

Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method

Review Number:

1086

Publish date:

Wednesday, 1 June, 2011

Author:

Mike Savage

ISBN:

9780199587650

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£58.00

Pages:

300pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

Oliver Blaiklock

A recent edition of *Society Now*, the magazine of the Economic and Social Research Council, makes a compelling case for the substantial contribution of the social sciences towards ‘a healthy society, a productive economy and a sustainable world’.⁽¹⁾ Professor Mike Savage’s latest work plots the changing path of the social sciences through Britain’s post-war social history. His argument is that one of the most interesting, yet ignored, changes of the second half of the 20th century is the creeping rise of the social science apparatus. The social researcher’s footprint can be seen in the people’s sense of identity and belonging and their attitudes towards place, locality, expertise, education, learning, science and art. Many modern notions of identity have their origins in the specific events of the 1950s and 1960s. As a consequence the structure and method of the social sciences have been transformed in light of their importance in the construction, explanation and experience of social identities in Britain. The result is a thought-provoking account of the battle between two types of ‘doing’ the social sciences, cultural hierarchies of expertise and the study of power and influence of knowledge in British history.

Conventionally, the rise of the social sciences has been linked with the rise of the welfare state through social work and education, for example in the work of A. H. Halsey.⁽²⁾ However, with David Edgerton recently drawing attention to Britain’s role as a ‘warfare’ not a ‘welfare’ state, the time seems right for a reassessment of the role of the social sciences and their relation with the emerging technocratic and scientific identities of the expanding and diversifying middle classes. In focusing on the battle for the social sciences within the cultural hierarchy of Britain, Savage would seem to be entering new and exciting territory. Originally trained as a historian, he is now the director of the Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change

and Professor of Sociology at University of Manchester. His early work, on the history of the local Labour movement in Preston between 1880 and 1940, explored gender and working class identities, and subsequent writings have examined the dynamics of middle class formation in Britain, social capital, mobility and the importance of professionalism as a status category in modern British society.

The idea for his research came about following a decision to examine the material collected in several social surveys and research projects. These included Elizabeth Bott's works on family and social networks in the early 1950s; Goldthorpe and Lockwood's Affluent Worker Project; and Mass-Observation Directives. The result is a fascinating account of change in post-war Britain told in an engaging style and with the benefits of expert historical and sociological understanding. For his sources, Savage has exhaustively explored the archive materials collected in the course of seven social science projects conducted between the 1940s and 1970s. Savage successfully tracks the emergence of a language of social groups and relationships, and a concern with delineating change and modernity in the archived social science sources.

Savage makes a theoretical nod to the work of Foucault, anthropologists such as Nicholas Dirks, and actor network theoreticians such as Bruno Latour. He also references Nikolas Rose's work on governmentality. Another theoretical source is the work of Pierre Bourdieu though Savage challenges him on several important points, such as the irreconcilability of intellectuals and technical and practical identities. Savage also moves beyond the work of Foucault and Rose in terms of his assessment of the politics of knowledge in Britain, as expressed through the social sciences. His conclusion is that these politics were 'messy' with different methods competing for prominence. He shows more agreement with the work of the political scientist Timothy Mitchell, who argues that the very act of constructing quantitative data is a central feature of modernizing, processes which are fundamental to governing. Indeed, the theoretical emphasis on the materiality and agency of technical devices is woven throughout the argument. Savage argues that this approach offers a powerful alternative to conventional histories of the social sciences in terms of their disciplinary arrangements, theoretical currents or substantive findings.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first, Savage describes the rise of the social sciences in Britain, second; the development of the social science apparatus and third; the impact on popular identities and social change. The first section starts with a chapter focussing on a particular research question – people's attachment to their place of residence as demonstrated through the responses that are generated by different kinds of social enquiries since the 1930s. Savage's point is that people's feeling of belonging has changed over the past 50 years. In particular, the use of the abstract language of groups can be seen in the responses of middle class families or individuals and suggests an agency or choice about where people settled that was missing from working class accounts, whose responses, in contrast, were mostly expressed in functionalist terms or as thrown into their landscape. The relationship between the physical landscape and social is both dependent upon and also helps to generate a new kind of academic social science. An aesthetic orientation to place, or the 'enchanted landscape' was deliberately used to abstract people from their landscape. Landscape, Savage suggests, which had been seen as functional and constraining, has increasingly been seen as an object of fantasy and desire, hope and escape (p. 46).

The next two chapters see Savage provide a historical grounding to the emergence of the post-war social sciences. First, he argues contrary to the work of Bourdieu, that intellectuals needn't necessarily be in the humanities, and that the 1950s saw the rise of a new kind of intellectual based on technocratic expertise. This account interrupts previous histories of the 'brow' wars of post-war Britain with the author choosing to focus on new scientific intellectuals rather than the artistic modernist avant-garde, who were previously the focus of post-war cultural histories of Britain. The Mass-Observation organisation, he argues, was a social movement that embodied this new 'nascent technical identity', and which involved the lifting of expertise away from the physical landscape in which gentlemanly status had previously resided. The result was a new kind of intellectual formation attracted to the scientific ethos that challenged conventional hierarchies and the importance of brow distinctions.

Second he argues that the attachment to a scientific ethos melded into a social scientific one by the 1960s. The changing relationship between the working and middle classes during and following the Second World

War encouraged the middle classes to reject the gentlemanly embrace of the aristocracy and instead show an interest in rational planning, a move more receptive to the social sciences. Such a premise encourages historians to understand cultural change of the 1950s and 1960s less in literary terms, and more in terms of social scientific values of change abstracted from traditional landscapes and communities. The sense of middle class loss of status and style served to reinforce the push towards new technical cultural identities that focused on making quality explicit for the working class and for the whole of society. This cultural push was wedded to the perception of the middle classes of themselves as providing the buffers or backbone for the nation. At the heart of the new social sciences was the desire to make things transparent, to refuse myth and to better understand ordinary lives. Their politics was complex and veered between right and left wing outlooks. This identity was not simply the product of social change, Savage argues, but the result of disputes with other older cultural formations. In short, the emergence of new technical identities and capacities associated with the new scientific occupations and the deployment of technical skills disrupted the cultural settlement based on gentlemanly highbrow cultural pursuits conducted by the middle and upper classes, supported by a hidden world of service.

Chapter four introduces the idea of the 'gentlemanly social sciences' which, Savage argues, dominated the academic discipline up to the 1950s. From the post-war period until the early 1950s, it was gentlemanly social science which was expanding, a process which can be demonstrated through an examination of the formation of the British Sociological Association and with it, the idea of sociology as synthetic, non-empirical social science. In order for the new technical identity to triumph, the older gentlemanly one had to be defeated. The older style was typified by the London School of Economics, T. H. Marshall's work on the evolution of citizenship, and the synthetic theories of Talcott Parsons. The older style had its own models of social research based on visual observation and moral responses to the subjects of their research. One example of this kind of research tradition is encapsulated in the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer's 1955 work, *Exploring English Character*. In the book, Gorer commented: 'When I was reading, with extreme care, the first batch of questionnaires which I received, I found I was constantly making the same notes: "What dull lives most of these people appear to lead!" I remarked; and secondly, "What good people!"' (p. 5). Such views, Savage argues took the values of contemporary civilization for granted, and saw its role as seeking the means of extending citizenship and civilization to wider groups in the population.

The launch of *New Society* in 1962 is highlighted as a prime source driving the new specialist sociology, 'neutral, specialist, objective', implied by new technical identities within the academic social sciences during the 1960s. Sociology is portrayed here as a social movement, challenging traditional ways of knowing through an appeal to a new rational mode of expertise that appealed to science. Again the new sociology had to actively compete with, and effectively overcome, the old sociology emanating from the LSE, a social science of elite administrative links with Whitehall and central to government. The new plate glass universities built during the 1960s served, in this reading, to spread the new values of the specialist sociology which in turn undermined or questioned the intellectual underpinnings of other disciplines. Through the 1960s, sociology and its intellectuals emerged to inherit the non partisan role of custodians of the 'social' from its previous keepers – historians and literary critics. This transformation of the disciplinary base of the academic infrastructure reinforced this sociological moment.

The agency of the new social sciences can be seen, Savage argues, in its quest to define the average or typical English town as the site of social change. Anthropologists, political scientists, geographers all sought to wrest descriptions of the community away from literary idioms of the inter-war years focusing on tradition. Anthropology originally led the way, and the two disciplines at first combined in their quest. However, it was sociology, Savage argues, that won the right to define the community, as the site of new and emerging social change, beginning with Stacey's research on Banbury. Descriptions of communities gave way to descriptions of communities as sites of change. However, the search for change, Savage suggests, ended in failure, and as a consequence social science began to abstract class from local social relations. Change became less and less embedded in the landscape and became abstract.

The next two chapters focus on the key social science methods: the interview, and the sample survey. Savage argues that the first of these two methods had to be wrenched from the hands of applied professionals, such

as social workers and priests, in order for the social sciences to use it as a mechanism for the study of individuals abstracted from their household surroundings. What is more, the interview, it is argued, was removed from its distinctly therapeutic domain in which it was originally deployed and, in collaboration with literary narratives, was used by social scientists in order to provide, 'melodramas of social mobility'. The rational, objective interview, free of moral values and assumptions challenged the previous role of women as interviewers, a point which Savage supports by referencing academic feminism's attack on the masculine social scientific approach in the later 1960s. The assertion of a feminist kind of social research was a counter-mobilization against this current.

Second, governments, Savage suggests, made extensive use of the sample survey for gathering social data, and this was a crucial technology for defining the modern rational nation. The experience of the Second World War was crucial here, and the concerns of governments with productivity, mobilization, production and destruction. The sample survey became the means of generating knowledge about popular feeling in turn bypassing accounts of the elected representatives of the people. The truth of the nation was guaranteed through science as the capacity to conduct large national social surveys became an important feature of the post-war state (for example, the Family Expenditure Survey, began in 1957, the General Household Survey from 1962, and the New Earnings Survey from 1971). This process was itself complicated by four competing strands of argument as to the value of the social survey method: its significance in the development of individuals; its importance in the new interest shown to social groups; its encapsulation of the nation; and its use in embedding notions of change, through the manipulation of data. Savage references the importance of the Royal Statistical Society and the development of the Government Statistical Service as vehicles for social research.

In the third and final section Savage considers social change and its impact on popular identities. The argument put forward is that the 1950s and 60s saw the erosion of the cultural standoff that had previously existed between middle- and working-class identities. This process relied on the decoupling of technique from skilled workers and its appropriation by the middle classes. This argument relies first of all on an examination of the field work of Richard Brown in Tyneside and John Goldthorpe and David Lockwood on working class identities. Savage argues that the previous conclusions drawn from this research, about the growth of a new affluent, privatised instrumental worker, are overstated. Instead, Savage suggests that working-class identities in this period remained premised on the existence of a visible, public elite drawn from the aristocracy. An understanding, Savage suggests, that attempted to naturalise class by showing the tradition and history of such elites. This conception of class was not, however, without its tensions and the assumed extraordinariness of elites were inevitably contrasted in working-class identities with the ordinariness of working individuals, thus in turn challenging their own sense of individuality. By contrast, the growing technical and managerial professions were absent from working-class accounts of class. Consequently, with the importance of the acquisition of formal educational credentials now in the ascendancy, coupled with the decline of apprenticeships, the male manual working class lost their cultural distinctiveness.

Among the middle classes, Savage suggests, there was a shift from understanding class as something born into, to understanding it as something that was navigated by strategically mobile individuals. Technocratic identities became more credentialist in orientation and shifted away from being implicit and taken for granted. Social studies of the 1960s began to reveal some new idioms of new middle-class identity. Taking Goldthorpe and Lockwood's interviews with 150 lower middle-class respondents Savage uses them as an evidence of a recognition of the notion of professional education leading to the possibility of social mobility. Education and intelligence were now independent forces for good. By the 1960s, Savage argues, significant sections of the middle classes were more confident and assertive in deployment of technocratic language, expertise, planning and class. The broader point that Savage is arguing is that those social theorists who have defined individualization as marking a break from class are misconceiving the key processes at stake. Instead, he argues for a deepening of old identities through the same process by which they are reworked.

The ramifications for the contemporary social sciences of the battle over expertise are spelt out in Savage's concluding chapter. First for contemporary popular narratives. The creation of an 'intimate, critical, and

compassionate' sociology Savage remarks, revolved around the methods of the new social sciences in a reworking of who was able to speak about the present. A crucial feature was the mobilisation of the ordinary and the everyday. Savage uses the example of accounts written by mass observers in 1990, to demonstrate just how pervasive the language of sociology has become in people's understandings and descriptions of self. He demonstrates just how far sociological accounts have come to dominate the public repertoire of routine and everydayness. This is due, Savage concludes, to a shift in cultural hierarchies rather than scientific progress. Second, he considers the challenge of informationalism. The emergence of digital data actually marks a return to older forms of social research, concerned with mapping whole populations using administrative data or sampling techniques. The role and influence of the social sciences may be damaged, Savage hypothesises for the future, and there may be a return to their role as synthesisers and generalizers.

Mike Savage is one of the UK's foremost historical sociologists and his recent exciting book provides a fascinating insight into the history of the social sciences and their role in the remaking of social class identities in Britain from the 1930s to the present day. Some historians may take issue with the work's theoretical stance, but notwithstanding such objections, this book provides a fascinating consideration of the role of expertise within British 20th-century history and its interaction within the creation of a specialised sociology as an academic subject. It raises questions of who is able to speak about the present, and with what authority, and expertly charts the process by which social scientists, under the guise of 'technique', stole the clothes of the artistic and historical establishment and usurped their previous role as the interpreters of social change. Consequently it will be of great use to historians and sociologists of post-war Britain.

Notes

1. *Society Now*, 6, (Spring 2010), 4.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. A. H. Halsey, *A History of Sociology in Britain Science, Literature, and Society* (Oxford, 2004).[Back to \(2\)](#)

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1086#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5502>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>