1962-63 but the three volumes weren't published until around '68 or '69, i.e. quite a significant difference, but they always tend to be treated as late '60s evidence rather than, in fact, early '60s evidence. If one is writing, as tends to be my approach, broadly narrative "real-time" history, it is potentially very attractive to be able to incorporate the fieldwork *at the point* of the fieldwork, because that is when the actual evidence applies. That is one of the reasons why it is wonderful to have this fieldwork in these boxes in Essex.

2.3 Secondary analysis reveals insights into the original methodology

There is the possibility, and I haven't got very far here, that looking at the field-work allows one, or could perhaps lead one, to different conclusions from those reached by the people actually 20, 30 or 40 years ago conducting the fieldwork. At the least, it allows one sometimes to see some of the assumptions

and prejudices that were at work when that fieldwork was taking place. Actually, in "*the Affluent Worker*" material at the end of each interview, the interviewer gives his/her overall impressions of the interviewee and these impressions are redolent with certain assumptions. So, I think that is quite a helpful historical tool.

2.4 Original sources give unmediated access to the evidence

I think what *most* attracts me about all this stuff is that the fieldwork gives one the real raw, unmediated and often very textured historical evidence. I find it, on the whole, preferable to oral history for, although there has been some marvellous oral history over the years, I think there has been some pretty dreadful oral history as well. I've been spending quite a lot of time in the main public libraries in Britain looking at local studies sections where they often have little books of oral history, and there is an awful lot of what I'm afraid I would call "sentimental, feelgood tosh". Quite apart from that, so much of it doesn't have a precise date, and if you have a date it is quite likely to be wrong. I think there are real problems in using oral history. Whereas, this stuff gives one the contemporary voice—as I say, raw and unmediated. It reminds me slightly of G M YOUNG's famous dictum about studying Victorian England—to the effect that one should go on reading these people until you can hear their voices. It gives one a chance to actually, in a sense, hear their voices and it is their voices at the time, not 30 or 40 years later.

3. Theory vs. Empiricism During the 1970s

My additional point is a slightly self-indulgent one, but I think quite an interesting one. For someone of my generation, coming out of university in the 70s, there was, particularly on the left, this great tussle between theory and empiricism, and theory had this terrific allure. I remember leaving Oxford in 1973 and a friend passing me a copy of ALTHUSSER's "For Marx" (1969), one of the black Penguins and saying "this is it—the real thing". Empiricism was quite a dirty word. It was very shocking, and I think in retrospect entirely salutary and beneficial and helpful when at the end of the 1970s, E P THOMPSON (1978) launched into ALTHUSSER (1969) with his "*The Poverty of Theory*", and certainly I found that very helpful for me starting to take shape as it were as a historian, and it slightly leads me into just one wonderful snippet from the material at Essex. It comes from the Peter TOWNSEND papers.

There's a file relating to the Institute of Community Studies which I guess most of you will know was something that began in Bethnal Green in the mid-1950s, and its first of two classic books published in 1957, were YOUNG and WILLMOTT's "*Family and Kinship in East London*" (1962) and Peter TOWNSEND's study of "*The Family Life of Old People*" (1957). I didn't

realise until the other day that these were originally going to be one book, before being split into two amidst a certain amount of tension in fact.[1]

Anyway, in the TOWNSEND papers is a memorandum by MICHAEL YOUNG, dated 8 January 1956, in which he sets out what he calls "Aims of Social Studies", and it includes a swipe at the condescending attitude to the working class of the intellectual academic establishment, as he calls for a first-hand description of what people's lives are like and so on. He goes on, "We pin our faith in our powers of observation and our more or less literary skill in describing the results". He then turns to the leading sociologists of the 1950s: "The learned deans of our present-day profession have spent their lives in libraries and lecture rooms, leaving the ignominious job of fieldwork to the troglodytes of market research". He adds that "such theory as there is in sociology seems to me so very unimpressive" and then I think there is a wonderful sentence, bearing in mind this is written in 1956, as he writes "We should not try this side of 1970 anyway, to build a theory of the whole of society but only of little segments of it". Well, I guess in practice quite a lot of sociologists jumped the gun before 1970.

Indeed it was between the late 50s and mid-60s that two particularly crucial things were going on. You've got the spread of affluence—Macmillan, of course, famously won the election in 1959 on "you've never had it so good" and so on—and simultaneously what I see as a great physical upheaval in this country. I'm thinking of the comprehensive development schemes, the high-rises, and all the changes in the city centres. The fact that at the end of the 50s, you could go to a provincial city, and if it hadn't been significantly bombed during the War, it would probably have the same sort of feel as it had in the Edwardian England—but 10 years later, it was completely different.

[1] Several studies mentioned in this paper are archived at the National Social Policy and Social Change Archive at the University of Essex, referenced by UKDA study numbers (SN):
SN 171-Family and Kinship in East London: Bethnal Green Survey, 1954-1955; Subjects
SN 262-Family and Kinship in East London: Bethnal Green Survey, 1954-1955; Children
SN 358-Family and Kinship in East London: Bethnal Green Survey, 1954-1955; Siblings
SN 4723-Family Life of Old People, 1865-1955
SN 4871-Affluent Worker in the Class Structure, 1961-1962
SN 4877-Three Hertfordshire Villages Survey, 1961.
Information about the collections can be accessed via the web site <http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/search/searchStart.asp>.

4. Examples of the Contributions and Value of Secondary Analysis

Data collection methods

There are three collections that touch on one or both of these themes. One, of course, is the "*The Affluent Worker*" collection, and what strikes me about it from a quickish look so far at the boxes in Essex, is that there is far more texture in the actual fieldwork than you get in the GOLDTHORPE and LOCKWOOD (1968a, 1968b, 1969) books.

Take one worker 011—he has been working in Vauxhall Motors in Luton since 1947, and is interviewed on 7 December 1962. "What is it that keeps you here?" "Decent money and decent standard of living". He sets out some of his views. "I don't believe in nationalisation—not my political way of life". "Why?" "It's been proven there are more disputes in nationalised industry than there ever are in private". He is also interviewed at home. The interviewer writes a description of the home—a newish home near the centre of Luton. "The house was well-furnished with fairly new suite in the front room. Pleasant wallpaper etc. Mrs X seemed a tasteful woman i.e. there was nothing in the room that jarred". That is the sort of thing that I was thinking of when I mentioned "assumptions". Mrs X—"We're home-birds, don't go out much". Asked about what sort of people that they feel completely at ease with, Mrs X replied "People who have had the same upbringing I've had". Mr X, "People who speak the same language and who are interested in the same things". Asked about people who they feel awkward with, Mr X, "Haven't a lot of time for Scottish people. I can't get on with the Blackies very much—they seem to have a bee in their bonnet about us and that's it. You try to get on with them but I think they feel you're trying to patronise them". And so on.

Secondly, the Ray PAHL Collection—there are various key components of that collection that are rather, I suspect, under-looked at. An under-used one is called "*Lifestyle and Patterns of Mobility in Hertfordshire Commuter Villages*". It comprises only three files in a box. These interviews in 1965 in commuter villages in Hertfordshire are very interesting because these are people living on new *private* estates. So much attention was given to public housing in this period but relatively little serious attention, apart from some journalism I've come across, to what was going on on the new private estates—all those Barrett and Wimpy houses and so on. Many of the people who one feels were to be amongst Thatcher's strongest supporters.

One interview briefly. One of his researchers talks to a Mrs Marsh. She is 27 years old, married to an accountant who works for Herts. County Council with ambitions to become County Treasurer. The interview was conducted in the sitting room; "four chairs and a coffee table, clothes drying in front of fire, Churchill's war memoirs in bookcase, flowered wallpaper and carpet". You get

a sort of sense of it. “What would you do if a new neighbour moved in next door?” “Some new people did come and I offered them tea and gave them hot water for the children. We have coffee together now and again. Some people are always in each other’s houses and I wouldn’t want that. There is an awful lot of gossip at these coffee parties. People pull each other to pieces”. “What do they talk mostly about?” “With young kids, they get “cabbage-like”. Most people shy away from politics—they don’t know enough about it”. “Do they watch TV programmes on current affairs?” “No. Dr Kildare and Compact—not politics”. “How does your husband like living up here?” “He’s not fussy. He doesn’t much mind where he lives. He’s not terribly social. He likes to come home and settle down for the evening.” “Does he help with the baby?” “He’ll sit and look after him if I go out. Bill does most things but refuses to touch his bottom. He’ll dress him and bathe him if he’s pressed and feed him. That’s not bad”. “What would you like your son to be?” “I hope he will go to university. I think my husband regrets not going. It seems the way to get on these days.” “When you move, where do you want to go?” “Well, not to the Midlands or the North.” “Why?” “Oh, prejudice. I don’t fancy it. All the industries around. Snobby reasons. It is too damn cold in the North”. “Is there any mixing with the Council estate?” “No.” “Should there be?” “There’s no real benefit. People tend to find their own friends anyway. There are many people you just happen to meet you wouldn’t dream of meeting again.” And, again, so on.

Finally, very briefly, the study I’ve found most exciting, though still in a fairly un-catalogued state, is the one by Dennis MARSDEN of Salford in the mid 1960s, which I found “spot on” to my concerns at the moment. Dennis MARSDEN came out of the Institute of the Community Studies—he, his wife, two small children went to live in Salford in 63-64, at a time when Salford was going through great upheaval, a continuous slum clearance programme and so on. It is quite a difficult collection to use, partly because it hasn’t been catalogued yet but also because there isn’t a book that came out of it, so it is quite difficult to get one’s bearings. It is very interesting; he observes a lot, he and his wife keep a diary, they talk to a lot of people, not only residents and so on but also people in the housing and planning departments. For example, an interview with a housing manager, Mr McNEE who says (in MARSDEN’s paraphrase) “There is now only one choice of housing which, refused without good cause, disqualifies for a further offer. People are caught in a cleft stick. They don’t want to overspill, except young ones who go with children, and they don’t want flats, except, curiously enough, the top floor”. This dislike of flats comes through again and again—this gulf between the planners and the planned. At one point MARSDEN and his wife go to a meeting—a joint committee on housing estates—with members of the housing, education, welfare, road safety and health committees from the local council presumably. MARSDEN notes,

> [j]ust for the record, at no point after we were introduced was any notice taken of us. Never was it suggested that we might have anything to contribute. Nobody had any doubt that 'the community spirit' should be fostered—that it was going—and that the community centres would foster community spirit. That the two sorts of community spirits were the same. There was no evidence that anyone present had ever read a sociological study of re-housing. No suggestion of finding out what people 'want' or that people's wants—if indeed they could be found out—were not common knowledge and identical with those of the council, or they ought to be.

5. Conclusion

To summarise very briefly. These were momentous years of flux—years that we now look back upon with acutely mixed feelings. The Essex material gets us somewhere near the coalface of these years. It is time that contemporary historians began to appreciate that material's existence.

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