Revisiting *New Society*
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It is now a little more than 50 years since the first issue of *New Society* appeared late in 1962. It enjoyed a brief, though meteoric career, less than thirty years later being incorporated into the *New Statesman*, in 1988. Today, it is largely forgotten: in 1996 the title of *New Statesman and Society* was changed to drop the latter term. Yet, especially during its trailblazing years in the 1960s, but also into the 1970s, *New Society* defined a new kind of appeal for a popular and engaged sociology which commanded a powerful presence on all newsagents’ shelves. Within weeks it rapidly gained a large and enthusiastic readership of around sixty thousand people.

*New Society* introduced the public to a new crop of young sociologists, whose work reported findings from surveys and ethnographies which offered an exciting new window on British society. These young sociologists included John Goldthorpe, Dorothy Wedderburn, David Lockwood, Jean Floud, C.C. Harris, Ronald Dore, Ray Pahl, Peter Willmott, Tom Burns, Peter Worsley, Ann Oakley and John Rex all of whom were later to become major figures in the development of British sociology, and who all saw public commentary as vital to their interest in sociology itself. And these writings were seen to have huge importance: government ministers vied with each other to contribute in its pages to reflect on the challenge of social change and the importance of sociology.

I want to emphasise four remarkable innovations associated with *New Society* in its halcyon period of the early 1960s. Firstly, it challenged the hegemony of the literary, gentlemanly culture which had previously dominated British intellectual life. When, in 1959, C.P. Snow lamented the divide between ‘two cultures’ of science and the humanities, he did not mention the role of social scientific thinking at all, which at this point was only weakly represented in British universities (with the exception of the London School of Economics). Instead, the key reference points for political debates, defined for instance by the weekly magazines such as *The Spectator*, *The Listener*, and *Encounter* was strongly oriented towards the humanities, and especially literary figures and historians – much like the *London Review of Books* today.

The idea of commenting on social affairs from the perspective of the findings of sociological research itself was unheard of, and sociological ideas had only previously became publicly authorised if they were produced from the social milieu of the gentlemanly intellectual classes. *New Society* had one foot in the scientific and technical culture which Snow saw as being in tension with that of the humanities, as it was modelled on *New Scientist* which has appeared in 1956. With its carefully non-politically partisan position and its determination to report the findings of social research, it was thus a key force in the development of a new politics which championed the role of ‘evidence’ and rigorous research as vital to social welfare and reform. Since the 1960s the significance of these currents has grown rapidly, so
that it is easy to lose sight of the dramatic cultural innovation which New Society helped bring about.

Secondly, the model of New Society involved a dramatic reworking of the popular media themselves through their vigorous use of relatively short and accessible features. In the early 1960s, the broadsheet newspapers largely used long accounts of current news stories, whilst the weekly periodicals focused on opinion pieces by eminent critics. New Society focused on accessible stories addressing issues of social concern. It ran regular features on ‘Work and Business’, ‘The Arts in Society’, and ‘Welfare and Policy’. During the early 1960s, it regularly ran features on the significance of immigration, homosexuality, adolescent ‘delinquency’, gender relations, and social class divisions. It thus rendered what had been seen as ‘troubling’ social concerns into issues which could be openly debated and talked about, so extending the remit of public debate. This model was soon taken up elsewhere. When in 1964 The Sunday Times began to publish its famous ‘colour supplement’, (which was to become the model for the host of new glossy magazines which were to transform popular publishing in ensuing decades) New Society regarded themselves as having got the idea first.

Thirdly, New Society played a key role in making popular culture respectable, rather than the object of scorn from the educated classes. Ray Gosling, who later became famous for his popular documentaries on aspects of popular life, was centrally involved in the early years. The jazz player George Melly and the novelist Colin McInnnes were also early and regular contributors. These three were all gay and their prominence testified to New Society’s capacity to challenge the conventional moral boundaries of its day. Its editor from 1967, Paul Barker, was particularly committed to exploring the relationship between arts and society. It was fundamentally concerned to recognise the importance of youth culture in a way which avoided the condescension of the established literary elite.

This hugely appealed to legions of young people across Britain who saw the journal as central to their identities. The famous cultural critic, Simon Frith, expressed the sense of possibilities which the journal offered young people in a ruminative article from 1995:

“When New Society was launched (as the social sciences’ own New Scientist) on October 4, 1962, I was still at school. I bought the magazine every week and read it from cover to cover. Under the influence of the TV series, Probation Officer, I had already decided I wanted to do something "social", and New Society became my handbook of the possibilities. I was most taken (I have still got the clipping) by Ray Gosling’s "The Tough and the Tender" (fourth in a series on adolescent morals) which appeared in issue 29, an account of a working-class teen values that to a sixth-form pop obsessive was at once completely familiar and quite strange. I was most influenced by New Society's intellectual mission, its propaganda for sociology.”
Fourthly, *New Society* innovated in its own interests in using research. Shortly after its launch it decided to conduct a survey of its readers, as a means of producing new insights into contemporary Britain. Swamped by over seven thousand responses, they spent many weeks analysing the findings, which they then commissioned the leading sociologists of the day to comment on. They thus themselves sought to popularise the kind of survey research which they saw as vital for informed social commentary and policy making. Today, as we are routinely and repetitively asked to conduct user surveys on our view about hotels, train journeys and other consumer ‘experiences’, this endeavour might strikes us as mundane. However, we should remind ourselves that it was *New Society* who appear to be the originators of this idea of conducting user surveys, and so exciting did this idea appear to be that the results were said to be considered by the Conservative cabinet of the day. It also broke new ground in reporting on the geographical locations of its readers – especially their strong North London bias – in a way which foreshadows the geo-demographics of market researchers.

What, then, are the lessons of *New Society* fifty years later? David Beer and Roger Burrows (2010) have recently argued that despite recent worries about the prospects for the discipline of sociology, actually it has seeped into contemporary culture in all sorts of profound, yet also un-appreciated ways. The success of *New Society* is a perfect example of his arguments, and a reminder of how sociologists have themselves been in the vanguard of socio-cultural change and left a legacy which remains evident even after the original intervention – the journal itself - has ended.

There is also a further, perhaps more challenging, lesson to learn. The sociology championed by *New Society*, committed to fieldwork, surveys, ethnography, and getting to grips with popular culture, was a different sociology to that which had previously dominated in Britain, institutionalised notably in the London School of Economics alongside other bastions of privilege. This previous gentlemanly sociology had been moralising and evolutionary in tone, a far cry from the somewhat risky and roué variety led by the new generation which was championed in *New Society*.

We are, in some respects in a similar moment of generational division in British sociology today, with very different views about the remit of the discipline, for instance regarding what kind of sociological canon is needed, the power of the post-colonial critique, and the potential for new kinds of radical research methods and the role of the new media. I therefore take from the case of *New Society* the final lesson that it is not enough to rest on our laurels (impressive though they are), but that we need to recharge and reinvigorate sociological practice in the context of the profound challenges of our time if we are to re-fashion a sociology which more fully captures the public imagination today. That re-charged sociology also needs to invent new means of communication to capture the excitement generated by *New Society* in its time.
References:


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