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

Edited by Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales and Kathryn Kish Sklar

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For the past hundred years, the social survey has been a major tool of social investigation, and its use has also been linked to social reform. Starting with the landmark surveys of Charles Booth in London and Jane Addams in Chicago, social surveys in both Britain and the United States investigated poverty, unemployment and other difficult social conditions. While in Britain there was marked continuity between the early studies of Booth and others, and the type of social research being done as late as the 1950s and 1960s, in the United States the social survey movement exercised curiously little impact upon later developments within empirical social science. By the 1930s, this method of investigation had virtually disappeared from the US scene.

This book traces the history of the social survey in Britain and the United States (with two chapters on Germany and France). It discusses the aims and interests of those who carried out early surveys, and the links between the social survey and the growth of empirical social science. The use of maps to portray social conditions was one of the survey method's major contributions to social scientific research, and examples of the early maps are included in the volume. The contributors are drawn from a range of disciplines, including history, sociology, political science, demography and geography.

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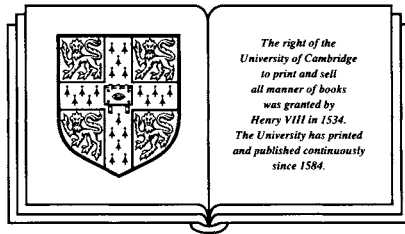


EDITED BY

Martin Bulmer

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Kathryn Kish Sklar



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* These plates are available in colour for download from www.cambridge.org/9780521188784

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☒ *Contributors* ☒

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Social investigation is an important part of the social history of industrial societies since the nineteenth century, and throws light on the development of both social policy and the social sciences. This collection of papers deals with one particular period and one type of social investigation, concerning the two generations between 1880 and the beginning of the Second World War. In 1880 social investigation was a burgeoning phenomenon but the social survey in the sense in which that term is used in this book did not exist. By 1940 such inquiries were much more common, and the beginnings of the modern sample survey, which was to become integral to the post-war world, were by then already apparent.

This collection seeks to identify what were some of the most important innovations in the social survey in this period, what those who conducted surveys thought they were doing, what impact their research had upon opinion and debates at the time, and what was the longer-term significance of particular investigations. A variety of different types of research activity are embraced, which share sufficient common features to justify the appellation 'survey'. The main focus is upon developments in both Britain and the United States, including exchanges between them, with a glance at developments in France and Germany. There are important differences in national traditions of social investigation which are only touched on here, but it is hoped that the collection has enough of an international focus to avoid parochialism.

A significant theme of the papers here is the relationship between research and social action. Most of the early social surveyors were not detached and dispassionate academics but people with practical and political ideals and interests. Many of them undertook inquiries as much out of a desire to understand the world the better to change it as out of dispassionate interest. Thus, as well as illuminating the role of knowledge-

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production in the history of social policy, the collection provides a case study in the tensions between involvement and detachment in social inquiry.

Other important themes concern the place of white women and racial minorities in the history of the social survey. It is no accident that several of the pioneer surveyors were women, or that the leading American sociological surveyor was African-American. Evaluating the contributions made by such researchers and understanding the implications of their minority status are among the aims of the collection presented here. Enjoying unprecedented access to higher education in the 1870s and 1880s, but lacking professional employment commensurate with their training, middle-class white women created their own channels of influence. They addressed their energies to a multitude of social issues raised by industrial capitalism, recognising the necessity of documenting social problems as a first step toward solving them.

In an era of fierce racial prejudice and the accommodationist philosophy advanced by Booker T. Washington, the educational opportunities for middle-class African-American men were more restricted than those of white women. An exception to this rule was W. E. B. Du Bois who applied his learning to social investigation and sought to illuminate the social conditions in which members of his race lived. Neither women nor African-Americans gained admission to the nascent academic disciplines that dominated social inquiry in the following generation, but they illuminate the centrality of social conscience and empirical curiosity to the early development of social science.

The idea of this book began in the summer of 1983 when Kevin Bales and Kitty Sklar were both working in the Archives of the British Library of Political and Economic Science at the LSE in London. Kevin proposed that the early history of the social survey as a method of social investigation should be made known to a wider audience, and together they started planning a collection which was the ancestor of the present one. As the project developed, they were joined by Martin Bulmer, who independently had an interest in the history of the social survey and in the origins of social investigation in Britain and the United States more generally.

Plans took a further step forward when Kitty Sklar and Martin Bulmer met at the University of California, Los Angeles in July 1987, and Kitty suggested the value of a conference which would bring the contributors to the book together, since most of them did not know each other and some were historians and some social scientists. Support was obtained from the Nuffield Foundation for some travel and subsistence costs of overseas

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participants, and a successful conference was held at the Polytechnic of Central London in March 1989, with twenty-one participants from Britain, the United States, France and West Germany. Apart from the contributors to this book, we would like to thank Mark Abrams, Anna Davin, Vivien Hart, Greta Jones, Dirk Käsler, Michael Rose, Simon Szreter, Pat Thane and Richard Wiggins for joining us in that conference and making valuable suggestions which have helped in revising the papers for publication.

Work analysing the bibliographical data on the history of the social survey in Britain and the United States shown in maps 8 to 11 and in figures 1.1 and 1.2 was done by Cynthia Brown, our research assistant, in the spring of 1989. Four other sources of funding remain to be acknowledged. Kevin Bales' original work on Charles Booth's poverty surveys, in 1982–3, was supported by the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust and its director, Robin Guthrie. Cynthia Brown's work was supported by a grant to Martin Bulmer from the Social Research Division of the London School of Economics and Political Science. The inclusion of colour maps in this book has been made possible by a grant to Martin Bulmer from the British Academy under its Small Personal Research Grants Scheme, and by a grant to Kevin Bales for research dissemination by the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust. We are glad to have this opportunity to acknowledge their support. Alain Desrosières and Irmela Gorges participated in the March conference as a result of their membership of the Franco–German–British Working Group on the History of Empirical Social Research and Statistics, of which Martin Bulmer and Jennifer Platt are also members. Financial support from the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique and of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft made possible meetings of this group.

One of the particularly worthwhile consequences of the March 1989 conference was the juxtaposition of historical and social science perspectives upon the social survey. Traces of the tension between them remain in this collection, but we believe that the combination of the two perspectives has been very fruitful. The historian is more prone to concentrate upon the particular, and on the effects of a particular time and place, whereas the social scientist seeks to frame general statements about a class of investigations. Nevertheless, the two can usefully be set side by side. The historian may be more likely to emphasise the importance of historical processes of change, the social scientist the universal features of a class of activities termed 'social survey'. Yet evident in these chapters is a common desire to understand the origins of modern empirical social investigation, itself an important part of the history of both social policy and of the social sciences.