



A.H. Halsey

# Change in British Society

Based on the Reith Lectures



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# **Change in British Society**

OPUS General Editors

Keith Thomas *Humanities*

J. S. Weiner *Sciences*

*For Norman Dennis*  
*True friend and exemplary citizen*

## Preface

THIS book on the changing face of British society is based on my Reith Lectures and on three 'Personal View' talks. In writing it, I have taken the opportunity of extending the discussion and of addressing myself to readers rather than to listeners.

For me, as no doubt for my twenty-nine distinguished predecessors, the B.B.C. lectures posed two dilemmas. Their primary purpose, and an opportunity which I welcomed and feared, was to broadcast from a chosen corner of the academic world to the wide and varied audience of those who listen to Radio 4 and Radio 3. The 'intelligent layman' is a phrase commonly used to describe them but one over which I hesitated, partly because of its faint aroma of patronage, but more because of its implicit identification of a person. In fact there is no such person. One is talking to an immense range of people with little in common other than, presumably, the capacity to understand the English language. So the first dilemma is to decide whom to talk to. There is a temptation to see one's academic colleagues behind the rather lonely and forbidding microphone into which one speaks. It stares back unblinking, offering none of those 'non-verbal responses' on which one relies in direct conversation. Yet one knows that the professionals are there, mostly friendly but untrue to their calling if not also critical. Alternatively there is that elusive falsification, the school teacher in Uttoxeter, innocent of social science but quick to detect logical error, empirical misdescription, or expository unclarity. I did my best to choose the latter audience and was firmly encouraged to do so by a benign

but sternly patient producer, George Fischer. He helped more than he realised, for in the end I really talked to *him*, the personification of an attentive audience, combining unflinching goodwill with critical appreciation.

The other dilemma is that spoken English has an internal logic and rhythm which is quite different from written English. So what does one do about the book? I have started again, discarding spoken for written prose wherever it seemed necessary. More important, I have used the opportunity to escape the constraint of half-hour talks by expanding (or, more accurately, re-inserting) the written arguments. The book also offers escape from another limitation of sound broadcasting, enabling me to add such graphs and statistical tables as are needed to strengthen the argument. Moreover, I have added a chapter on mobility and education—a topic I would have included in the lectures had there been seven rather than the traditional six.

The result is intended to provide students of all ages with a short but comprehensive introduction to the information needed in order to form a view of the direction of twentieth-century social history in Britain, and to offer a sociological interpretation of that history. In a short concluding chapter I have deliberately trespassed beyond sociology to a moral and political interpretation. This I have done mainly in the hope that the reader may thereby be helped and encouraged to form his own view and to appreciate both the separation and the link between the social sciences and social action.

Many colleagues and friends have helped me in one way or another in preparing the talks and the book. They include Colin Crouch, Alan Fox, John Goldthorpe, Clyde Mitchell, Michael Teitelbaum, and Keith Thomas, the humanities editor of this series. Margaret Bett has given me her superb secretarial support. Above all I want to salute Norman Dennis, whose intellectual comradeship has been a constant delight to me over the years.

*Nuffield College*  
*Oxford*  
*March 1978*

A. H. HALSEY



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# 1 To know ourselves

WHO are you? Where do you come from, and where are you going? These are old questions, but perhaps never before so anxiously asked, or so uncertainly answered. Each one of us knows them as personal questions: but they can also be put collectively. I want to do that in this book: to turn them, in other words, into sociological questions. To manage their immensity I want to circumscribe them in space and time: in space by concentrating on one country—Britain; in time by confining the discussion largely to the experience collectively undergone by those who live in Britain now. This will give us material enough, to demand explanation. Some Britons belong to the two-and-a-half million compatriots who are over 75, and even to the half million who are over 85—people who remember Queen Victoria and a world without radio or plastics or the Labour Party. Others belong to the 15-19 year-old age group of four million, for whom the *pax Britannica* is as remote as the *pax Romana*, whose world is post-Suez, who never rode a tram, nor wore a Sunday suit.

However, we must not infer from generational contrasts that all we need to explain is change. Continuity is no less striking and equally problematic. Each successive age group, in its distinctive collective consciousness, reflects a new world. But it also carries the past into the future. It is not only that Irishmen perennially re-fight the Battle of the Boyne, or that the B.B.C. annually re-enacts the Second World War. Adherence to ancient custom is so tenacious that at Downham Market in Norfolk, British Catholics in the 1970s have defied the modernising tendencies of the

Vatican by persisting in the celebration of the Tridentine Mass, the old Latin Mass promulgated by the Council of Trent in 1570, which was ruthlessly forbidden in the reign of the first Elizabeth.

Continuity is no accident. Social customs, like personal habit, economize human effort. They store knowledge, pre-arrange decisions, save us the trouble of weighing every choice afresh. In this way the world is ordered; but, in the same way, control in the interests of the *status quo* is more or less powerfully embodied in any society. Maintenance of that control then depends on a stable environment of which one important element is external security. In this respect British history is distinctive by contrast with the history of the European continent. The towns and villages of the island have peaceable traditions over many centuries. The last battle on British soil took place at Culloden in 1746; every other European country has known violent and bitter warfare with foreigners on its own territory. Britain has exported its bloodshed. But above all, continuity is a matter of social control and this brings with it its puzzles. For example, many have noted and praised Britain as a land of tolerance and liberty, while at the same time wondering at its capacity to resist the claims of egalitarian movements without resort to overt force.

How, then, are we to make sense of the complex amalgam of persistence and change? My answers will be those of a sociologist. This you may immediately find an imprisonment of method, especially if I add that just by living and learning to the point of reading this book, you already know practically all the sociology that is to be known. But that is a misleading truth—a play on the verb ‘to know’. Sixth-form boys and girls setting out on an ‘A’ level science course are frequently told that they already know 95 per cent of all known physics. It is true: but the other 5 per cent transforms the meaning and the power of knowing.

What, then, are sociological questions and answers? If I again put my first question to a native of our chosen country—‘Who are you?’—he or she might reply with the title of one of Graham Greene’s entertainments, *England*

*Made Me.* The sociologist would then ask, 'How?'. Or he might quote Sir Harry Smith's mother who took leave of him saying 'If you ever meet your enemy, remember you are born a true Englishman'.<sup>1</sup> The sociologist would want to ask who, apart from a traditional matriarch, advances a definition of the true Englishman, what other definitions are available, from whom, and who knows them, follows them, or defies them. Sociology is about social relations—relations of individuals and groups in work and in play, war and peace, transient encounters and enduring bonds. Sociologists seek regularity and pattern in these relations. Hence they summarize them in abstractions as relations of production and reproduction, of kinship and affinity, of authority and freedom, power and advantage. They assume that the social world is not a universe of random changes and exchanges but, on the contrary, that the successful study of social relations will yield general rules governing their persistence and their rupture—rules which are by no means necessarily known to the social actors themselves.

Now I realize I have already taken us into deep water. To go further would be to navigate those oceans in which are to be found the question of free will, and whether there are laws of social motion, historical necessities, propelling us towards a determined fate. Enough. Let us defer these questions and, for the moment, contrive to imagine ourselves as visitors from some other planet, as Martian anthropologists, possessed of belief in science and of the intelligence to use it, but without the understanding which enables us to interpret our neighbour through the fact of our own humanity. What would the inter-planetary visitor see? Even without human understanding, his computer picture would reveal order rather than chaos, regularity rather than randomness. A guarded boundary of British society would be as clear to him as the physical coastline. He would notice that there are two ways of entering this society, either through the wombs of mothers and the records of the Registrar of Births, Marriages, and Deaths, or from other countries overseas and via the desk of the immigration officer. Exit is similarly marked and rule-bound.

Births, deaths, and migrations are governed not only by physical laws, but also by social mechanisms: there are both legitimate and illegitimate births and deaths. Further inspection, again unaided by any kind of human empathy, would reveal patterns and continuities of relations inside the boundary. Our Martian would quickly conceptualize pair-bonding in what we call marriage, courtship, and friendship, class structure in the social relations of production, scientific organizations in the social relations of discovery, status systems in the relations of dominance and submission, and so on. Without doubt, considerable inhuman sense could be made of British society and its history.

But our own social knowledge is both less and more than Martian. Less, because human involvement makes us creatures of our time and place, hampering us with preconceptions and prejudices, and restricting the range of our imagination. More, and it is a crucial more, because we can turn understanding to the service of scholarship. You might, therefore, think of the social sciences as striving simultaneously both to understand so as to interpret human activity, and also to achieve Martian objectivity so as to remove from it adulterating passion. This, at all events, is the intellectual posture I will adopt in my attempt to interpret recent generations of British social experience.

This is a considerable task. A single book could not hope to reproduce more than the most minute fraction of the social action and perception of a single hour in British society. Moreover, the fact that to understand other human beings is an indispensable tool to sociological explanation also constitutes a peculiar handicap in exposition because it makes sociologists of us all. Words like 'class' or 'status' are common to 'folk sociology' as well as to professional sociology, but their meanings differ (and, in the case of this particular pair of words, are usually reversed as between a newspaper and a learned article). Hence the struggle to rescue scholarship and science from gossip, which the physicist has largely won, is much harder for the social scientist, for the paradoxical reason that he more readily 'knows' and is known to the 'object' of his study.



The posture I have described as proper to sociologists, its difficulty apart, is not the only possible one for understanding society; nor is it either confined to or always adopted by sociologists. Much of our collective self-knowledge comes from fiction or books and essays in persuasion. It is arguable whether we learn more about the social circumstances of childhood at the beginning of the present century from Arthur Morrison's *A Child of the Jago*, or from Charles Booth's *London Survey* of that time. Yet there can be no doubt that accuracy of perspective is more likely to be obtained by use of the sociological method. The novel seeks drama before balance. As it happens, both of the works cited are excellent examples of their genre. But the Jago was the worst of slums, and therefore Morrison's novel tells us about childhood in that environment only, while Booth's Survey not only described but quantified the population living in a much wider range of environments. From him we receive a quantified description not only of the 'lowest class of occasional labourers, loafers and semi-criminals', but also of 'the very poor' and 'the poor', those on 'regular standard earnings', 'higher-class labour', and so on. Booth estimated the lowest class to number 11,000 out of 900,000. But this was the class, the lumpen proletariat so heartily detested by Marx, which has constantly attracted the attention and caught the imagination of research workers, reformer, and journalists. The resulting descriptions make good copy, but they tempt romantic minds to identify the working class as a whole with a distinctive and unrepresentative segment of it.

The search for objectivity through social science has another characteristic feature. Sociology, as I have said, is essentially a set of propositions about social relations, about characteristic tendencies and variations in social conditions and social consciousness. Sociological reference is thus to the role, not to the person. Even references to groups should normally be taken as statements about a structure of relations rather than an aggregate of people. For example, if we speak of the British working class, it is more often than not misleading to take this to mean a