Sociology

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Issues and Debates

Edited by
Steve Taylor

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Preface

The motivation for this book came a few years ago when, having taken on the first year sociology course at the LSE, I was wading through the available introductory sociology textbooks. I found there wasn't one I could recommend with any enthusiasm. Too many corners had been cut, too many tired old ideas recirculated and too many new ones omitted. Instead of being immersed in their topics, the writers often gave the impression that they were peering rather vaguely at them from a distance. In my view this was not the fault of the authors; indeed, it seemed to me most of them had done a pretty good job in the circumstances. It was just that 'the circumstances' seemed insurmountable. Sociology has become such a massive and diverse enterprise that the task of mastering the range of material now available is simply beyond a single author, or even a small team of authors.

Sociology: Issues and Debates is based on the very different idea of producing a *general* sociology text that makes use of *specialist* knowledge by having each chapter written by authors with established records of writing and research in the area. However, the contributors were chosen not only for their specific expertise, but also for their ability to write in a clear and accessible way and every effort has been made in this book to keep complex sociological terminology to a minimum. Terms of central importance, such as methodology, theory and the various dimensions of power, are all explained in the relevant chapters and a glossary of other key concepts is provided at the back of the book.

To try to ensure consistency, each chapter is structured around the origins, key ideas, development and current concerns of sociological work in the areas that have been examined. However, in a book with so many contributors, it is inevitable that there are some variations in style and emphasis. In my view, these variations are less a reflection of individual preferences and idiosyncracies than of the different ways in which the specialist areas of sociology have developed. Two key differences can be identified in this context. First, while some areas in sociology have been driven primarily by theoretical developments, others, such as the sociology of health and medicine, are predominantly empirically orientated. Second, while some areas of research seem to be characterized by a sense of uncertainty, as if sociologists working within them recognize they are trying to construct a jigsaw puzzle where most of the pieces are missing, in other areas most sociologists do not seem greatly troubled by any sense of doubt, the picture is clear and sociology is about helping to right the wrongs it clearly reveals. My own position on this latter

issue, for what it is worth, is that sociology sometimes has to be a little more robust in its assertion and defence of its capacity to provide specialist knowledge of human societies. However, at the same time, the exercise of justifying our claims to special knowledge lead us to recognize that the limitations of sociological theories and methods simply do not allow us to be *that* certain about anything. However, this book is not about my views, it is about how the key areas of sociology are seen by those with expert knowledge of them.

I would like to express my gratitude to all the contributors not only for their excellent work but also for their patience and co-operation with my various editorial requests. I should also like to thank Alf Barrett, David Field, Rosie Gosling, Tony Lawson, Andrew Pilkington, Jo Roberts, Keith Sharp and Nick Tilley for their help with various chapters; thanks also to Sue Taylor for her editorial help with all the chapters and, finally, to Catherine Gray of Macmillan for helpful and perceptive advice throughout this project.

STEVE TAYLOR