

# PLENARY

## BEN CARRINGTON

Tuesday 4 April, 13:30 - 15:00  
THEATRE B, UNIVERSITY PLACE

### **PUBLICISING THE PERSONAL, PRIVATISING THE PUBLIC: RETHINKING THE SOCIAL THROUGH MILLS AND HALL**

In this talk I revisit C. Wright Mill's famous dictum that the sociological imagination is driven by the desire to understand the relationship between 'the personal troubles of the milieu' and 'the public issues of social structure'. I trace what we might broadly call Mills' sociological project, mapped out in *The Sociological Imagination*, that attempted to avoid the excesses and limitations of 'grand theory' on the one hand and 'abstracted empiricism' on the other. I suggest that, at least within US sociology, where I have worked for over a decade, this Millsian form of sociology has been abandoned in the pursuit of a narrow form of scientific empiricism, that largely eschews key sociological concerns and concepts such as those of 'power' and 'class'. In this context, and as a corrective to some of these tendencies, I develop a reading of the writings of the former British Sociological Association President Stuart Hall. Revisiting Hall's Presidential address to the 1996 BSA conference, as well as a brief but little known exchange between Hall and Mills, I outline why Hall's 'conjunctural sociological' approach to understanding the social can help us to make sense of the current moment of neoliberal crisis and the related rise of authoritarian nationalist populism in the United States, Britain and elsewhere. I argue that Hall provides a way to move beyond some of the conceptual limitations found in Mills' sociological work, most notably in thinking more seriously about the racialised dimensions of the social and sociology's own unconscious racial commitments. I conclude by returning to the distinction between the personal and the public that underpins the sociological imagination, by asking to what extent this distinction holds anymore in the context of celebrity culture and self-promotional social media on the one hand and the privatisation of the public realm itself on the other.

**Professor Ben Carrington** is an internationally renowned British sociologist currently working in the United States of America. He is widely regarded as one of the world's leading scholars on the sociology of race and culture, especially in relation to popular culture and sport, and has given keynote talks on these topics in North America, the Caribbean and across much of Europe. In his research and teaching he uses post/colonial theory and critical race studies to better understand the role of culture in shaping identities and the sociological and political significance of popular culture in our everyday lives. Professor Carrington has published four books including *Race, Sport and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora* (Sage, 2010) and recently wrote and presented a one hour documentary for US public radio on the life and times of Stuart Hall, called *Stuart Hall: In Conversations*.

Ben Carrington was born in Woolwich, south London in the 1970s and grew up in Thamesmead, one of Europe's largest council estates – dubbed at the time of its conception in the 1960s as a "town of the twenty-first century" – and the





backdrop that is featured in Stanley Kubrick's dystopian film "A Clockwork Orange". After Charlton Athletic Football Club made a disastrous decision to not take him on as a professional footballer (a decision many experts believe may well have set Charlton back at least a decade), he stayed in education and went on to Loughborough University. His undergraduate dissertation explored the late 1980s/early 1990s house music, or "rave" scene, and sparked his interest in thinking seriously about the changing meanings and politics of popular culture. Encouraged by his mentor, the leisure policy theorist Professor Ian Henry, to continue his studies, Ben Carrington applied to the graduate program at the Carnegie School at Leeds Beckett University. At Leeds he was supervised by the leading leisure studies experts Professor Sheila Scraton and Dr. Peter Bramham where he completed his PhD on the role of sport as a form of black cultural politics.

After leaving Leeds, Ben Carrington taught the sociology of sport, popular culture and race at Brighton University from 1997 until 2004 when he left England to take up a position in the Department of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin where he has worked ever since and interestingly where C. Wright Mills himself studied sociology as an undergraduate. Outside of the Sociology Department at UT Austin, Ben Carrington remains actively engaged with a range of intellectual spaces, including the Center for European Studies, the Center for Women's and Gender Studies, and the Warfield Center for African and African American Studies. He holds a courtesy appointment with UT's African and African Diaspora Studies Department and is also, currently, a Carnegie Research Fellow at Leeds Beckett University.

One right-wing American website once noted that Ben Carrington "is a typical academic that inserts two parts race and one part gender into every issue with a twist of Marx", a description he quite likes.

**Chair:** John Horne, BSA Chair (University of Lancaster)



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