

History of the Sussex University Sociology Department

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Sussex Sociology, founded in 1962, has been home to many interesting members. Its founders were no exception. Zev Barbu, born in Romania in 1914, fought on the Russian front in 1941 and was imprisoned for desertion, separatism and leftism. After the war he was part of a team that drafted a new constitution for his country and represented Romania at the Paris peace conference. He sought political exile in Britain in 1950, and in the '60s, after a spell at the University of Glasgow, was given the task of setting up the new Sociology group at Sussex. The department had just two members at its inauguration. The other was Helmut Pappe, a German refugee from the Nazis in 1939. Helmut came to Sussex with interests spanning sociology, history, philosophy, law and economic theory, in line with the traditions of the university. His work focused on Sismondi, a nineteenth century economist and historian, and the political philosopher John Stuart Mill. Pappe and Barbu were both encouraged to come to Sussex by History professor and later Vice Chancellor Asa Briggs.

In the early years there were insufficient numbers to staff a whole sociology degree and the group's first offering was a joint programme with Politics. Sociology as a single degree came later. Barbu and Pappe were soon followed by others, including longstanding department stalwarts George Rehin and Jennifer Platt who arrived in 1964 and were around for another 30 or 40 years or so respectively. In the late '60s another refugee from the Nazis joined Sussex, Julius Carlebach. During his long association with the university he initiated an Israeli Studies programme, and pursued research on the history of ideas. Tom Bottomore arrived at the same time, leading the group for many years, and writing on Marxist sociology, one of the department's most well known figures. From 1969 others who were also to become longstanding members joined – Kevin McCormick, William Outhwaite, Jenny Shaw, Pete Saunders, David Harrison and Brian Taylor, all remaining for decades rather than years.

Student numbers have expanded as the university sector has, the entry cohort of around 30-40 in the early 1990s rising to about 100 in the 2000s. The department has stabilised for many years around a permanent staff of about 12, with trendless fluctuations up and down from this norm, and many important part-time and temporary staff being mainstays of our degrees. There was long a female minority in the sociology group, but in the mid-2000s the department underwent a fast transition to a clear female majority with a number of new, many young, appointments.

Sociology at Sussex was not physically located in one place until 40 years after its foundation as its members were spread across the interdisciplinary schools mixing with staff and students of different disciplines. Schools dominated and Sociology was known, consequently, as a subject group rather than a department. Even now sociology is not really in one place. Many academics with a sociological approach and associated with our department have been located in other groups and units at Sussex, from Education to the Institute of Development Studies to Social Administration amongst others, whilst still playing a key role in the history of Sussex sociology. Students who did Sussex degrees

outside our group discovered sociology here because of the possibilities allowed by the university's flexible structures. Professor Paul Gilroy is one example.

One area of the department's work has been in social and political thought and political sociology, connected to the internationally renowned Social and Political Thought graduate programme. Important figures from sociology involved in SPT have included Tom Bottomore, William Outhwaite and Gillian Rose, all of whom have published central books in the field. Postgraduate students have come from around the world to study social theory, attracted by the work of such members. Urban Studies was another area where sociologists linked up with staff from other disciplines to create a new research and teaching centre that pulled in postgraduate students.

Other strengths of Sussex sociology in various periods have been in health and medicine and gender, themes hardened up by the need to define groups for research assessment purposes. Many of our postgraduate courses and PhD students have been in SPT and these areas. MAs and PhD programmes in Women's Studies and Gender Studies have been an important part of the university's identity over the years. Sussex Faculty have also congregated around fields such as work and employment, inequalities and development. Some members in the interdisciplinary days had cultural and literary interests. Kevin McCormick single-handedly made Japan a distinctive part of the department's history for many years, with a steady stream of visitors, and a key part of the undergraduate curriculum. Staff such as Jennifer Platt and Paul Chalmers-Dixon established a critical approach to research methods as an important part of the curriculum and department life.

Members of the department have been involved in the associational life of the university and more widely. Several have served as officers or committee members in the local branch of the lecturers' union, including Jennifer Platt, George Rehin, Jenny Shaw and Kevin McCormick. Members of the department have played key roles in the discipline's national and international associations. Jennifer Platt, Tom Bottomore and William Outhwaite have edited journals such as *Current Sociology*, *International Sociology* and *Sociology*, and served at the helm of the International Sociological Association and the British Sociological Association. Jennifer is a world authority on the history of the discipline.

Research assessment and restructuring from 2000 onwards had their impacts on the department, and Sussex. The department, encouraged by Sussex's unique structures, had emphasised interdisciplinary links throughout its history until the post-2000 period. Its members were, until then, scattered around schools, which had area foci such as Europe, America, and Africa and Asia, or thematic foci such as culture and community and social sciences. Research assessment stressed intra-disciplinary collaboration, and the restructuring of the university in the early 2000s away from interdisciplinary schools to departments also led to a more disciplinary focus.

Chairs of the group from the 1970s onwards included Julius Carlebach, Tom Bottomore, Pete Saunders and Jennifer Platt and Heads of Department following them in the 2000s included Ruth Woodfield, Gillian Bendelow and Gerard Delanty. Sociology at Sussex has been blessed with friendly and able secretaries and administrators over the years, including

Brenda Chittenden, Pat Bennett, Lisa Cobden and Linda Cooper as well as many support staff in schools who have helped the department through its history.

Sadly there have been premature deaths – the indefatigable and well-liked Mary Farmer in her early 40s, and Gillian Rose after her departure to Warwick.

One of the strengths of the department has been its students – intellectually able, critical and liberal. Sociology at Sussex has consistently done well in teaching league tables, including a perfect 24/24 in the 1995 Teaching Quality Assessment which put us in the top 3 in the UK for teaching. The department has usually been ranked in the top 15-20 in the UK for research and teaching during the periods of league tables for these things.

Graduates of the department include some of those who went on to be its staff, such as William Outhwaite. Paul Hirst became ensconced as Professor of Social Theory at Birkbeck College and Nigel Fielding Professor of Sociology at Surrey. Professor David Frisby took his MA in Sociology at Sussex, worked with Tom Bottomore and became a leading authority on German social theory. Professors Tony Bennett, Larry Ray and Bob Holton are Sussex Sociology graduates. Other alumni include Radio 4 presenter Barbara Myers, and Timothy Shaw, an academic in Canada, the UK, the West Indies, Uganda and South Africa. David Hallam was a Labour MEP in the 1990s and active in the Methodist community. Professor Neil McKeganey specialises in drug misuse and Michele Barrett is Professor at City University. Helen Roberts is a Professor of Child Health. Dr Tim Reed is Director of Health International Europe.

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