

Michael Banton - Biographical Journey

Having joined the BSA at the end of 1951, I have been a member for longer than anyone else! A brief account of how I became a sociologist can be read in a collection of essays, *New Social Connections**. It says a little about how, from a school in Birmingham, and from wartime service in the Royal Navy, I came to the London School of Economics to study economics. I thought that a qualification in that subject might be a path to a good income. My first-year tutor was a sociologist from Chicago, Edward Shils. Though a rotten lecturer, he was an inspiring tutor, and he promptly recruited me to his enthusiasms.

Some may see my tale as a story of opportunities seized, with a measure of perseverance. Others will say that I had a more than ordinary share of good fortune. Shils advised me of lots of books in sociology and social anthropology to read; he recommended me to go to listen to Karl Popper because his was 'probably the most interesting teaching in the School at present'. I never received better advice. Popper, even more than my other teachers, conveyed the inspiring conception of an academic career as devoted to the advancement of knowledge.

As an ex-serviceman, I had a good grant. So I read voraciously for at least nine months each year without ever needing to supplement my income by paid employment. Hoping for a career in social research, I did not bother to contact the Careers Advisory Service, but simply hoped for the best. It was a great disappointment that, despite my hard work, I graduated in only the 'lower second' class. That was when the perseverance was needed. After a discouraging wait, I was fortunate to secure a graduate studentship (though it was not called that in those days) in the Department of Social Anthropology of the University of Edinburgh; it was under an entrepreneurial head of department who was good at raising funds for research.

My appointment was to study 'colonial stowaways' from West Africa, who, after arrival, were sentenced to a term of imprisonment. I interviewed some former stowaways in HM Prison Brixton. As I expected, it was an unrewarding exercise, so I persuaded my supervisor to change it into a study of what was then called 'the coloured quarter' in London's East End. Before I had finished, my head of department had raised funds for me to look further back into the chain of migration. I was to study migration from the rural areas within Sierra Leone down into the coastal capital, Freetown.

Six years after starting at Edinburgh, I was back in that splendid city with a wife and three children to support from an income of £700 p.a. (in those days university teachers received an allowance of an extra £50 p.a. for each child!) None of my colleagues was expecting the expansion of the universities and of the social sciences that occurred in the nineteen-sixties, so it was a period when it helped to be optimistic. Nevertheless, the opportunities came, I published a sequence of books and articles, and this brought rewards to both my morale and my career.

Now, in my mid-eighties, I am still submitting myself to the hazardous discipline of submitting articles to the editors of `indexed' journals (i.e., the quality journals that require submissions to be in a form that gives no indication of who the author may be, so that they can be sent for `peer-review' by referees chosen by the editors). I get rejections as well as acceptances. Contributing to the growth of sociological knowledge is a vocation to which I was called more than sixty years ago.

* Judith Burnett, Syd Jeffers & Graham Thomas, editors, *New Social Connections. Sociology's Subjects and Objects*, 2010. Palgrave Macmillan.