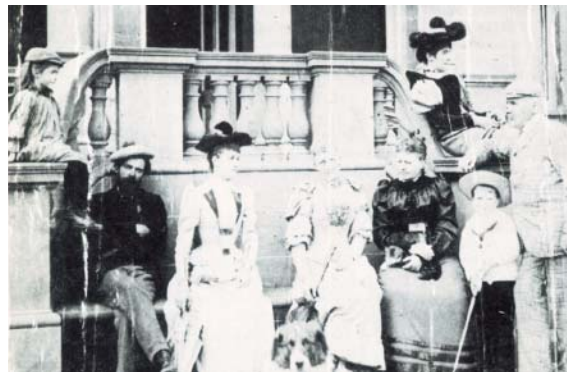


# 100 years of LSE Sociology



In 2005 LSE's Department of Sociology celebrated the 100th anniversary of the first offering of a course in sociology at LSE. **Chris Husbands** salutes the celebration.

Some birthdays are celebrated in a spirit of uproarious extroversion. Others are ignored, perhaps because those who are having the birthdays that might otherwise be celebrated have been chastened into silence by the passage of the years. As a middling compromise, the birthdays of others are celebrated with a becoming decorum, but a minimum of ostentation.

A 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, even for those preferring the options of silence or the minimum of ostentation, presents a dilemma. Having got that far, it seems a pity to waste it. Surely a centenary is worth recognising in some sort of display of emotion or celebration? Yet one hundred years? Does one usually want such longevity to be rubbed in?

The first course in sociology, under that name, in an institution of higher education in the UK, was actually taught at LSE in the 1904-05 academic year by Edvard Alexander Westermarck (1862-1939), the first appointed Martin White Professor of Sociology from 1907 to 1930. In 2004 a colleague in the Department of Sociology alerted the School to the anniversary.

Thus was born the germ of the idea that became a highly successful conference celebrating a hundred years of sociology at the School and within British higher education, held at LSE in May 2005. Organisers decided quite deliberately not to celebrate the centenary with a conventional academic conference (usually with formal and lengthy academic paper presentations to small numbers of enthusiasts). Instead, the event was in the spirit of a genuine birthday party, an invitation that up to 250 people accepted.

We were fortunate to have several generations of some of Britain's most distinguished sociologists give presentations about the history of the discipline in this country and of their role within it. The

School's director, Howard Davies, launched the event with an entertaining speech that commended LSE sociology and contained exactly the degree of qualified irreverence about the discipline that most of those within it would enjoy. Professor Nik Rose, convener of LSE's Department of Sociology, gave an intellectual launch to the proceedings in a presentation that impressively collapsed a discussion of many contemporary trends in British sociology into a 15 minute tour de force. Chelly Halsey and Michael Banton were most illuminating on LSE sociology in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Martin Bulmer (Surrey) gave an erudite discourse on the history of British sociology in that period. Rosemary Deem (Bristol) and Jennifer Platt (Sussex), among the distinguished senior cohort of British women sociologists, gave their views of the period in the 1950s when LSE was beginning to lose its ascendancy as the principal locus of sociology in the UK; John Scott (Essex) commented on their presentations. Mary Evans (Kent) and Lydia Morris (Essex), among the generation that emerged after the 1960s growth in the discipline, gave well-received accounts of different aspects of that period and of their views on its ambience and the influences upon it. Tony, now Lord, Giddens gave an account of the start of his own distinguished career in the discipline, combining a number of scurrilous and hilarious vignettes with a serious account of how sociology emerged from the 1960s through a series of often adventitious circumstances to the point in the 1970s when it was clearly well established as a university discipline – well enough established in fact to survive the attacks on social science by the Thatcher government in the early 1980s.

Did we find sociology, and sociology at LSE, in good health at age 100? The consensus was

that everything that had been looked for had been achieved to give the subject the academic credibility for which its early practitioners and enthusiasts had fought so hard. Some felt that opportunities had been lost to give sociology a more mainstream role in current policy formation, but that in general it was well placed to inform the century ahead.

The conference ended with a question and answer session chaired by Nik Rose, with contributions about the future of British sociology from Sarah Franklin (LSE), Mike Savage (Manchester), Bev Skeggs (Goldsmiths) and John Solomos (City).

It is tempting to conclude simply that the event successfully ended with the evening reception open to all participants. However, the conference provoked subsequent outcomes. Series of exhibitions on related topics were held simultaneously in the atrium of the Old Building and in the vestibule of the Library. Many conference participants were intrigued by the exhibits and memorabilia of early British sociology. Also, certain colleagues have been moved to research more carefully some of the neglected figures of early British sociology. Terhi Rantanen (LSE and of Finnish origin) has been investigating further into the biography of Edvard Westermarck (who was Finnish but of Swedish language origin). Sarah Franklin has been equally concerned to revive interest in Westermarck's anthropological work on marriage and the family. Indeed, one of the revelations of the conference was the hitherto neglected importance in early British sociology of Westermarck, perhaps unfairly eclipsed in reputation by Leonard Trelawny Hobhouse (1864-1929), who held the full-time Martin White Chair (while Westermarck's appointment, though made a few weeks before Hobhouse's, was part-time and, initially, fixed term). The conference has also

brought into the public domain much more about the biography of James Martin White (1957-1928), whose money was so influential in establishing both the teaching of sociology at LSE and the chair (formerly chairs) bearing his name. Moreover, several contributors to the conference were moved by the early history of the discipline in this country to investigate further the hitherto rather elusive figure of Victor Veracis Branford (1863-1930), never formally an academic but an important figure in the early history of the discipline. Accounts of these researches will appear in later publications, as it is hoped will material related to the conference itself.

And what of the future? Well, at LSE the discipline is thriving. After a period of undoubted quiescence in the 1980s and 1990s, LSE has attracted a host of intellectually vibrant sociologists, as well as being at the forefront of developments in the discipline in the sociology of employment, crime, human rights, culture and media, multi-ethnic relations, and in the social aspects of the life sciences and biomedicine.



## Dr Christopher Husbands

is reader in sociology at LSE. He is the author of books and articles in several different aspects of sociology and has taught at LSE for 27 years.

BILL ABRAHAM

Among those enjoying the Sociology birthday in the Shaw Library, retired academic Gabriel Newfield (BSc Sociology 1953) (top right); current LSE Sociology Professor Dick Hobbs (above left); and alumnus Stuart Jackson (BSc Sociology 1955, Diploma in Personnel Management 1956)

## Sociology at LSE

Research priorities are:

- Social justice
- Cities and urbanism
- Economic life
- Culture and technology
- Politics, regulation and governance
- Identities, ethnicities, and religion
- Crime and control
- Life, disease and medicine

[www.lse.ac.uk/collections/sociology](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/sociology)