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A. H. Halsey: Oxford as a base for social research and educational reform

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A. H. Halsey has been a professorial fellow (now emeritus) at Nuffield College in Oxford University since his appointment in 1962 as Director of Oxford’s Department of Social and Administrative Studies. This paper explores his contribution to education throughout his career, as an academic and as a national and international policy advisor, and the interface between these two. Halsey worked in what he termed the ‘political arithmetic’ tradition throughout his career, with the dual tasks of documenting the state of society, and addressing social and political issues through ‘experimental social administration’, that is the field testing of social innovation and social policy in advance of national implementation. The paper focuses on Halsey’s ‘activist’ role in policy development in the UK and internationally, through his work on educational reform at the OECD and as research advisor to Crosland at the DES with the introduction of comprehensive schooling in the UK and in particular the Educational Priority Areas (EPA) programme, and traces through the impact of his work. His major contribution as one of the leading sociologists of education in the second half of the 20th century is also discussed, but the wider impact of this aspect of his work requires a much more extensive assessment than is possible in this paper.

Introduction

Tourists arriving at Oxford by train since the new millennium have had to pass almost underneath the monumental new Said Business School with its token Oxford spire, past Blackwell’s 1970s dark glass cliffs in Hythe Bridge Street, then to be faced by the city’s ‘cheerful’ modern bus station complex. Their first glimpse of what appears to be a mediaeval college turns out to be Nuffield, with its Cotswold stone façade and impressive library tower. But Nuffield, too, is relatively modern, built in the late 1940s to the traditional inward-looking Oxford college pattern, but as the first explicitly social science research college at Oxford. While it is often bracketed as the social science equivalent of All Souls in terms of scholarly exclusivity, its founding motif was in part the contribution that such a concentration of social science talents in Oxford

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could make to the social and economic reconstruction of Britain in the post-war period.

A. H. Halsey has been a professorial fellow at Nuffield College since he was first appointed to Oxford in 1962 to head Barnett House, as Director of the university’s recently created Department of Social and Administrative Studies. ‘Barnett House’, in comparison with Nuffield, had grown from an earlier (and slightly different) UK tradition of social service and social enquiry. Founded in 1914 in memory of Canon Barnett, the social reformer and first warden of Toynbee Hall, set up in London’s East End thirty years earlier, Barnett House was not (until 1961) formally part of the university, though powerfully backed by its founding members who included several Oxford Heads of Houses and college fellows. It was to be a centre for the practical study of contemporary social and economic problems, and to provide training for young men and women to enter social work or social research (Halsey, 1967, 1976a). The University Department of Social and Administrative Studies was thus, in its origin as Barnett House, more of an intermediary institution, drawing on the resources of the university to address social issues and problems, and to prepare graduates from the university for practical work and research in areas where such problems were concentrated.1

Halsey,2 throughout his working life at Oxford and before, has consciously drawn on both these traditions—of more detached scholarly study of social issues and of more engaged involvement with social and educational policy and practice. Indeed he would, no doubt, see them as part of a whole. As he wrote in 1970, ‘the challenge is irresistible … for the social scientist to become involved in the development of social policy, its definition of ends, its allocation and planning of means, and its measurement of results’ (Halsey, 1970, p. 251). He did not resist—in a recent note, Wilensky describes Halsey as ‘altogether a most impressive human being, scholar and activist’.3 Symbolically, perhaps, for much of his working life before retirement, Halsey had a pattern of working in the department in the mornings and Nuffield College in the afternoons,4 maybe in part recognition of these different traditions but also as a bridge between them. He also spent considerable energy trying to bring the rather fragmented social science effort in Oxford together on a single site in the mid 1970s,5 and again to develop joint research programmes in the 1980s, but never fully succeeded.

These architectural and institutional traditions set the context for this paper. We explore Halsey’s contribution to education, and schooling in particular, during his Oxford career as an academic and as a national (and international) policy advisor, and critically in the interface between these two settings. This interface includes what Halsey termed the ‘political arithmetic’ tradition, which:

has a double intent; on the one hand it engages in the primary sociological task of describing and documenting the ‘state of society’; on the other hand it addresses itself to central social and political issues. It has never, therefore, been a ‘value free’ academic discipline, if such in any event were possible. (Halsey, Heath and Ridge, 1980, p. 1)

And it also includes ‘experimental social administration’ (Halsey, 1970)—that is, the field testing of social innovation and social policy in advance of national
implementation: ‘to produce a theory of poverty and to test it in the very real world of the urban twilight zones’ (Halsey, 1978, p. 144).

This paper is not a biography—Halsey has already written his own account (Halsey, 1996)—nor is it an assessment of Halsey’s wider contribution to sociology, though here we would underline Martin Trow’s comment on Halsey’s style of thought and ‘breadth of vision’, which he compared to Edward Shils. Drawing on his experience working with R. K. Merton at Columbia and later at Berkeley, Trow writes:

> a sociologist, we learned, had to be a social scientist, sensitive to historical forces, and something of a psychologist, ethnographer, economist, political scientist … Chelly [Halsey] has been something of all those things, which kept his work always from being trivial or precious.7

In this paper we can only pick out a limited number of themes, some of which we follow through to demonstrate not necessarily Halsey’s direct influence on later events, but the way that ideas—which he played a key role in pioneering—continue to be of central importance. We mainly focus on developments where Oxford was the base for initiatives elsewhere. We give less space to initiatives aimed at reform within Oxford. We ask whether Oxford, with its exclusive and elitist traditions, was an appropriate base for reforms that had an explicitly egalitarian purpose. Halsey has written extensively and elegantly about the changing role of academics and universities in the modern world (e.g. Halsey, 1971, 1992). But a core dilemma remains between the press for meritocratic excellence and wider social egalitarian concerns. High up on Halsey’s list of recommendations to incoming sociology students was Michael Young’s (1958) fable *The rise of the meritocracy*, set in the not too distant future where ‘IQ plus effort’ had become the basis for a new form of social and economic inequality.8

**Before Oxford**

Halsey has written fully on his own formative period (Halsey, 1996). Here we simply draw out some key features that are relevant to our theme. First, his working-class background, and his experience of growing up in both urban and rural areas are clear threads running through his continuing egalitarian concerns and anger against social injustice. But it is a respectable, orderly and stable setting that he portrays. Linked to that is a very strong sense of family and community, and—sometimes surprisingly to his more radical students—the idea of Christian fellowship (see Dennis & Halsey, 1988). As he makes clear in his comments on Peter Hennessy’s version of the ‘British ideology’, the framework was a ‘love of Englishness and conviction … that social accord is necessary, and necessarily based on justice or at least accommodation between the classes’ (Halsey, 1996, pp. 40–41). This consistently held position on social reform through some form of consensus certainly made the going much tougher in the later 1970s and 1980s with the decline of such consensus, not just in the wider political arena, but within universities and even within his own department.
Despite winning a scholarship to Grammar School, Halsey left school at 16 and became a sanitary inspector’s boy. But war intervened. He joined the RAF, was selected to train as a fighter pilot, but after delays and extended training was only just finally qualifying when war ended. War, however, gave him the opportunity to return to education—first as a recruit to an emergency training scheme for school teachers and then to take up an undergraduate course for those whose higher education had been interrupted by the war. Halsey’s later advocacy of ‘second chance’ higher education always drew on his own experience and that of his peers for whom the war had delivered this opportunity. So it was first to Westminster College and then to the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) to specialise in the sociology of education, in survey research and the use of official statistics (Halsey, 2004a). The early part of Halsey’s autobiography contains several references to rugby and cricket at school, in the RAF and at university. While his skills on the games field are hardly relevant to our concerns, we note that he always played ‘stand off half’ in rugby. While rugby is a team game, the stand off half is the ‘playmaker’—an individual who has to read the game quickly, seize openings and opportunities and then link with other players who can take these forward. Halsey has always been an extraordinarily good and rapid ‘reader’ of many different settings. One colleague commented that he somehow seemed to have read books before they were published, or when arriving as speaker at a conference seemed to have absorbed what had already been covered by other speakers. He was also, in the best sense, an opportunist. But good fly halves are also heavily dependent on good possession. Without it they have to scratch around for openings. This works too, as in the tougher climate of the late 1970s onwards, Halsey admitted to much more difficulty in running a university department, as expansion turned to contraction and new opportunities dried up.

After a brief stay at Liverpool University as a researcher, Halsey moved to Birmingham University as lecturer in 1954. His period there was punctuated by two spells in the USA, as Fellow at the Center for the Advanced Study of the Behavioral Studies at Palo Alto and later as visiting Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago. What we can draw from this period is, first, the developing network of contacts that built on his LSE years and made him a personal bridge with an earlier generation of sociologists (Parsons, Merton, Shils); second, the expansion of this network well beyond sociology and academia; third, an extraordinary facility with the US setting, which meant that throughout his life he was treated not as some visiting ‘British academic’, but a sociologist with the same background and language, who ‘knew American society and its higher education system as few Englishmen do’; fourth, a highly articulate and productive lecturing and writing style. These were closely linked and key factors in his growing influence. Following, he claims, Arthur Lewis’s recommendation, Halsey learnt to lecture without using any notes or other aids. This meant that he was able to engage the audience in ways that few academics achieve; the style was not to ‘lecture at’ them but to draw them in like an actor, relying on his personal magnetism and timing. Like the best ‘touch’ players, this nearly always worked—though there were lapses.
At his peak he was undoubtedly among the very best lecturers in post-war Oxford. This skill was not limited to academic audiences or students, but worked across the board, with local groups in Sunderland or Liverpool, with mothers of preschool children, or senior civil servants. Often there seemed to be no evidence, and sometimes no chance, of preparation. His style in managing meetings also used a similar mode, seeking to generate a shared understanding at the outset. Yet unlike many other noteless and impromptu speakers, Halsey typically spoke in wholly connected and structured prose. One reason may have been that his writing was increasingly dictated (at a time when British academics still had secretaries). So written and spoken forms were not far removed, and Halsey’s writing style often had the same quality of direct engagement with its readers. ‘To find a strategy for educational roads to equality! That has been a central theme of educational discussion from the beginning of the twentieth century’ is the opening to *Educational priority* (Halsey, 1972a, p. 3). Finally, this period laid down the foundations for Halsey’s major contributions to education—his work with Jean Floud on social class and educational opportunity (Floud et al., 1956), the sociology of education (Floud & Halsey, 1958) and education, the economy and class structure (Halsey, Floud & Anderson, 1961; OECD, 1961), which in combination defined the direction of educational sociology until the 1970s.

**Why Oxford?**

In one sense the answer is easy. Halsey came to Oxford because he had been ‘recruited’ in the traditional Oxford way through a series of informal contacts. He mentions Evans-Pritchard who was at Palo Alto with him, Isaiah Berlin and Alan Bullock and no doubt others who encouraged him to apply. Oxford (or rather some individuals in Oxford) clearly wanted to get its hands on a rising world-class talent. But it was a ‘two way street’. Halsey wanted to come. Having decided to turn down offers to move to the USA, being invited to apply to Oxford was attractive. And in addition to the plans he was developing for Oxford in terms of sociology, there was no doubt he saw Oxford as potentially a better base for his wider concerns with social reform; bluntly, that he would be taken more seriously and get better access.

**Oxford as a base for wider educational reform**

Halsey’s working life at Oxford now spans more than 40 years. In that time, Oxford has changed relatively slowly until recently (and Nuffield College hardly at all), but in the world outside there has been rapid social change, much of which Halsey has charted in the UK (Halsey, 1995; Halsey & Webb, 2000). Here we pull out some key changes that set the background to our examples. First is the sheer change in the scale of policy-related research. At the outset in the 1960s there were a mere handful of academic sociologists, and even fewer concerned with policy; and there was very little large-scale empirical social research. Most major committees of enquiry in education in the 1950s and 1960s had to begin by undertaking their own studies. In arguing for the spread of ‘experimental social administration’ Halsey (1970) described the ‘trend
away from advisory virtuosos like Professor Lindemann towards councils and committees ...’ But it did not stop with the rapid expansion of sociology and social policy from the 1960s and the subsequent growth of social research. Government departments, too, changed. When Halsey worked as advisor to Tony Crosland at the Department of Education and Science (DES) in the 1960s he would have been the only practising social researcher in that department, certainly the only sociologist. That would have remained more or less true until the 1990s. 16 While the DES may have been a special case, even the celebrated Home Office Research Unit, which was the largest social research group within central government (after the OPCS Social Survey Division), had about 40 professional staff in 1979 (Blume, 1982); the Home Office RDS now has approximately 300 researchers, statisticians and economists. Thus the picture that Keith Banting (1979), for example, draws of the way that a small number of social science academics—Halsey among them—was able to influence social policy during the Labour government of the 1960s, had been transformed. The civil service’s guard against this new form of intervention, which Banting argues did not really exist in the 1960s, was now fully in place, staffed by a phalanx of in-house researchers and policy analysts.

The social policy-making process in the UK has also been transformed. No longer is it a case of three year commissions, extended discussions, parliamentary and party debate before proposals are put forward, but rather tight-knit groups working within government to generate more or less definitive policies that are then put out to very time-limited consultation (Smith & Smith, 1992). These changes severely restrict the direct influence of researchers or academics who are independent of government or outside this loop. And even if Oxford weekends and ‘high table’ discussions over port between policy makers, civil servants and academics were ever an effective method of influencing policy, it is clear that the balance has shifted significantly to London, through pressures of time and the sheer density of academics, policy makers and social researchers in the London area. Even though Oxford was always his base, Halsey, we should underline, expected to travel. Indeed the most likely place to find him was on the way to (or back from) somewhere else.

The OECD and educational reform

Halsey was drawn into the OECD through his contact with Ron Gass and was selected to act as the ‘rapporteur’ of a major OECD conference in Sweden in 1961. The published report, *Ability and educational opportunity* (OECD, 1961), shows the way that Halsey seized this opportunity to lay down or draw out key messages for education and the OECD. Lionel Elvin, who chaired the conference, notes diplomatically that the publication ‘is neither a statement of his [Halsey’s] own views, nor a mere précis of our debates, but ... a personal formulation of the “sense of the meeting”’ (OECD, 1961, p. 9).

The three themes that stand out, welded together in Halsey’s contribution, are first, the increasingly central role of education in economic development (a theme also developed by Floud and Halsey in the opening section of their reader published in the
same year). Here, Halsey draws on the emerging work of Schultz (1960) and others on the economic returns from education. Second, is the argument about the ‘pool of ability’ which was critical to the issue of educational expansion, and was at the core of the Robbins proposals for the expansion of higher education in the UK in the early 1960s. And third is the concern with ‘equality of opportunity’ presented in terms of social background and access. Halsey was able to draw on his own work and that of others to present an optimistic conclusion, one that was linked to untapped ability, the unacceptable levels of educational inequality based on social background, and access to the higher and more selective levels of education. In combination these three sets of ideas, articulated by Halsey and others, underlie the gradual shift in the OECD from ‘the somewhat narrow macro-economic and trade organisation of the 1960s’ where the primary focus on education was restricted to ‘manpower planning’, ‘to the multi-disciplinary policy institution of today’. This laid down the agenda for OECD’s major expansion into education and later into social policy more generally.17

If the early 1960s set the agenda, then the middle to late 1960s focused on actively developing the OECD programme in education. This, for Halsey, included securing backing from Crosland (then Secretary of State for Education in the UK) for the OECD role in education, and flying with the Secretary General of the OECD to persuade the Ford Foundation to make a major grant to set up the OECD Centre of Educational Research and Innovation (CERI—of which Halsey was the first chairman), and then to Tokyo to charm the leaders of the Japanese ministry of education into support. Interspersed with these trips were international conferences and meetings to draw on the experience of US researchers and innovators and link them with other OECD countries. Thus a conference hosted by the Ford Foundation in New York drew together US experience in the ‘war on poverty’ for a largely European audience, just beginning to take the first small steps in this direction (Little & Smith, 1971). Halsey refers to the ‘buccaneering’ style of these developments:18 there was a strong sense that opportunities were opening up, doors opening, policies shifting and resources available, if only the package or proposals could be pitched in the right place and time. Yet the number of people involved was still small, and the weight of OECD work in this area limited and therefore heavily dependent on a favourable national and international climate of educational expansion and reform.

The OECD Manpower, Social Affairs and Education Directorate headed by Ron Gass began developing ‘country reports’ on education, following the parallel of the highly influential OECD reviews of national economies. The form was a visiting review panel that assembled and commented on material provided by national governments, drawing on research, data and evidence for other systems. The outcome was a report containing the examiners’ judgments and national response debated in the OECD education committee in Paris. Halsey lists six such national studies in which he took part, concluding with his review Higher Education in California (OECD, 1990). These reports often have a distinctive flavour, which, on one or two occasions, deeply offended the country in question. They were midway between the examiners’ own assessments and a more objective account. Halsey’s reports certainly carried their own individual stamp. This was perhaps inevitable given the
lack of comparative data and the relatively short time and resources available. Such studies remained relatively intermittent affairs, perhaps because there were relatively few academics or researchers able or willing to take on the assessment of a whole country’s education system.

Yet if we roll the clock forward, the position has been transformed. With the major initiatives within the OECD to develop better comparative international educational statistics (in *Education at a Glance* from 1992 onwards) and the incorporation of international educational performance measurement into the OECD programme (under the PISA label19) from 2000, the latest OECD country studies are able to draw on much more robust and comparable data, including educational outcomes.20 They have moved much closer to their economic counterparts in the OECD. Thus the so-called ‘PISA shock’ (where countries face up to their relative educational results in mathematics, science and literacy in the OECD reports) may have a major impact on education systems. The latest country report on Denmark (2004) shows this new reliance on data but also the traditional OECD concerns with social and educational equity. Its principal examiner, Peter Mortimore, sees himself explicitly working within the agenda set during the Halsey/Gass era and the ‘political arithmetic’ tradition,21 but with a much more robust set of information to draw on. What began as a limited venture in Halsey’s day has since become a very major part of the OECD programme.

Research advisor at the Department of Education and Science (DES)

Halsey was appointed as advisor to Tony Crosland when the latter became Secretary of State for Education in 1965. It was technically a two-days-a-week secondment from the university. Halsey had in fact first met Crosland in Birmingham through their mutual interest in the cooperative movement (Ostergaard & Halsey, 1965) rather than education. Philip Williams at Nuffield College was also a key go-between in making the link. Crosland’s era at the DES (1965–1967) is indelibly linked with the move to comprehensive secondary education and the end of selection at 11+, with circular 10/65. This set out six possible models of comprehensive reorganisation to which local education authorities were ‘requested’ to respond with their plans. But ‘going comprehensive’ was already official Labour policy: the previous Secretary of State, Michael Stewart, had gained cabinet approval in 1964, and the circular was already in preparation when Crosland arrived in January 1965 (Kogan, 1971; Kerckhoff et al., 1996). Between 1960 and 1965, too, the educational tide was running strongly in favour of comprehensives, with increasing proportions of secondary age pupils in these schools (up from 4.7% to 8.5%).22 Halsey’s arrival at Curzon Street later in 1965 would have made little direct impact on these developments, as is clear from his own and others’ accounts (Kogan, 1971; Halsey, 1996, p. 124). It is also highly unlikely at this point that civil servants would have allowed a part-time advisor anywhere near the detailed drafting of circulars and guidance, and Halsey was never a ‘detail man’, going instead for the broader picture and the underlying arguments. As he makes clear, his role was with the DES research programme. His influence on
this major development in secondary education was indirect, through his earlier research and writing on the relationship between selective secondary education and social class, on the ‘pool of ability’ and the waste inherent in terminating the majority of secondary schooling at age 15 without qualifications. This was allied with the growing volume of educational research on testing children at 11+, and the consequences of such selection both on primary and secondary schools. Unusually at this time, there was a sufficient body of research coming together to form a powerful case on several fronts against selective education. Halsey’s appointment as advisor perhaps reflected that shift; for Crosland, it was significant that he was a sociologist (Kogan, 1971, p. 185) rather than a mainstream educational researcher or from the economics of education, which his successors tended to be.

Most of this research, it should be underlined, was on the failings of the selective system. There was very little research on comprehensives. Empirical research has to focus on what is the case, not what might be. The positive examples came largely from other countries, from the US and Husen’s conclusions from the Swedish case (Husen, 1961). And while a research study of comprehensives was commissioned by the DES at this period, the policy development went ahead. The effects of these national changes in secondary education could only be assessed after the event, over the next twenty years.

With hindsight, what is striking about this change of policy was the relative lack of detail on the content of these new forms of secondary education. The concern was with reorganising structures, as if this alone would produce the desired result (and without significant increases in funding). Clearly at this point the role of the DES was far removed from any notion of determining the detail of what went on in schools, particularly the curriculum. It was another ten years before serious discussion on the ‘core curriculum’ at national level, and a further ten before the 1988 legislation for a national curriculum reached the statute book. But there was a vacuum, where the growing clamour over standards in schooling from the first Black Paper in 1969 (Cox & Dyson, 1969), and the focus by researchers on what went on in the classroom, increasingly made the running. From the mid-1970s Halsey recognised the challenge of this ‘new sociology of education’ and admitted to ‘selective inattention’ to what went on within the ‘black box’ of schooling (Karabel & Halsey, 1977). But by then the agenda had shifted, the majority of secondary pupils were in comprehensives and comprehensives were increasingly under attack.

Halsey’s own assessment of his role at the DES (1965–1968) was that it had been ‘less successful in practice than in theory’ (Halsey, 1996, p. 124). Certainly he made little long-term impact on the way DES research was organised, though he was able to promote specific research studies. He put this lack of impact down, in part, to his unfamiliarity with the anthropology of the ‘strange tribe’ of the civil service. Ironically perhaps, it is his social survey (with Ivor Crewe) of the civil service, as part of the Fulton Commission in 1969, that is now the most widely listed of Halsey’s publications in the official files in the National Archives, as each government department responded to this first systematic study of their customs and practices. But the contacts he had established at the DES led on to further developments, often through
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civil servants who had been influenced by the climate of ideas he had articulated in a
language that they found appealing. This lasted through a change of government.
Thus when the Conservatives took over in 1970 and Mrs Thatcher became Secretary
of State, Halsey still had considerable input into her 1972 White Paper *Education: a
framework for expansion*, but this was on the importance of preschool, and not
secondary, education.

In the more recent controversy over comprehensives, Halsey has, on occasions,
been cited as one of the founding fathers of the reform who has now had second
thoughts (most recently in his appearance on the radio programme, *Desert Island Discs,*
in 2003). His stated position (Halsey, 1996, p. 130) is that his idea of comprehensive
reform, which he claims was also that of Crosland, was ‘of taking grammar schools
plus technical schools to all our children’. But this ideal has not as yet been realised.
One conclusion to draw is that while he now classifies himself as a ‘naïve supporter’
of the original reforms, the focus at that time was primarily on the reorganisation itself
with the 1960s optimism that this would, on its own, bring the desired result. We
should also underline that while Halsey worked energetically and supportively with
local comprehensives as parent and governor,24 his research focus was never on the
detail of their internal organisation. The nearest he came to advocacy here was in his
support for the community schools movement in the 1970s, and the idea of a core
curriculum.

*Government against poverty in school and community*25

The Educational Priority Areas (EPA) programme (1968–1972) grew directly from
the Plowden Report on Primary Education26 and Halsey’s role as advisor to Crosland. The key ingredient was Michael Young,27 who was both a member of the
Plowden Committee and first chairman of the newly created UK Social Science
Research Council (SSRC). The origins of the EPA programme are well docu-
mented.28 Our focus here is more on the way it happened and how these small
networks operated in and around central government at that time. Michael Young
had been put forward for the Plowden Committee by Kogan,29 though this was in the
final stages of the Conservative administration. Having played a key role in drafting
the Labour Party’s manifesto in 1945, by the 1960s Young was already the leading
‘social entrepreneur’ in the UK with a string of ideas and institutions30 on the go. As
he wrote in a brief memoir to Halsey, ‘I wanted to push for more ‘equality’ of course
and was impressed with what I saw … on my trip around the USA for Plowden. … I
tied it up in a parcel and thought of the label ‘Educational Priority Area’ and wrote
Chapters 4 [Participation by Parents] and 5 [Educational Priority Areas] of
Plowden’.31

When the Plowden Report was published in 1967, it listed 197 recommendations,
but stated unequivocally ‘we have given absolute priority to only one of our propos-
als—the creation of educational priority areas’ (Plowden, para. 1185). The aim was
initially to reach the schools containing the two per cent most deprived in the first
year, rising to ten per cent over five years. The committee also proposed research ‘to
discover which of the developments in educational priority areas have the most constructive effects …’ (para. 177). The national reception and debates in both Houses of Parliament were positive—Crosland in the Commons concluding that EPAs were ‘a most radical recommendation—utterly convincing and striking illustration of what Professor Titmuss and others have recently been saying—that we cannot rely on economic growth alone to even out gross social inequalities’ (HoC, 16 March 1967). Yet little action followed—the state of the economy was, as usual, the reason. At the so-called ‘Plowden seminar’ at Crosland’s house, shortly after the Report had been published, Halsey, supported by Young, argued that a small start should be made and the possibility of using research money was raised. Young and Halsey worked increasingly in tandem over the next few months, scaling down their original request for £10m, then £5m and finally a much lower sum from the SSRC and DES research budget. As the government began to respond to the Plowden proposals for EPAs, encouraging LEAs to identify their priority areas and allocating additional money for new school building, and later salary supplements to teachers in designated EPA schools, Young laid out more or less the full EPA proposal in a letter to Crosland (August 1967), arguing that money for school buildings was one of the least imaginative of the Plowden proposals for EPAs. What was needed was ‘experimental action’ at the local level to implement and test out innovation. Young had indeed already done something like this as a demonstration for the Plowden Committee on the effects of parental involvement (Young & McGeeney, 1968). The idea was of small teams working for selected LEAs, backed by research from the local university, to implement the more imaginative proposals for EPAs. Young contrasted the sluggishness in education to pilot field test new ideas with the position in health.

But by now Crosland had moved to the Board of Trade. The response by his successor, Patrick Gordon Walker, while broadly positive, raised a fundamental problem, endorsed by civil service comment. It was not legally possible for DES money to be used in this way to support specific developments in selected areas. While this is a detail in the overall story, in part it explains why Halsey’s department in Oxford became the route. It was a way round this blockage. The next few months were taken up with attempts to get local areas signed up, in addition to ‘the ghastly drawn out negotiating and keeping-sweet of SSRC, DES and SED people. We wanted the five biggest cities—London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow … Manchester ran out and we put in the West Riding because of Clegg. Birmingham ran out …’ 32 This took place more or less at the same time as the negotiations with the Ford Foundation for support of the OECD centre, and from time to time the possibility of OECD funding for EPAs was dangled. But by the end of 1967 there was a draft of the full proposals for an action-research programme which gained formal support from the DES and SSRC by April 1968. Funding was modest with £100,000 from the DES and £75,000 for the SSRC—though this was the largest grant given up to that point. 33 It was for a three-year programme in four selected areas in England and one linked Scottish study in Dundee. Joint action-research teams were to be employed in each area, for the four English EPAs employed directly by Oxford, with Halsey as the national director and Young as chair of the national steering committee.
One result was effectively to double the size of the Oxford department,\textsuperscript{34} though all the new staff were based elsewhere.\textsuperscript{35}

Though there had been local experimental projects before EPA, it was the first ‘action-research’ programme in the UK explicitly designed to test out national policies, but run through a university department. Young had clearly initiated the idea and mapped out the detailed proposals; Halsey had added his own distinctive stamp; his conception of ‘experimental social administration’ was broad enough to cover everything from randomised experiments at preschool level in the West Riding to the Liverpool project’s emphasis on research as an adjunct to action-generating support for ideas such as increased parental participation, locally and nationally. Halsey’s style as director, having set things going at the start, was to provide an umbrella of general support and regular visits to each project, but never detailed management, though there were standard data collection exercises run from Oxford, and a centrally-designed preschool intervention programme (Payne, 1974). This style of management meant that the successful projects were able to develop their own distinctive programmes, but some struggled to carve out a coherent strategy, given the terrifyingly wide objectives\textsuperscript{36} and the competing groups and pressures. As Midwinter recalls, one of the most forceful lessons conveyed by the US ‘poverty warriors’ at Ditchley Park in 1969 was that the worst thing to do in an action-research project was to involve a university. ‘Oxford was the rule proving the exception, almost entirely because [Halsey] had the clarity of mind and the firmness of purpose to transcend all that nonsense.’

The EPA projects began in autumn 1968 and ran for three years, ending with five HMSO published reports (\textit{Educational priority}, vols 1–5, 1972–1975) and a linked Penguin Education Special (\textit{Priority education}, Midwinter, 1972). Here we can only summarise their impact. During the period of the programme, support for area-based targeting of social need increased, with further programmes. Nationally, the EPA programme gathered speed and coherence, as the new Urban Programme after 1969 removed the bar on the expansion of nursery education. And by luck of timing, Mrs Thatcher’s White Paper in 1972 was able to draw on the EPA findings on preschool. The programme also made a substantial impact on teacher training colleges, which increasingly began to develop options for students wanting to teach in EPA areas. Overall the balance sheet in 1972 indicated that a very small project, even if with national backing and standing, had made very considerable national impact, and apparently laid the foundations with a series of successor organisations to continue work both nationally and locally.

But from then on the going proved much tougher. We have charted elsewhere the main reasons (Smith, 1987). The social and economic climate shifted dramatically away from education as the key ingredient in tackling social deprivation. One of the key messages from EPA, that education alone could not resolve major social and economic inequalities, contributed to its own marginalisation. New projects and programmes sprang up that attempted to address these issues directly. And worse, the very analysis that had underpinned EPAs, of a few areas that had missed out on economic growth, was overtaken by the growing realisation in the 1970s
that these problems were spreading to all areas, as industries declined and unemployment rose.

By the late 1980s, while there were still some traces of the EPA programme (teachers in designated schools continued to be paid an extra allowance), what was depressing on visiting schools in such areas was to find little evidence of the enthusiasm that the EPA programme had generated. But the EPA idea certainly took root in other countries, with visitors seeking advice from Halsey. These included the French team developing their national *Zones d’Education Prioritaire* (ZEP), which were introduced in France in 1981/2. With the revival of concern about educational disadvantage in the 1990s, demonstrated by the 1993 Ofsted report *Access and achievement in urban areas*, there has been a major swing back to many of the ideas in EPA, including the increased importance given to the role of education. The incoming Labour administration in 1997 announced Educational Action Zones (EAZ), and later the Education in Cities (EiC) programme. Designating areas of high social need formed a central plank of the ‘Area-Based Initiatives’ programme with initiatives on a very much larger scale than in the 1960s. The original EPA programme has proved not a dead-end but rather a precursor for this much larger enterprise.

Halsey was also a principal player in the early stages of the Home Office Community Development Programme (CDP), which in conception predated EPA but was much slower to get off the ground. Though based in the Home Office, CDP was designed as an inter-departmental programme involving the main social ministries. Its principal architect, the senior civil servant Derek Morrell, had been at the DES and clearly drew on the EPA ideas and model for the CDP enterprise. Enoch Powell’s ‘rivers of blood’ speech in 1968, and the hastily cobbled together Home Office Urban Programme, gave Morrell the chance to launch CDP (Mayo, 1975). Halsey became the national research director for CDP in its early phase, much to the relief of some cabinet members who were uneasy at Morrell’s almost mystical views on the power of ‘community’. While CDP was seen effectively as the successor programme to EPA in the early 1970s, relatively little of its programme focused on schools. It was also much larger and more complex, with twelve local authorities, other central government departments and university research teams in each area. Much of the early effort went into making these complex structures work (Lees & Smith, 1975), and while the Oxford department provided the research teams for three of the CDP areas, Halsey dropped back to an advisory role.37

If these local programmes were precursors to the later area-based initiatives, then Halsey’s ideas of ‘experimental social administration’, the field-testing of new social policies, might be seen as a precursor to the emphasis on the ‘evidence-based’ interventions, RCTs and ‘systematic research’ reviews of the 1990s. But, as Halsey argues:

> The laboratory is, by definition, natural and not experimental. ... The desired outcomes of action are often imprecisely defined and in any case resistant to clear measurement. The inputs are not completely controlled and the relation between input and output is to that extent indeterminate. ... Nevertheless, the challenge is irresistible. (Halsey, 1978, p. 143)
In this paper we have primarily focused on Halsey’s ‘activist’ role in policy development across the UK and elsewhere that directly affected schooling and related areas of social policy. We have given much less attention to Halsey’s role as one of the leading sociologists of education in the second half of the 20th century. We have covered the period in the 1950s and early 1960s when Halsey and Floud effectively laid down the agenda for the sociology of education; but there were also the three major ‘readers’ (Halsey, Floud & Anderson, 1961; Karabel & Halsey, 1976; and Halsey, Lauder, Brown & Wells, 1997) that have influenced generations of students (and tutors); major research studies on British academics (Halsey & Trow, 1971 and Halsey, 1992), and above all there is the series of studies linked to the major Oxford Social Mobility project from the mid-1970s onwards, where Halsey, as ever, played the central role of holding together over many years a highly distinguished, but at times fractious, group of academic sociologists particularly taking the lead on the role in education and social mobility. All these contributions may have had effects on schools and educational systems that were far more significant than any direct impact that he may have made as a ‘policy activist’, but we are not in a position to assess these impacts here.

We have noted the way that Halsey’s academic work on social mobility rose, as the conditions for social reform deteriorated in the 1970s and the necessary consensus began to break down. But it is important to stress the continuity of purpose with his activist phase. ‘We have set ourselves a question in this book which in its most general and deceptively simple form is whether education can change society’ (Halsey, Heath & Ridge, 1980, p. 1). The answer, as with the EPA programme, is complex and mixed: ‘We must avoid the error of generalising from a particular history to some supposed universal imperative of social policy. The record gives no warranty to easy optimism: but neither does it endorse defeatism’ (Halsey, Heath & Ridge, 1980, p. 216).

Halsey notes that Morris Ginsburg, head of the Sociology Department at LSE, had assumed that he (Halsey) might make an ‘adequate WEA [Workers’ Educational Association] tutor’ (Halsey, 1996, p. 51). In fact, Halsey took his broader educational and dissemination role very seriously, speaking to a very large number of groups of all types across the country on the EPA programme and acting as a missionary for its ideas and recommendations. But this always extended to a wider educational role. Between 1972 and 1994, he published regular columns in the Times Higher Education Supplement (Dennis (1994) records 63 articles). In 1977 there came his delivery of the BBC Reith Lectures, at that time still the most prestigious series of public lectures in the UK (delivered in 1977, and published as Change in British society, currently in its fourth edition, 1995). There are also the three editions of British social trends (Halsey, 1972b, 1988; Halsey & Webb, 2000) which clearly fit into the political arithmetic tradition of ‘documenting the state of society’. The goal of local dissemination also lay behind Halsey’s involvement with Professor Jerry Bruner in the Oxford Preschool Research Group (OPRG), and
with Harry Judge’s Oxford Educational Research Group (OERG) in the late 1970s.

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What was the role of Oxford in these developments, particularly the activist phase? While it may have been the case that Oxford added something, it would be hard to argue that it could not also have been possible from Birmingham. After all, it was the timing, content and articulation of the message that contributed to the main impact. But this is not the whole story. What was striking about these developments for those closely involved was that it often proved much easier to carry out this kind of initiative from Oxford at this time. This was underlined by the (sometimes very extensive and convoluted) negotiations to involve other universities in the EPA or CDP programme. Oxford was as yet much less institutionally bound, and heads of department more or less autocratically able to determine what they would do. Funds flowing through the University Chest to play schemes in Liverpool, or for a market stall rent in the West Riding, were rarely, if ever, challenged. Halsey was expert in working with the system, and had the right contacts in both Oxford and outside to make it work. But, as he himself charts in *Decline of donnish dominion*, the window has been closing. By the mid-1970s, the tightening financial climate and increasing oversight from the centre gradually reeled in the high level of autonomy that had existed. Such activities may still be possible, but require disproportionate time and effort.

But the critical counterpoint to this autonomy was the lack of institutional follow up. Why, asked US academics, as Halsey was a world-class sociologist, so successful in creating these ventures that affected national and local policy, did not resources and support flow from the university? In fact the reverse was almost the case. Once the resource climate tightened from the mid-1970s onwards, and Halsey moved increasingly to more conventional academic research as the Oxford Social Mobility project gathered way, this part of his enterprise fell back. He never managed to secure long term research funding, though this was increasingly the pattern of support in other major social policy research centres. By 1980 or so, what had been a major programme of social intervention and research in the 1970s was reduced to a single project or two.

Reform within Oxford

We should remember that during the time he was most active outside Oxford—his ‘activist phase’ was perhaps 1965–1975—Halsey successfully built up a medium-sized university department from a backwater on the periphery of the university. He taught and lectured well beyond his formal ‘stint’. Indeed ‘wheeling out Chelly’ to meet visitors who needed to be impressed, give a lecture at short notice, or represent the department with external bodies where progress had stalled, was an effective and widely used device. Expansion of the department came not just through the policy-related research, but with the University’s agreement to expand and refashion the graduate social work training in the mid-1960s, demonstrating the traditional link
between sociology and other disciplines and the applied study of social problems (Halsey, 1967). The two-year MSc social work course in the department became the largest Masters course in the social studies faculty and one of the best regarded training programmes in the country, and had produced over a thousand graduates by 2000, many in senior positions in social services departments and local and central government policy organisations, as well as in professorial posts. Moves in the 1980s to parallel this in social policy and social research (including education) by training prospective social policy researchers on a two year programme, while well conceived, never developed to the same level, though the relatively small numbers of students who went through this course included several who have made their mark in this field. The result by the mid-1980s was a department that increasingly focused on professional social work training.

Beyond the department, sociology had been introduced into the PPE undergraduate degree in 1962 and, together with Julia Parker, Halsey later introduced social policy. He was also a key figure in the new Human Science degree initiated in 1971, which combined the social and biological sciences (Halsey, 1969; Pringle, 1972). Most recently he has undertaken a series of studies to assess the relative ‘fairness’ of the university’s admissions from the private and state school sector. Drawing on this research in evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment in 2000, Halsey produces a classic restatement of the persistence and origin of class inequalities, as applied to higher education and society’s needs.

**Conclusion**

Halsey has spent more than 40 years working as a senior academic at Oxford. Unlike most of the other figures in this collection, he was neither an Oxford product himself nor a national politician or administrator. He defines himself explicitly as an ‘academic’, but one we should add that has never placed a tight boundary round his field of work—sociology was about ‘understanding society’—‘what we had at LSE was an education that was not a training for sociology but a course in the understanding of society’ (Halsey, 2004a, p. vi). Nor does he see the ends, means and outcomes of social policy to be illegitimate concerns for an academic. Halsey’s extraordinarily wide range of interests and activities and his prodigious written output means that an overall assessment of his contribution to education and schooling would have to take account of both direct and indirect effects on policy. As has been argued by Weiss and others (see Smith & Smith, 1992), the most important effect of research and academics on policy may be this indirect route of ‘illumination’, setting agendas, redefining problems and proposing solutions. We have tried to indicate the ways that Halsey contributed to this set of effects.

But there are other routes that are much harder to measure—for instance, by individual example through the influence of teaching or writing on the next generation. We have not attempted to capture this aspect, though it could be the most important of all. Almost at random, we discovered students of Halsey’s in the 1970s who commented 30 years later that his lectures on community and fraternity had
influenced their life’s work, and Barney Pityana’s 2002 address as Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Africa (UNISA) invokes Halsey’s conception of the role of universities.

Our focus has rather been on Halsey’s direct involvement, particularly during his ‘activist’ phase (1965–1975), where it is slightly less difficult to measure the effects on policy. Here the results in the short term were impressive. Halsey brought together ideas, not always ones he had originated, which he turned into powerful arguments and prescriptions for practice, for positive discrimination, area-based policy development, preschool, parental involvement, the community school, all of which received a very significant lift up the policy agenda by well-timed interventions, reports and skilled advocacy. But for much of this period the tide was moving in the same direction, and even Mrs Thatcher as Secretary of State for Education in the 1970s was anxious to enlist Halsey’s backing for the expansion of pre-schooling. The idea of ‘experimental social administration’ was also a major refinement on what had gone before—the idea of field-testing innovations and EPA demonstrated the manifold ways that this could be done.

From the mid-1970s the tide turned and the going got much tougher. Halsey spent more time on research studies such as social mobility and higher education. Doors were no longer opening, and even the ideas that had made the activism possible were no longer in place. In the mid-1980s, Halsey played a major part in the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas. The thrust of this study was to recreate the earlier agenda and draw attention to widening inequalities. But this bounced off a government that was not only unwilling to accept that there was a problem of urban poverty but formally ruled out the use of the word ‘poverty’ to cover conditions in the UK. It was not until the 1990s with the publication of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s Inquiry into income and wealth (Barclay & Hills, 1995) that the tide turned.

We have also charted the way that many of the ideas current in the activist period have returned to the central agenda from the mid-1990s onwards. The HMI report Access and achievement in urban education (OfSTED, 1993) echoes, perhaps unconsciously, Crosland’s arguments for the EPA programme in the Commons in 1967, adapting J. F. Kennedy’s phrase to conclude ‘the rising tide of educational change is not lifting these boats’. Since 1997 we have had a raft of policies to boost education in disadvantaged areas, and the development of a far more extensive and well-funded set of area-based programmes, not just in education, but across the social policy spectrum, through the work of the Social Exclusion Unit and later the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit. Resources are allocated in a far more systematic way than in the 1970s. The national moves to evidence-based policy making, though part rhetoric, also fit with the moves to a central state that plans and regulates, rather than directly provides, services. We have noted, too, the way that the OECD country reports draw directly on the approach developed in the Halsey era, though again with much better comparative data. And many initiatives hailed as new ideas—such as the commitment to preschool intervention as even more important than higher education, and the role of parents as ‘amplifiers’ of their children’s educational development—are revivals of
the ideas that were developed in the EPA and CDP programmes, now resurfacing in the post-1997 policy climate.

Much of this is an indirect legacy, though some of the current players still provide a direct link. Halsey’s direct contacts with Blair (Halsey, 1996), and later Blunkett, when Secretary of State for Education, are unlikely to be key factors in this transmission. Will it last? Here, we should simply note than many of the same issues that lead to the relative collapse of this approach in the 1970s remain; this is not just the perennial question of targeting versus universal welfare polices, but much bigger issues. As Halsey commented in 1969:

what we have to consider is the development of government inspired and financed programmes, posited on the assumption that the welfare society may be attained through the legitimate use of the existing political structures ... which may turn out to have been nothing more than a shibboleth of liberal society in decline. (Halsey, 1974)

And it was the collapse of the consensus that this was both possible and legitimate that undermined such interventions. In education, Halsey reminds us that the effects of formal schooling may be limited:

Schooling goes far beyond schools; it is fashioned in the kitchen and in the street and it is influenced by the media and the peer group. Much of it is beyond politics in a free society.43

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Notes

1. For a direct comparison, see Alan Fox’s autobiography A very late development (1990). Alan resigned his fellowship at Nuffield College and moved to Barnett House as lecturer in industrial sociology.
2. Halsey is very widely and affectionately known by his nickname, ‘Chelly’, used by family, colleagues and students alike. But in the interests of lexicographers and Google-searchers we have used his official name throughout this paper.
4. Since his retirement in 1990, after 28 years as head of department, Halsey has continued to work at Nuffield College on a formidable number of studies (Halsey, 1995, 1997, 2000 and 2004a)—and there is more to come.
5. This has only (partially) come about in the new millennium with the opening of the Social Sciences Centre in Manor Road in 2004.
6. See also Dennis (1994) for a biography and a full list of publications up to 1994.
Michael Young’s trajectory as a social reformer offers an instructive comparison with Halsey’s. Despite being the first chair of the UK Social Science Research Council (1965), Young largely operated outside higher education in his own self-created institutions. Halsey has always been an academic.

The stand off or fly half (or 5/8ths) in rugby has some affinities with the quarterback in American football, though the rules are very different.

Halsey attributed this to Peter Collinson.

For example, Halsey’s links with the politician Tony Crosland and with Ron Gass at OECD.


He kept to this, with few exceptions.

Notably, his review of E. G. West’s Education and the state in the New Statesman (24 December 1965) which led to a published retraction in the New Statesman, action and legal costs in favour of West and the Institute of Economics Affairs (IEA).

At a major Anglo-American conference at Ditchley Park in 1969 on anti-poverty programmes, the non-appearance of Patrick Moynihan to give a keynote address meant that, with general agreement, Halsey was asked to stand in. He began straight away without notes: ‘I want to make 14 points …’ and proceeded to do so.

DES (and later DfEE) statisticians were always keen to distinguish their activities from ‘research’.

Ron Gass, personal communication, 1 February 2005.

For example, suggesting to an OECD consultant on an official mission to the US that he hid money in his shoes to evade UK exchange controls.

PISA is the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment.


Professor Peter Mortimore, personal communication, 14 February 2005.

Figures from Kerckhoff et al. (1996, p. 27).

It was only at the end of the 1970s that Kay could claim a shift (in DES research) away from ‘a series of isolated research projects spread thinly across the whole range of Departmental interests’ (Kay, 1979, p. 25).

Mrs Julia Parker, personal communication, 1 March 2005; Professor Tim Brighouse, personal communication, summer 2004.


Later Lord Young of Dartington.

See, for example, Halsey, 1972a, and Smith, 1987.

Interview with Edward Boyle, Secretary of State for Education (1962-4) by David Dodds (1975).


Letter from Michael Young to A. H. Halsey, October 1970.

Letter from Michael Young to A. H. Halsey, October 1970.

More like £1.8m at 2004 prices, with at least as much again added from local and other sources.

Halsey claimed the numbers (including researchers) expanded from seven to something like 35 posts.

Dr Eric Midwinter, personal communication, 20 January 2005: ‘I often reflected on the anomaly of treading the streets of Liverpool 7 and 8 under the aegis of Oxford University, receiving project money from the Oxford University Chest and being paid the same rate (if not allowed the same holidays) as university staff’.

These were to i) raise pupil achievement, ii) raise teacher morale, and iii) involve parents and the community more closely in education. As Eric Midwinter asked, ‘What do you do on the second day?’
37. At the same time as the national CDP, Halsey supported the development of a local community development project, linked to the University department, based in the Barton estate, one of the most disadvantaged areas in Oxford. This combined a welfare rights centre, a ‘fieldwork base’ for professional community work and social work training, and research into disadvantage and the effectiveness of preventive intervention projects. 30 years later, the project survives in the form of a local welfare rights centre and a student unit, based in Ruskin College, which plays a key role in local community activity and in regional social work training.

38. Mrs Julia Parker, personal communication, 1 March 2005.

39. Memorandum from Professor A. H. Halsey to the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment, July 2000, minutes of evidence (HE57). See www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmeduemp/400/

40. In more formal roles, Halsey chaired the Social Studies Board in the 1970s, and was later on a member of the University’s General Board and of Council. Active in Nuffield College throughout this period, he himself recounts (Halsey, 1996, pp. 89–91) how close he came to being elected college warden in 1978.

41. His wife, Dimza Pityana, took the social work course in the department in the 1970s. See also Halsey, 1976b.

42. Researchers in the department have been centrally involved in these developments, for example, the local area studies in the 1995 Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, work on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation to create the local measures of deprivation that are used to allocate resources across the UK (e.g. Noble et al., 2004), and evaluations of some of the major neighbourhood programmes.

43. Memorandum from Professor A. H. Halsey to the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment, July 2000, minutes of evidence (HE57). See www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmeduemp/400/

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Teresa Smith was a graduate student in Professor Halsey’s department in the 1960s, and worked in the West Riding Educational Priority Area Project 1969–1972. She returned to Halsey’s Department as a University Lecturer in the 1970s. Her main research interests are community, disadvantage, pre-schooling and the family. She currently leads the national evaluation of the government’s Neighbourhood Nursery Initiative and acts as advisor to the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills. Since 1997 she has been Head of Department of Social Policy and Social Work at Oxford, one of the two successors to Halsey’s Department of Social and Administrative Studies.
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