

Martin Bulmer: An apostle for quantification in sociology

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REFLECTIONS ON A SOCIOLOGICAL FOX



Martin Bulmer: An apostle for quantification in sociology

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ABSTRACT


This contribution summarizes Martin Bulmer's role in spreading among sociologists an interest, and a facility, in the basic use of quantitative techniques, both by his teaching at the London School of Economics and in other institutions where he was employed, but also to the sociology profession in Britain more generally. It also discusses his crucial role in expanding the scope and influence of the journal, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, moving it from a niche publication to being one of the major English-language journals in its field.

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My acquaintance with Martin began in 1978, when I joined the Department of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), having moved there from a position at the University of Bristol. Let me offer a little explanatory background for some of what follows.

I had been keen, before I arrived, to offer a course in research methods and basic statistics, as I had done at Bristol. I had thought, apparently wrongly as it turned out, that my interest in quantitative techniques was among those reasons why LSE had offered me the job. However, anything too numerical was apparently anathema to many in the Department of my new institution and I was told that even basic statistics teaching was the preserve of LSE's Department of Statistics. To be fair, the person who then taught it, Colm O'Muircheartaigh (now at the University of Chicago), was teaching it brilliantly at a level that even less numerate sociology students could understand, and sociology students clearly enjoyed both his lectures and the

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style by which they were delivered – but, none the less, some of these had originally chosen sociology as their major subject precisely because they had thought, wrongly and probably on the basis of how it was then taught as a subject in some A-level syllabuses, that it was a way of avoiding anything too quantitatively demanding. The Department of Statistics at the University of Bristol would have regarded it as distinctly below the salt to have been expected to teach statistics to mere sociology students, who, in many cases, did not like the subject and would have preferred to be taught about a whole range of other subjects before that.

The ambivalence towards quantification that I found in the Department of Sociology at LSE was at first surprising – to say the least. David Victor Glass, responsible for coordinating the publication of a major empirical work on social mobility in Britain (indeed, the work at the time on this topic) had been appointed Professor of Sociology at LSE in 1948, although the focus of his later interest was more specifically in demography and, by the time of my arrival at LSE, he was no longer a central figure among the staff of the Department. Others who were or had been in LSE Sociology, such as John Westergaard (who had moved to Sheffield), were certainly sympathetic to quantification in social research. None the less, the prevailing ambience in the Department that I was then joining was towards other styles of pursuing the subject.

It was in this apparently less propitious environment that I then found myself. However, in Martin, who was not in the Department of Sociology but in that of Social Administration (as it was then called), I found somebody with fellow feeling about the importance of ensuring students in both our departments were taught some quantitative techniques. After all, it was not as though they were expected to know advanced calculus, but the basic principles of quantitative sociology were felt by both of us to be important components of the syllabus for a degree qualification in the subject from an institution that saw itself, rightly or wrongly, as among the best in the country for these particular subjects. Indeed, when Martin had first sought a position on the staff at LSE, he had been offered a position in the Department of Sociology, but the Department of Social Administration had made him a more attractive offer.

For several years Martin and I co-taught a lecture course on research methods, whose syllabus was fair to the various approaches possible for doing social research but did not hold back from a focus on the quantitative. To the horror of one senior figure in the Department of Sociology, its second-year students were also organized to conduct a major questionnaire survey of all LSE students, seeking data on attitudes to all sorts of contemporary issues, though some of the proposed questions about sexual behaviour – albeit asked in a manner that would anonymize individual responses – proved too much for those more sensitive Sociology students to ask other students about (this was at the time of a “Don’t Die of Ignorance” Government

campaign, when there was much anxiety about AIDS and very explicit public advertisements that discouraged indulgence in those sexual practices that would facilitate its spread). The Departmental senior figure concerned had protested loudly about students being expected to concern themselves with anything as grubby as questionnaire research (wholly irrespective of what it was asking about), though his prejudice on the matter failed to carry his (and my) Departmental colleagues with him.

Martin was at that time, some years before he came active in the production of *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, pursuing a number of research issues that educated the more insular British sociologists to subjects and issues being pursued in American research, both at the time and earlier. It was at this time that he published materials about the Chicago School and on the work of such names as Robert E. Park and Charles S. Johnson. This culminated in 1984 with the publication by the University of Chicago Press with his doctoral thesis on the sociology of the classical Chicago School. However, ever active, Martin was in these years also making important contributions to debates about social statistics, particularly on the value of such official statistics as the census – subjects about which some of his contemporary sociology peers were inclined to be sniffy, prejudiced as they had been by the toxic influence of such passing, “here today–gone tomorrow”, enthusiasms as ethnomethodology, by a perverted or simplified version of hermeneutics, or by various other genuflections in the British sociology of that period towards the worship of excessive subjectivism – sometimes descending into such singularly pointless debates about the reality, or not, of “facts”.

Martin was also active in pushing the cause of empirical sociology in fora outside LSE, including in the then-recently-founded Social Research Association, which is still flourishing and pushing the cause of empirical social research. Martin left LSE in 1993 for, firstly, a professorship at the University of Southampton and then from 1995 for one at the University of Surrey. It was LSE’s loss. However, our relationship continued through his editorial role (later with John Solomos) in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. He had become involved in the late 1980s, when the previous editor (and founder) of the journal, John Stone, was then keen to pass it on. Initially edited by Anthony Smith with Martin as Reviews Editor, the journal was at that time a successful enterprise, but in terms of citation status, it rather held a “League Division Two” middle-rank position as a niche journal in its subject. Its later ascent in international journal rankings, to be one of the foremost English-language journals in its field, owed much to Martin’s work as editor and then co-editor, along with John Solomos. Especially under Martin’s aegis, there were a whole range of new initiatives – more individual issues per year, special issues on topics of particular interest to those researching in those fields, occasional conferences of international participants, and the launch of a separate *Ethnic and Racial Studies Review*,

containing, “as it says on the tin” (to pilfer a once well-known advertising slogan) book reviews and symposia.

All in all, this is a massive intellectual legacy that Martin has given to the subject that has attracted his research interests and his contributions for over fifty years. All of us who work on these topics should be grateful.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.