

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18878-4 - The Social Survey in Historical Perspective 1880-1940

Edited by Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales and Kathryn Kish Sklar

Excerpt

[More information](#)

❧ CHAPTER ONE ❧

*The social survey in historical perspective*MARTIN BULMER, KEVIN BALES AND
KATHRYN KISH SKLAR

Since antiquity, governments have collected information about the people whom they governed as a by-product of administration. As a consequence, they have also found it useful and necessary to design methods to gather such data. The population census – counting the numbers of people living within a given territory – was one of the first such inquiries. At the time of the birth of Jesus, for example, Joseph and Mary were travelling to Bethlehem to be registered in a census. For the most part, however, such inquiries were confined to basic headcounts.

The social survey is a direct descendant of this type of inquiry, although much broader in scope. The origins of the investigation of the condition of the working or labouring classes in modern times may be traced to the late eighteenth century. Interest intensified with the creation of the Statistical Societies in the 1830s, with their roots in Benthamism and political economy,¹ and as a result of the early public health inquiries. A variety of developments in early- and mid-Victorian England, discussed by Eileen Yeo in chapter 2, preceded the emergence of the scientific social survey in the 1880s. Social investigation is a broader category than the social survey, and the Victorian period in particular saw the flowering of a variety of forms of social investigation which are part of the immediate pre-history of the social survey. The social survey as a tool of scientific inquiry is not much more than 100 years old.

The appearance of the social survey in the latter part of the nineteenth century followed the development of social investigation. Both may be attributed in broad terms to the confluence of upper- and middle-class concern about the negative effects of large-scale urbanisation and industrialisation in Western Europe and North America with the growth of a desire to investigate society scientifically and on a more systematic basis than before.² The sources from which the social survey grew were various,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18878-4 - The Social Survey in Historical Perspective 1880-1940

Edited by Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales and Kathryn Kish Sklar

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 MARTIN BULMER, KEVIN BALES AND KATHRYN KISH SKLAR

government censuses being only a minor contributor. Throughout the nineteenth century there were investigations into public health, housing, family life and employment, particularly as these affected the working classes. The investigations were carried out by private individuals (many of them, in the later nineteenth century, women of some social position), certain professions (associated with, in particular, medicine), members of voluntary associations concerned with social welfare, a few journalists and (by the end of the century) one or two academic scholars.

Although the methods of inquiry varied, there was some common ground. From the time of Charles Booth onwards, the term 'social survey' came increasingly to be applied to the inquiries. Indeed, for a period in the United States what became known as the Social Survey Movement flourished, engaging significant numbers of private, government and academic researchers. These inquiries signified increasing upper- and middle-class interest in the condition of the working classes as well as a desire to intervene – a desire both to remedy want and disease through voluntary or state action and to achieve a greater degree of social control through the use of scientific expertise.

The social survey defined

The types of social survey treated in this book are richly varied and not easily defined in a wholly consistent manner. The *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences (ESS)* published in the 1930s, edited by Alvin Johnson, provides one of the most adequate definitions.

In its broadest sense a social survey is a first hand investigation, analysis and coordination of economic, sociological and other related aspects of a selected community or group. Such a survey may be undertaken primarily in order to provide material scientifically gathered upon which social theorists may base their conclusions; or its chief purpose may be to formulate a programme of amelioration of the conditions of life and work of a particular group or community. Although either type of survey may yield results of value to the other, scope and method are governed chiefly by the initial purpose of the study. The first type was introduced into sociological thought by Frédéric Le Play in the middle of the nineteenth century and has resulted in a rich and varied literature as well as in a less definite but nevertheless powerful influence, particularly in French and German sociology. The latter, while gaining much from the impetus of Le Play's studies of working men's family budgets, had its actual inception in England in the last quarter of the century with the work of Charles Booth and his associates, and has attained its fullest development in the United States. Thus the social survey as a method for the study and analysis of social phenomena as well as for the application of a programme of social planning is of comparatively recent origin, although it had been envisaged by thinkers belonging to an earlier period.³

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18878-4 - The Social Survey in Historical Perspective 1880-1940

Edited by Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales and Kathryn Kish Sklar

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The social survey in historical perspective*

3

This definition brings out well the dual involvement of social scientists and social reformers in the history of the social survey, and the interplay between them. It is important to stress that before 1940 the social survey was not associated particularly closely with academic social science, which was in any case itself quite small in scale. The modern scientific sample survey, established by academics such as Rensis Likert and Paul Lazarsfeld, government statisticians such as P. C. Mahalanobis and Louis Moss, and market researchers such as Henry Durant and Mark Abrams, has developed since that time.⁴ Before that period, a variety of individuals and groups, only a minority of them academics, contributed to the establishment of the social survey and it is with them that we are concerned here.

Several specific characteristics distinguish the social survey from the modes of social investigation that preceded it. A social survey involved field work, the collection of data at first hand by a social investigator rather than reliance upon reports by others or on pre-existing data. Surveys attempted to achieve comprehensive rather than haphazard coverage, albeit (in most of the studies discussed in this book) within a local rather than a national area. The data in surveys related to individuals, families and households rather than aggregates, and were analysed accordingly. Survey research involved the attempt, however primitive, at counting and quantifying the phenomena with which it was concerned. And the social survey developed in close relationship with public policy and social reform.

From its inception, the social survey was intimately associated with social action. Whether or not studies were done with a reform purpose, they were thought of as illuminating current public debates about the condition of the working classes. This concern was well captured in David Glass' definition in Chamber's Encyclopaedia: 'a scientific study of social conditions and social problems, within a limited geographical setting, the objectives of that study being implicitly or explicitly related to social policy'.⁵ Social surveyors varied in their degree of detachment from the issues of the day, but almost all were concerned not simply to anatomise and classify in the manner of early anthropologists, but to throw light on matters of current social and political controversy and to promote social amelioration if not social intervention. As Mark Abrams, one of its chief British practitioners, wrote:

Occasionally surveys originate in an abstract desire for more knowledge about the structure and workings of a society; more frequently, however, they are carried out as an indispensable first step in measuring the dimensions of a social problem, ascertaining its causes, and then deciding upon remedial action... Most surveys have been concerned with curing obviously pathological social conditions.⁶

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18878-4 - The Social Survey in Historical Perspective 1880-1940

Edited by Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales and Kathryn Kish Sklar

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 MARTIN BULMER, KEVIN BALES AND KATHRYN KISH SKLAR

What actual methods were involved in the conduct of a social survey in the period before 1940? The *ESS* definition quoted earlier does not adequately answer this question. In the late twentieth century we tend to be over-influenced by the contemporary sample survey, and run the danger of reading into social surveys of the past elements drawn from today's practices. It is hard to escape an implicitly Whiggish history.⁷

A fundamental change in the concepts guiding the acquisition of social knowledge accompanied the rise of the social survey. This change is visible in the difference between Henry Mayhew's examination of the London poor in the middle of the nineteenth century and Charles Booth's surveys three decades later. Booth conceptualised the problem differently, conducted a larger-scale inquiry, attempted to measure the phenomena with which he was concerned, and collected data from multiple observers rather than relying upon a single observer. Some historians will protest at the periodisation implicit in such a distinction, and maintain that social survey-type inquiries were taking place earlier in the nineteenth century. But even though some features of the survey method predated the emergence of the modern local social survey, inquiries using those features were not yet mature social surveys.⁸

This slow and uneven development is apparent in the contributions which follow. At the end of our period, there was a degree of discontinuity between the social survey in the United States before 1940 and the rise of the modern sample survey after 1940. Alain Desrosières follows the emergence of the idea of representative sampling and shows the lack of lineal development in its course. E. P. Hennock traces the evolution of the study of poverty, showing the twists and turns in its emergence as a measurable concept in British social science.

Slow and uneven development also characterised other features such as the role of the investigator, how the data were actually collected, and the analysis of the results. Charles Booth, for example, did not rely upon interviewers but upon School Board Visitors; however, Seebohm Rowntree *did* use interviewers, and reliance upon first-hand methods of data collection rather than reports from middle-class observers acquainted with the working class gradually became standard procedure. The emergence of the interview, however, was not an inevitable process. (We still await a full history of its development.) Thus, the term 'social survey' embraced a wide variety of research practices, sharing some common elements in terms of conceptualisation, extent, measurement and first-hand data collection, and also building concretely upon what had gone before.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18878-4 - The Social Survey in Historical Perspective 1880-1940

Edited by Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales and Kathryn Kish Sklar

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE PRE-HISTORY OF THE SOCIAL SURVEY

In Britain, the most important early landmark in systematic inquiries was Domesday Book of 1086. Some authors, such as Caradog Jones in 1948,⁹ have treated William the Conqueror's Domesday Book as the beginning of social surveys in Britain. Domesday Book's listings, of course, were more about property than about people, but it did initiate a tradition of inquiry which carried forward to the end of the nineteenth century. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, enumeration with a purpose steadily increased and became less likely to be carried out by government than by interested private individuals. At the same time the focus of the investigations broadened, from administrative and economic information about people to demographic and social topics.

This process of inquiry prior to the mature social survey may be thought of as having four phases or aspects. The first, starting in the seventeenth century, was the tradition of 'political arithmetic'. The second, in the first half of the nineteenth century, shifted the emphasis from population characteristics to the investigation of social problems by both government and private individuals in the 'statistical movement'. A third trend, mixed up with the second but to some extent distinct from it and gaining impetus throughout the nineteenth century, studied social conditions as a weapon in the arsenal of 'ameliorism' and social reform. The fourth, part of ameliorism in Britain but distinct from it in France, was the collection of data by direct observation. All four phases were preliminary to the social surveys considered in this book, and the methods of inquiry used did not constitute surveys in the sense defined earlier.

Political arithmetic

'Political arithmetic' has the longest pedigree. It is usually thought to begin with John Graunt and William Petty in the Restoration.¹⁰ Their publication in 1662 of the *Natural and Political Observations on the Bills of Mortality* linked social and economic measures and included a crude life-expectancy table. Petty was the more active of the two and had earlier accomplished the *Down Survey* in 1652, a careful assessment of life and property in Ireland under Henry Cromwell. A general register of demographic information was urged by Petty during period of the Commonwealth and after the Restoration, but this was never realised. It was Petty who coined the term 'political arithmetic'.

The contributory causes of this seventeenth-century flowering included

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18878-4 - The Social Survey in Historical Perspective 1880-1940

Edited by Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales and Kathryn Kish Sklar

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 MARTIN BULMER, KEVIN BALES AND KATHRYN KISH SKLAR

the advances in natural sciences which a few sought to emulate in the study of society, population growth amidst the absence of reliable demographic data, the development of insurance which required a firmer numerical foundation, and mercantilist beliefs that population size played an important part in the wealth and power of the nation. Yet the flowering was comparatively short-lived. Petty died in 1687, and for the following century there was little of note that qualifies for the history of social inquiry being pursued here.

This is not to say that social statistics were entirely quiescent in the eighteenth century. Demographic record-keeping expanded slowly and rudimentary analyses were carried out by Sir Peter Pett, Charles Davenant and Gregory King. Halley's life-expectancy tables were used for the first time in the calculation of life insurance. Cullen sees in the work of King and Halley the 'almost instantaneous' reduction of political arithmetic into demography.¹¹ In the process, political arithmetic lost William Petty's reformist zeal but served to inform contemporary debate about the population question.

Throughout the eighteenth century there were fears that the population had fallen since the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Methods used to estimate population were inadequate, being based on the window tax, but calls for a census were resisted in part due to fear of new taxes.¹² The complexion of the population debate changed radically after the publication of Malthus's *Essay on Population* in 1798, when concern about under-population was replaced with concern about over-population. Malthus' work, although the best known, was only one of several striking developments at the end of the eighteenth century. Another was the application of demographic methods to medical problems in the work of Gilbert Blane. A third was the entry into English of the word 'statistics'.

In 1791 'statistics' was firmly ensconced in the language with the publication of Sir John Sinclair's *Statistical Account of Scotland*, which surveyed that country demographically, economically and socially through descriptive accounts of each locality obtained from local parsons and schoolmasters.¹³ By 1797 the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* described 'statistics' as 'a word lately introduced to express a view or a survey of any kingdom, county or parish'. The synthesis of this form of statistics with the population question contributed to the introduction of the national population census.

The intellectual spur to the successful establishment of the census, where previous efforts had failed, owed more to the efforts of John Rickman than to the publication of Malthus' book. Rickman pressed Parliament, which

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18878-4 - The Social Survey in Historical Perspective 1880-1940

Edited by Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales and Kathryn Kish Sklar

Excerpt

[More information](#)

responded not to the long-term demographic case but to the need to assess demand for food in the wake of the disastrous harvest of 1800. A retrospective census was collected from parish records going back to 1700 along with the first census in 1801. Thereafter, a regular census was performed every ten years. Significant improvements in the method of enumeration were introduced in 1841, when details about all individuals were first recorded by enumerators.

THE STATISTICAL MOVEMENT

Around the beginning of the nineteenth century a qualitative change occurred in how society was viewed. Morality, religion and authority had been challenged earlier, in the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, for example, but this scepticism and resort to empirical inquiry had not extended, demography apart, to the study of society. The eighteenth-century *philosophes* used evidence about primitive peoples, but they were at heart philosophers who did not have a sense of puzzlement about the state of contemporary society. That inquisitiveness began to arise among people who were in touch with fellow citizens outside their own strata of society, and sought to establish more precisely the facts of the conditions under which those people lived.¹⁴ This interest was sharpened by the gathering pace of urbanisation and industrialisation as people were brought together in ever-more-concentrated settlements which aggravated problems of health, overcrowding, and the lack of recreation space, especially compared with rural society.

The period after 1800 saw a significant extension of the scope of social inquiry in Britain. In particular, the establishment of a number of Statistical Societies in many cities provided a focus for discussing the inquiries to which the growing curiosity about social conditions were leading. The first to be founded was the Manchester Statistical Society in 1833. Its work was motivated by the peculiarly Victorian blend of an urge to attack moral evils and to 'elevate the physical condition' of workers.¹⁵ One of its innovations was the employment of agents, such as the 'intelligent Irishman ... himself a handloom weaver', to survey 4,102 weaver families in 1834. Most notable among the new societies was the London Statistical Society, formed in 1834 by Richard Jones, T. R. Malthus, Charles Babbage, Adolphe Quetelet and Adam Sedgwick. Its original aims were defined as 'procuring, arranging and publishing Facts calculated to illustrate the Conditions and Prospects of Society'.¹⁶ Quetelet's importance is discussed shortly, but it was not the academic founders but some of its early members – such as

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18878-4 - The Social Survey in Historical Perspective 1880-1940

Edited by Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales and Kathryn Kish Sklar

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 MARTIN BULMER, KEVIN BALES AND KATHRYN KISH SKLAR

Edwin Chadwick and William Farr – who addressed questions of relief policy or public health, who were the most active investigators and who moved the Society's work more into the field of social investigation.

In preparing the Poor Law Report of 1834, Chadwick had brought social inquiry closer to the process of government policy-making. Subsequently, as Secretary of the Poor Law Commissioners, he prepared the *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population*, which graphically described the social and health conditions of urban areas in which epidemic diseases such as cholera were rife. Concerns with urban poverty, welfare and sanitary improvement were growing. In its first ten years, Statistical Society discussions centred on health and social conditions including education, generating that 'peculiar pattern of British empirical sociology' in which demography and the study of poverty predominate.¹⁷

William Farr, on the other hand, was influential in the development of vital statistics. He made important contributions in his work on the causes of cholera and in his studies of the connection between cholera and density of population. He was working in a time receptive to the statistical approach. As G. M. Young observed, 'it was the business of the [eighteen] thirties to transfer the treatment of affairs from a polemical to a statistical basis, from Humbug to Humdrum. In 1830 there were hardly any figures to work on. Even the census was far from perfect.... But statistical inquiry was a passion of the time.'¹⁸ Farr had benefited from studying medicine in Paris, where he was also taught medical statistics and his interest was aroused in the quantitative study of the incidence of disease. International contacts emerge at several points in this book, and are explicitly discussed by Jennifer Platt in chapter 13. He was one early example of the extent to which investigators in one country learnt from those working in another.

In some ways Farr was a typical member of the Statistical Society of the 1830s and 1840s, but, having a sophisticated understanding of statistics for the time, he never assumed that facts alone constituted a science. He was a distinguished member of that group of medical members of the early statistical societies who made notable contributions to the measurement of social phenomena, ancestors of the epidemiologists and community health specialists of today. Public health was a major social issue directly related to the life chances of the industrial working class. In the British medical profession, 'a tradition of local investigation connected with efforts to improve the condition of the poor. Physicians, especially those affiliated with dispensaries, were frequently the first professional people to gain extensive and direct experience with the lives of the poorest classes of cities.'¹⁹

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18878-4 - The Social Survey in Historical Perspective 1880-1940

Edited by Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales and Kathryn Kish Sklar

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The incidence of disease, compared with some other phenomena, was relatively easy to enumerate in terms of deaths and cases of sickness. Statistical inquiries were seen by some medical people as a way of improving medicine, through finding order and regularity in complex events. Quetelet's influence was strong here. The development of life tables, for example, exemplified the search for regularities in socio-medical phenomena. Farr was an important figure in the development of medical and demographic statistics not least because from his position in the General Register Office he continually emphasised their relevance to policy and administration. Like Victorian administrative reformers such as Chadwick and Simon, social investigation was seen by Farr as a necessary part of state activity.

By 1850, six distinct types of agency carrying out social investigations may be distinguished. Royal Commissions investigated social conditions, as did parliamentary committees. Government officials such as Chadwick and Sir John Simon conducted inquiries, while in some fields government inspectors were a source of information. After 1837 the work of the General Register Office, in which Farr was the prime mover, gradually grew in importance.²⁰ And private individuals carried out studies which were reported at the meetings of the Statistical Societies. None of these six types included what would fifty years later have been recognised as a social survey, with the possible exception of studies accomplished by the London and the Manchester Statistical Societies. Social conditions were itemised by means of information collected from correspondents around the country, informants giving first-hand testimony under interrogation before commissions and committees, augmented by other first-hand observation, particularly by medical investigators. Only in the demographic field was systematic effort made to gather individual data, and here the census and vital registration rather than a purpose-designed inquiry²¹ was the main vehicle.

Controversy arose about the place of values in such investigations. Though driven to greater or lesser extents by the desire to improve social conditions – particularly to check the scourge of epidemic diseases – investigators sought to rest their case on facts rather than values. The aspirations of the Statistical Society were clear enough. Its prospectus stated: 'The Statistical Society will consider it to be the first and most essential rule of its conduct to exclude carefully all Opinions from its transactions and publications – to confine its attention rigorously to facts – and, as far as it may be possible, to facts which can be stated numerically and arranged in tables'.²² In reality, it was hard to keep a clear distinction

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18878-4 - The Social Survey in Historical Perspective 1880-1940

Edited by Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales and Kathryn Kish Sklar

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 MARTIN BULMER, KEVIN BALES AND KATHRYN KISH SKLAR

between facts and values and between facts and theories. All observers framed their observations in terms of theories, and these coloured their interpretations.²³ Moreover, some though not all investigators, whether government servants or private individuals, were interested in pursuing social reform, so that a purely detached and disinterested conception of social inquiry, though it was part of the rhetoric of the statistical societies, was an inadequate foundation for their work.

Adolphe Quetelet

On the continent the development of social inquiry was somewhat different though one of its key figures, Adolphe Quetelet, sparked off the creation of the Statistical Society of London during his visit to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1833. Quetelet was born in Ghent in 1796; in his youth he had literary and artistic interests before being trained as a mathematician. He then became interested in astronomy, and on a visit to Paris in 1823 to pursue this interest became acquainted with the French mathematicians Fourier and La Place and with their work on probability. This gave him the idea of applying statistical ideas to the measurement of the human body. On his return to Belgium he became involved in designing a Belgian census, and followed this up with studies of human stature and of criminal tendencies in the Belgian population. A third study of the distribution of populations by weight followed. From the various studies, Quetelet published *On the Development of Man and his Faculties* in 1835, a book bearing the subtitle 'physique sociale'.²⁴

The 'laws' from which Quetelet sought to construct his social physics were initially based on his observation of relationship between physical characteristics and rates of crime and marriage over time and between countries. He then studied the distribution of these characteristics and found that they tended to conform to a normal or binomial form. Though his best-known statement of his ideas was published in 1869, in fact he had formed them thirty years earlier. The ideas which had the strongest appeal to analysts of society were those concerning what he called 'moral statistics' about crime, marriage, suicide, public disorder and intellectual capacities.

Quetelet was important in introducing some major statistical ideas into social inquiry, although with hindsight the way in which he worked them out failed to realise their full potential – for example, he did not apply ideas about probability to the occurrence of events. His view of social causation was a deterministic one, influenced by his training in science. He was a