

Why it's always sociological....

*LSE Sociology alumnus **Phil Woodford** on his reasons for studying sociology in the 1980s.*

The growth of media studies over the past 25 years was probably the best thing that could ever have happened to sociology. There always needs to be a subject which is the butt of everyone's jokes and back in the 1980s, I guess sociology was it. Despite its reputation and associations with bearded 1960s Marxists, I was still pretty determined to study it.

My motivations were wildly naive, to be honest. I was a fresh-faced 18-year-old when I first arrived at the LSE in 1987 and I believed that sociology was a subject that provided answers to the world's questions. In many ways, I felt it to be the epitome of the School's motto of *Rerum Cognoscere Causas*.



detached suburban home in south-west London.

After three years of undergraduate study, I realised that unfortunately there weren't any answers. Just more questions. But when I arrived, I was full of anticipation.

I had lived through the Thatcher era as a teenager and was actively involved in various left-wing causes. Long before I became a student at LSE, I had been banning the bomb and campaigning against Apartheid in South Africa. I'd pushed against lines of riot police at Wapping in east London when the printers were involved in their bitter dispute with Rupert Murdoch. I'd supported Arthur Scargill and the miners from the comfort of a semi-

When I came for my interview, I was probably full of chat about the state of the country and I doubt that I made a great deal of sense. Maybe the academics who interviewed me – **Dr Chris Husbands**, an expert on the far right in British politics, and **Dr Eileen Barker** who specialised in new religious movements – thought that offering me a place was the best way of shutting me up.

So what did sociology give me? Well, it may sound very trite, predictable and clichéd, but it certainly encouraged independent and critical thought. I remember writing a rather feeble paper in the first term and being pleased when the German PhD student who ran our seminar group told me that it showed 'sociological imagination'. (I'm not sure that C. Wright Mills would have made too much of it, but it was a start.)

Even though there may ultimately be no definitive answers, it does make sense to go looking for them. Sociologists always dig beneath the surface of what is superficially apparent. I like that.

If crime is falling, we might quite happily believe that people are better natured than they were previously. But one sociologist will ask whether we're recording crime differently. Another might postulate that policing tactics have changed. A third might point out that most crime is committed by young people, but populations in the developed world are ageing.

I was given a good grounding in methods, which makes me pick holes – probably unfairly – in virtually every academic study I see quoted in newspapers and magazines. I was forced to study

statistics, which was probably good for my brain at the time, but I confess that I retain virtually nothing of the detail today.

From a personal point of view, however, the thing that meant the most to me in the study of sociology was the subject's all-encompassing nature. Virtually no aspect of life is left untouched. I remember being fascinated by the idea that Georg Simmel might extend the discipline to investigate an area such as fashion, for instance.

It was good that I came to sociology relatively fresh. My A-levels were actually in government & politics, history and law. There was an advantage in having studied subjects which were relevant to the sociological endeavour, but not having my head crammed full of Lockwood & Goldthorpe and the other stuff that was part and parcel of the sociology A-level syllabus.

The bible used by A-level students at that time was written by Michael Haralambos. They were pretty sure that if they stuck to this worthy text at undergraduate level, nothing much could go wrong. My tutor, however, was rather bemused at their determination to quote from *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*.

'I've heard of Marx,' she confided in me, 'and I've heard of Weber. But who is this Harry Lambos that everybody talks about?'

We were very much left to our own devices back in those days and I don't really know how it would compare to a degree course today. There were only a few hours of formal lectures a week and a few hours of seminars. Perhaps if I'd been paying £9,000 a year in tuition fees, I would have demanded more. The culture, however, in the late 1980s was one of gratitude for being given the opportunity to study. Many of my fellow sociologists were mature students and had taken a very deliberate break from their roles as homemakers, customs officers and psychiatric nurses.

In terms of my career in advertising and marketing, the fact that I went to the LSE probably counted for more than the specific subject I studied. Nevertheless, I know just how much I owe to a subject which frames the way I look at the world. Remember, something is usually going on beneath the surface. And it's always sociological.

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