Aspects of modern sociology

The social structure of modern Britain

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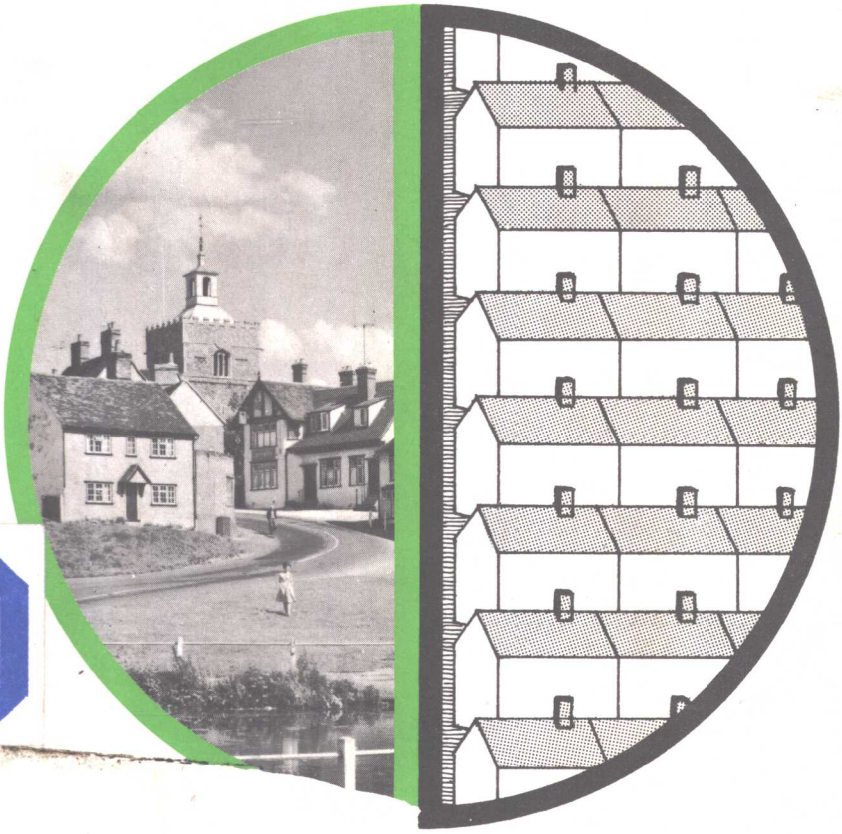
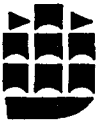
R. E. Pahl



Patterns of urban life

R. E. Pahl M.A., Ph.D.

Professor of Sociology and Director of the Centre for Research in the Social Sciences
University of Kent at Canterbury



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Aspects of modern sociology

The social structure of modern Britain

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Editors' preface

British higher education is now witnessing a very rapid expansion of teaching and research in the social sciences, and, in particular, in sociology. This new series has been designed for courses offered by universities, colleges of education, colleges of technology and colleges of further education to meet the needs of students training for social work, teaching and a wide variety of other professions. It does not attempt a comprehensive treatment of the whole field of sociology, but concentrates on the social structure of modern Britain which forms a central feature of most university and college sociology courses in this country. Its purpose is to offer an analysis of our contemporary society through the study of basic demographic, ideological and structural features, and through the study of such major social institutions as the family, education, the economic and political structure, and so on.

The aim has been to produce a series of introductory texts which will in combination form the basis for a sustained course of study, but each volume has been designed as a single whole and can be read in its own right.

We hope that the topics covered in the series will prove attractive to a wide reading public and that, in addition to students, others who wish to know more than is readily available about the nature and structure of their own society will find them of interest.

JOHN BARRON MAYS
MAURICE CRAFT

Foreword

Britain is physically as urbanised as any nation in the world, yet as a society we seem to be extraordinarily reluctant to accept this fact. How else can the dearth of books on urbanism and urbanisation in Britain be explained? Charles Booth and others may have pioneered the use of systematic survey techniques for documenting the urban social situation, but out of this fact-finding no systematic urban sociology has emerged. Students of the subject in this country learn more about Chicago than Glasgow or Birmingham. However, in recent years sociologically informed scholars in urban history have helped to add a new dimension to the study of urbanism in Britain. Furthermore, architects, planners and the practical professions concerned with the built environment have been pressing sociologists to systematise what is known. Thus, helped by the historians and prodded by the planners, it may be that urban sociology in Britain will enter a new phase. I hope that this book will at least show where the gaps are widest and will help to stimulate a deeper interest in the subject.

R. E. PAHL

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The origins and growth of pre-industrial urbanism in Britain

1

There has been some form of urban life in Britain for nearly two thousand years. According to almost any criterion Britain is now among the most urbanised two or three nations in the world. Sociologists are interested not so much in the physical growth of towns and cities and not, even, in the proportionate increase of the population living in areas designated as urban, but rather in the changing patterns of social relationships, which may develop in urban areas. This analytical distinction between the physical situation and social relationships gives rise to certain difficulties and confusions in modern Britain, which, in many respects, may be considered to be completely urbanised in the sociological sense. These difficulties were much less apparent during the early period of the development of urban life and institutions in Britain or in western Europe generally. The town or city, even without its wall, rampart or ditch, was clearly separate and distinguishable from the country.

In this chapter I shall first consider the early colonisation and urbanisation of tribal Britain by a large bureaucratically organised and urban-based imperial power. Then, using the rather slender historical material available, I shall consider urban life and social institutions in two English preindustrial cities, York and London. This will be related to the more general sociological work of the distinguished German sociologist Max Weber, who wrote one of the pioneer works in urban sociology early in this century. More recently the American sociologist Gideon Sjoberg has written on preindustrial cities and we shall also consider his contribution. It should be stressed that I am not so much concerned with telling a story, inferring that what comes before is directly related to what follows; rather

I am concerned with specifically sociological themes, which may be discussed in the light of the available historical evidence. The main focus is on social institutions and social relationships.

THE BEGINNINGS OF URBAN SOCIETY AND URBAN IDEOLOGIES

Tribal Britain was administered from fortified camps which some people have described as towns. However, it was the conquest and colonisation by the Roman legionaries and administrators that introduced cities to Britain. In many ways the Roman Empire was the creation of the city and Roman intellectuals had much the same ambivalent attitudes towards urbanism as contemporary intellectuals (Lowenstein, 1965).

Many authors in ancient Rome complained of the noise, the traffic and the crowds. Horace complained of 'that bit of Hell/Known as big city life', and Martial complained of the transience or superficiality of certain urban social relationships—'in all the city there is no man who is so near and yet so far from me' as his own nextdoor neighbour. The jaded satirists not only deplored the physical form and pattern of urban life but also the source of income of the rich; Horace wrote:

> Some men derive their income from government contracts;
> Some hunt down rich widows, with fruit and glazed candy;
> Some cast their nets for old men to put in their fishponds;
> Some people's capital keeps on growing, kept growing
> By interest (fostered by time, just like a tree).

In the sophisticated city, life was claimed to be vile and corrupt whereas the good life could be lived in the country: after all, as Varro put it—'God made the country and man made the town'. Typically, the rich got the best of both worlds: 'Whenever worn out with worry, I wish to sleep, I go to my villa', remarked Martial, and Pliny was obliged to commute to peace at his villa 'but seventeen miles distant from Rome; so that having finished your affairs in town,

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you can spend the night here after completing a full working day.' Yet there were, of course, dissenting voices; Cicero did not enjoy life in the country: 'I cannot describe how ardently I long for town, how hard I find it to bear the stupidity of life here.' Even Horace makes one of his characters in his *Satires* laugh at him:

> 'At Rome, you yearn
> For the country, but once in the sticks, you praise to high heaven
> The far off city, you nitwit.'

Although urban life was the basis of the ancient Mediterranean civilisations it was not easy to establish it in tribal parts of the Empire like Britain. The Romans adopted a policy of creating what French geographers have described in once French-occupied Africa as binocular towns—the Roman town was built adjoining the tribal camp. This system had the advantage of close proximity to the old tribal aristocracy who were responsible for levying local taxes; the unit of administration was based on the existing tribal area and the urban network became the main source of British Romanisation. However, most Roman towns were simply military camps and only five British towns had a status which enabled their inhabitants to have the rights of Roman citizenship. One of these, Verulamium (St Albans), may have been a *municipium*, which would have merited its own charter and constitution, but this is still in dispute. Archaeological evidence has shown that Verulamium certainly had pretensions to grandeur. At the peak of its prosperity there were large triumphal arches, temples, an openair theatre and a forum with large centrally heated houses built in a prosperous colonial style in brick and tile. In his report on the recent excavations at Verulamium S. S. Frere suggested that the more wealthy men of the Catuvellauni tribe invested their money in blocks of shops fronting Watling Street.

Acculturation followed urban development: Tacitus describes how Agricola provided educational facilities for the sons of tribal chiefs so that 'in place of distaste for the Latin language came a passion to command it. In the same way, our national dress came into favour and the toga was everywhere to be seen. And so the Britons were gradually led on to the amenities that make vice agreeable—

arcades, baths and sumptuous banquets. They spoke of such novelties as "civilisation", when really they were only a feature of enslavement' (Tacitus, p. 72).

It is difficult to believe that this period of some three hundred years of urbanisation and Romanisation did not have some lasting effects. Substantial villas were built in the countryside by the new gentry, with masonry footings, mosaic floors, bath-houses, heated rooms, and glazed windows. Even if towns declined between the Saxon invasions and the Norman conquest a more sophisticated urban style may have continued amongst a scattered Romano-British population, which could have provided the basis for the merchant-trader class which appeared in the eighth and ninth centuries. And the withdrawal of the Roman legions in the fifth century may not have led to quite the eclipse of urban life that some historians have claimed. As Professor Edward Miller (1961) put it: 'There seems, in fact, every reason to believe that seventh-century townsmen were fully conscious of the origins of the Roman monuments around them. In York the massive walls and columns of the earlier culture . . . must have inspired even farmer and artisan with some sense of urban community.' York maintained a strong urban tradition from the fifth to the tenth centuries. Canterbury also maintained its urban tradition and as early as the ninth century there is reference to a Cnihtengild—an organisation for a defined section of the town, although who the Cnihts of Canterbury were is not clear. These early urban voluntary associations are forerunners of the medieval guilds. Regulations for a thegns' guild at Cambridge are mainly concerned with the rituals connected with the blood feud but there is also some concern with funeral dues, the transport of a member's body home if he is taken ill or dies outside the district, and so on.

It is likely that in some English urban centres trade and industry carried on through the Dark Ages. Nevertheless there is dispute among historians whether, apart from London and one or two other places, there were any real towns in Anglo-Saxon England. Certainly many burghs were closely integrated into the rural economy with little that could be described as distinctly urban in any sociological

sense. However, evidence is accumulating of quite considerable urban development. For example, in the ninth and tenth centuries the Anglo-Danish town of Thetford developed a broad industrial and trading structure. Metalsmiths worked iron and copper and there was a flourishing woollen and pottery industry. Trade extended all over eastern England and to the Continent. Other inhabitants of the town were farmers providing the food for the industrial workers. The site of the town extended for about a mile along the Little Ouse valley and stretched inland for half a mile. At the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086 Thetford was an administrative and commercial centre comparable with Norwich or Oxford and had maybe 4,000 or 5,000 inhabitants. York probably had more than 8,000 inhabitants and was divided into smaller units known as 'shires'. London probably had 12,000 inhabitants, though Domesday evidence is lacking. At the end of the eleventh century perhaps a tenth of England's population lived permanently in towns and even if many of these towns' inhabitants were farmers there was a substantial minority of urban Englishmen, legally and politically distinct and apart from the manorial structure.

However, the early urbanisation of Britain by the Romans and merchants is obscure, largely owing to the lack of documentary evidence. It is nonetheless possible that if a tenth of the population did live permanently in towns by the end of the eleventh century then England was more urbanised than Africa is today. Of course this statement is difficult to substantiate, since much depends on the definition of 'town', the occupational structure of the urban population, and so on.

PREINDUSTRIAL URBANISM

Max Weber has argued that the only time and place where the true urban community has existed was in medieval Europe. Such a community, he asserted, should be based primarily on trade and commerce and generally had the following features:

1. Fortification
2. A market

3. A court of its own and at least partially autonomous law
4. A related form of association
5. At least partial autonomy with burghers taking part in the election of urban administrators.

Essentially, then, the city emerges out of feudal society as a distinct and largely autonomous community. 'City air makes one free' was an adage in medieval Germany and in England a serf who escaped to town and lived unchallenged within its walls for a year and a day could claim to be regarded as a free man. Generally, urban dwellers belonged to professional groups such as crafts or guilds, localised within the urban areas. Within the ward or street districts urbanites had specific responsibilities for maintaining the peace: social control was maintained both formally and informally.

Weber suggested that such ideas of 'urban citizenry' or 'urban community' appear to be lacking in Far Eastern cities. Cities acting specifically as cities, as a particular kind of communal action, are the product of a distinctively European tradition. Urban freehold, property and trade were the bases of the class of burghers, independent of the feudal lords. 'During the period of maximum autonomy', Weber remarks, 'the cities displayed an exceptional variety of forms and trends.' Some cities pursued imperialistic foreign policies, having their own soldiers and even controlling overseas colonies. Some large cities in Italy and Germany achieved an international political importance. This was not the pattern in England where cities were always limited in their power, largely because, although the king did grant charters allowing a degree of autonomy to cities from the twelfth century, crucial military and political power was centralised in a way which made English feudalism quite a separate sort of system from that which developed in France or Germany.

Perhaps the best way to see preindustrial cities is by analysing the sources and distribution of power. Firstly, there was the power struggle between the individual cities and the central authority. Secondly, there was a struggle between cities for various privileges and trade monopolies, particularly the struggle between the over-

whelmingly dominant London and other cities. And, finally, there were struggles within the city for political power, trade and craft privilege, the rights of minorities and so on. The city as a sociological fact could not exist without its power.

Professor Sjoberg has described other characteristics, which, he claims, are typically found in an ideal type of preindustrial city. In terms of spatial arrangements he mentions the segregation of minority ethnic groups, the congestion within the walls, the dominance of the central area and low functional differentiation. He sees a direct link between the technological base of a society and the localisation of particular crafts and merchant activities in segregated quarters or streets. Such preindustrial cities are essentially centres for the elite: only there can they communicate and maintain their common interests. 'The more potent the elite the grander the city.' The elite has power rationalised through religion and maintained through the control of education and government. Sjoberg argues that the merchants are excluded from the elite, despite the city being dependent on commerce. 'Business men, or merchants, fall into the lower class or outcaste group.' The social structure is said to be rigid and there is very little social mobility. The economic structure is based on the guilds. Most economic transactions are concluded after long haggling. There is little specialisation of function in craft industrial production, although there is a good deal of product specialisation.

Sjoberg also discusses marriage and the family, the political structure, the religious structure and so on. His book has given rise to a great deal of controversy and he has been severely criticised by historians and sociologists, largely for generalising about *the* preindustrial city which, he claims, has common characteristics remaining much the same 'over fifty-five centuries' and between different cultures. Such broad generalisations are sharply at variance with the work of Weber, who stressed the variation and distinctiveness of preindustrial cities largely as reflections of the distribution of power in society. There may, indeed, be certain similarities between contemporary 'preindustrial' cities in Africa or Asia and medieval European 'preindustrial' cities, but to argue that they are essentially the same type in that they are all 'preindustrial' is hardly defensible.

Not only does Sjoberg, in Wrigley's phrase, do violence to history (Wrigley, 1967, p. 53), but he also does violence to sociology. Nevertheless his work is widely read and quoted.

It is in this context that the following, more detailed, accounts of York and London should be seen. We are still a very long way from a sociological theory of preindustrial urbanism and urbanisation in Britain. Quite apart from the intrinsic interest of such a study, it is important to understand that cities are not simply products of the last two hundred years. The industrial revolution may have helped to form an urban society but the distinctiveness of urban life was, in certain respects, more marked in the centuries which preceded it.

MEDIEVAL YORK: THE EMERGENCE OF URBAN AUTONOMY

Medieval York provides an example of the working of the distinctive urban institutions of a community of traders and craftsmen (Miller, 1961). Until the year 1212 the sheriff of Yorkshire had to provide revenues for the king and these were probably derived from tolls and other charges on the trading activities of the citizens, a simple tax on domestic property and revenue from the urban court. Furthermore, the king imposed extra levies: between 1156 and 1206 there were sixteen of these, yielding some £3,500, which would be a considerable burden on the citizens. In the later part of the twelfth century the citizens were granted the right to found an association to manage the internal trade of the city, linking up with associations on the coast and in Normandy. Nevertheless, it is interesting that some basic civic liberties are thought to have been laid down without the warrant of a charter so that even as early as the beginning of the twelfth century such rights of citizenship may have been established for some time.

In the early years of the thirteenth century the citizens of York were given the collective responsibility for the management of urban finances, thus emancipating them from the power of the sheriff. Later in the same century citizens acquired further legal rights—for example, they could be convicted only by a jury of fellow citizens, except when the city as a whole was charged. Legal, financial and commercial autonomy meant that the citizens had effectively pre-

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