ISSN 1755-9928 (Print)
ISSN 2753-3298 (Online)

Journal of
Scottish Thought

Research Articles

The Edinburgh School of Sociology

Author: John Scott

Volume 1, Issue 1
Pp: 89-102
2007
Published on: 1st Jan 2007
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ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh School of Sociology[1]

John Scott

The Edinburgh School of Sociology was formed in the late 1890s in order to promote the establishment of a particular vision of sociology in the British educational scene.[1] Its key movers were Patrick Geddes and his disciple and associate Victor Branford. As an organisation it was short-lived, being a nominal rather than a real entity, yet it was crucially important as a focus for the activities that eventually gave rise to the establishment of the Sociological Society and the *Sociological Review* in London. The members of the Edinburgh School were central to this venture, and its whole development was shaped by the concerns of the founding Scots. Though the label largely fell into disuse, their identity as the Edinburgh School was an important factor in the collective identity of emergent British sociology. In later life, Branford claimed that the Edinburgh School had been the basis for all the intellectual work that he had completed over thirty years (Branford 1926: Appendix B).

The School was officially launched as the 'Edinburgh School for Promoting the Study of Ethical, Social, and Economic Subjects' and was an offshoot of the popular Summer Schools organised by Patrick Geddes in Edinburgh Old Town and around the Outlook Tower. Geddes was the intellectual inspiration, while Branford was the organiser and coordinator. Geddes himself was incapable of organising anything — even the day-to-day matters of his own life — and it was Branford, together with fellow Geddes disciple John Ross, who undertook the main tasks involved in founding and running the School and its successors.

The initial base for the School was at 11 Dudley Gardens in Leith, but it shortly moved to 31 Royal Park Terrace in the more salubrious Meadowbank district of the City. Geddes was made President and two prominent Edinburgh academics – political economist Joseph Shield Nicholson and ethical philosopher James Seth – were recruited as Honorary Presidents. Organising roles in the committee were taken by former students and associates of Geddes, including Edward McGegan, his assistant at the Outlook Tower.

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[1] This paper draws on work undertaken with Chris Husbands (see Scott and Husbands, 2007) and Ray Bromley. A book co-authored with Ray Bromley is in preparation. The sociological and political ideas of these writers is virtually unrecorded outside their own writings. A very sketchy biography of Branford can be found in Defries (1928), while Geddes is discussed in Defries (1927), Boardman (1944; 1978), Mairet (1957), and Meller (1990). Other material comes from public and University archives, especially the Branford archive at the University of Keele and the Geddes collections in the National Library of Scotland and the University of Strathclyde.

The aim of the school seems to have been to make a base within the Edinburgh academic community for the establishment of a strong sociological presence within the University. Geddes had been unsuccessful in an attempt to secure appointment to the Professorship financed by Martin White at the London School of Economics, and the Edinburgh School became the springboard for the establishment of the Geddes Lectureship Fund in 1906. Through this fund, Branford and Ross hoped to finance a lectureship in sociology for Geddes at Edinburgh University. Although some money was raised, this was insufficient for a case to be made to the University, and the focus of the activities of both Geddes and Branford had, in any case, now become firmly based in London. The Sociological Society had been formed in London in 1903, Branford was by then working almost exclusively in London, and Geddes barely visited Edinburgh after 1900.

Geddes and Branford

Patrick Geddes (1854–1932) was born on Deeside, but spent most of his childhood in Perthshire and close to Dundee, where he met Martin White who was later to finance a number of his intellectual ventures. Geddes was largely self-educated in biology and botany, and after a period in Huxley's laboratory in London and an assistantship in a marine laboratory in Brittany he was appointed as an assistant in botany and zoology at Edinburgh University. Inspired by the sociological studies of Frédéric Le Play, Geddes began to construct an evolutionary ecology that encompassed both biology and sociology. In 1884 he was appointed to a Chair of Botany at Dundee, a post especially created for him by Martin White that allowed him to continue to spend much of his time in Edinburgh.

While lecturing in Edinburgh he inspired many students to follow his intellectual approach to evolutionary social science. Most notable among these students was Victor Branford (1863–1930). Born in Northamptonshire, Branford spent much of his childhood and adolescence in Edinburgh. His father had a rather chequered career as professor of veterinary surgery at the

Veterinary College in Edinburgh, and family problems, including the death of his mother and the imprisonment and bankruptcy of his father, ensured that Branford and his brothers focused their attention on educational success. Branford graduated in natural science in 1886, by which time he was firmly under the spell of Geddes.

Geddes began his Summer Schools in Edinburgh in 1887, intending them to be a means of drawing into intellectual activity those people– women as well as men–who were outside the conventional University system. Many of those attending the Summer Schools were school teachers, in a variety of subjects. An array of international speakers from the sciences, history, geography, and sociology were brought to lecture in Edinburgh, and Branford himself became a lecturer in history and science from 1893. The Summer Schools, which were to run successfully until 1899, were the institutional basis through which Geddes and Branford began to develop their encyclopaedic conception of sociology. It was through the work of the Summer Schools that Geddes and Branford devised the project for the Edinburgh School of Sociology.

The failure to establish a strong base for sociology in Scotland led Geddes and Branford to focus their attention on London. Having persuaded Martin White to finance the first posts in sociology at the London School of Economics, they formed the Sociological Society. The membership of the Society came from the political establishment, the nascent social sciences, and the social services, together with international sociologists such as Durkheim and Tönnies. Prominent Scots drawn into the Society as founding members included the geographer (Sir) John Scott Keltie, the philosopher Robert Latta, the political historian D. P. Heatley, the economists David H. Macgregor and James Mavor (recently moved to Toronto), the biologist J. Arthur Thompson, the philosopher and Liberal MP Charles Mackinnon Douglas, other Liberal MPs such as Munro Ferguson, Geddes' friend and business associate Henry Beveridge of Pitreavie, and numerous fellow Scottish migrants such as sociologist John Mackinnon Robertson. The Society launched a series of *Sociological Papers* that soon became the *Sociological Review*, and from this base they launched a series of papers and books under the general title *Papers for the Present*. These publications presented a view of the role of sociology in social reconstruction. The Society organised a number of discussion meetings and conferences, some of which were attended by the young Robert MacIver on his visits to London from Oxford.

Geddes' grand ideas for the promotion of social science led to his involvement in a diverse range of activities with little overall focus. During his travels in the United States he met William James, Stanley Hall, and Jane Addams, all of whom became friends and whose work in education he sought to promote through his own involvement in progressive schooling and University Settlements. He also had a long-standing involvement in University Residences, and in 1907 he became involved in the establishment of a University of London Residence at the relocated Crosby Hall in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea. He became particularly heavily involved in town planning, working on plans for Pittencrieff Park for Andrew Carnegie and setting up a roaming international Cities and Town Planning Exhibition. In 1919 he retired from his Chair of Botany at Dundee and took a post as Professor of Civics and Sociology in Bombay, though he spent much of his time after 1923 at a new Hall of Residence for Scottish students at the University of Montpelier.

Branford began his working life as a journalist, a move that was unsuccessful until he met and married the wealthy widow of the editor of the *Dundee Advertiser*. On the basis of his new-found security he decided on a career in business, though hoping that he might eventually secure an academic post. With his fellow student John Ross he formed an accountancy partnership and established his main office in London. By 1905 he had begun to be heavily involved in railway promotion and travelled frequently to New York and Buenos Aires. In South America he became closely involved in the management of the Paraguay Central Railway Company, and the business of the railway, which collapsed in the wake of the attempt by Percival Farquhar to build a trans-American railway network, was to dominate his life for more than a decade.

Branford's first marriage did not last and in 1910 he was divorced and remarried to Sybella Gurney, a pioneer of housing co-partnership and an active member of the Sociological Society. When, after the First World War, the affairs of the Paraguay Railway were more settled, Victor and Sybella Branford spent more time in Britain and Branford renewed his active involvement in the Sociological Society, the *Sociological Review*, and the work of the Le Play House 'Cities Committee'. Throughout the 1920s he combined a partnership in the accountancy firm of Binder Hamlyn with his sociological work at Le Play House.

The Sociological Framework

The sociological approach that Branford and Geddes set out had its roots in Auguste Comte and Frédéric Le Play. From Comte they took a broadly positivist methodology — they were active in the London Positivist Society and in the associated South Place Ethical Society — and a view of societies as systems of spiritual and temporal power. From Le Play they took the basics of the survey method for investigating the relationship between the natural environment, the mode of production, and the way of life of a people.

They held that the material environment in which people live shapes their patterns of work and hence their way of life. The crucial idea that they developed to explore this was the 'region'. A geographical region has to be seen as the product of a particular physical environment and landscape as the people who live in the region undertake their work tasks and pursue their cultural activities. Geddes and Branford stressed the importance of physical geography, botany, and biology in studying the ecology of a region, and they argued that any regional survey must begin with such a description of 'place' before moving on to an investigation of the occupations and work activities of the people living in the region. These work activities are shaped by the natural resources, soil, and vegetation of the place, and the variations between hunting, pastoral, and fishing regions were seen as distinct economic structures. These economic patterns condition and constrain the way of life followed by a people and the region becomes the basis from which is fostered the cultural tradition of a people and that embodies the spirit of place. The customs, practices, and habits of action of a people are distinctive of their region. There is, therefore, a determinate relationship between 'place', 'work', and 'folk' (Geddes 1904; 1905).

They saw the development of industry as having led to massive transformations in the scale and structure of human societies. The predominantly rural pattern of pre-industrial societies is supplemented and over-whelmed by the urban patterns of residence found in an industrial society. Increasingly, the city becomes the basis of human existence and the focus of social life. People increasingly live in city regions and the life of the city shapes the structure of the whole society. The nature of the city and its influence in its society depends upon the patterns of power that have evolved within the society.

Any society, Branford and Geddes argued, could be seen as organised around two interrelated systems of power, the temporal and the spiritual (Branford and Geddes 1919a; 1919b). The dynamics of a social system results from the interrelationships between these two systems and the state of equilibrium or disequilibrium that they show.

Temporal power comprises both economic and political power and has been the driving force in the social development of industrialism. The 'organisers' of temporal power comprise the dominant social elite, and in the contemporary world Branford and Geddes document the successive rise of entrepreneurs, bureaucrats, and financiers. Echoing the ideas of their friends and associates John Hobson (1906) and Thorstein Veblen (1899; 1904), they saw the contemporary era as one of finance capitalism in which the control and mobilisation of credit has become the central factor in economic and political power.

Spiritual power is exercised by intellectual and 'emotional' specialists rooted in the cultural systems associated with religion, education, and family. In the pre-industrial societies of the medieval and earlier periods the Church had been central to the mobilisation and exercise of spiritual power. The development of capitalist industry, however, had gradually undermined the autonomy of spiritual power and the organising elite in the economy had usurped the power formerly held by Church leaders and intellectuals. Financiers now controlled the spread of ideas, and spiritual power was increasingly subordinated to their interests. Financiers control newspapers through ownership and through advertising revenue, and they are able to determine the content of the press. They control the schools and universities through endowments and finance and so are able to shape the content of the curriculum.

The dominant cultural form is that of a pecuniary utilitarianism in which all matters are reduced to monetary calculation. Financiers shape public opinion and are able to ensure that prevailing cultural forms legitimate their power. The acquisitiveness of a consumer culture becomes the basis through which 'Mammonism' is established as the dominant cultural outlook. This debasement of culture produces a 'disciplined docility' in the mass of the population, strengthening the influence of the 'herd instinct' in social life. These ideas foreshadowed the later development of sociological theories of 'mass society'.

Financiers have their base in the contemporary city, for which Geddes invented the term 'conurbation' (Geddes 1915). Contemporary conurbations are largely based around coalfields, as 'paleotechnic' industrialism is the age of coal and steam. The conurbations are increasingly marked by a polarisation between the private affluence of a leisure class and the increasingly impoverished life of the masses. This polarisation within the cities is matched by a wider political polarisation between the political agencies of 'order' and 'progress'.

The 'party of order' comprises the political wing of the ruling elite, and Geddes and Branford note a drift towards a greater reliance on coercion and force, epitomised in Prussian statecraft but found in all industrialised societies.

The masses who are excluded from temporal power and whose debasement and impoverishment drives them into an 'insurgent' role are increasingly formed into a 'party of progress' that pursues nihilistic opposition to the forces of order. Thus, in political terms, Geddes and Branford saw contemporary societies as drifting towards a revolutionary struggle between the forces of order and progress. Externally, modern states are engaged in an imperialistic struggle that produces a drift towards warfare between their respective ruling elites.

Towards the Third Alternative

The pessimistic vision that Branford and Geddes held of the drift towards war and revolution — inherent in a society oriented to 'wardom' — was countered by optimism that there were certain social tendencies pointing in an alternative direction. They hoped that Britain and other industrial societies could avoid social disintegration by following a 'Third Way' or 'Third Alternative' between the parties of order and progress. Branford was the originator of the term 'Third Way', which he used to describe this political strategy (Branford 1914a: 341). The agencies of this third alternative are the intellectuals whose spiritual power has been usurped. Predominant among these are the sociologists, who are able to spearhead the task of social reconstruction.

The conception of the third alternative reflected a wider movement of political thought that emerged after the consolidation of Fabianism into the new Labour Party. Many of those on the political left felt that Fabian collectivism provided no real alternative to the centralised collectivism of the bureaucratic nation state, and they sought a more pluralistic and democratic alternative.

The heart of this alternative was initially provided by guild socialism, which saw the reestablishment of the medieval guild idea as offering the possibility for social renewal organised around more creative forms of work. These ideas were promoted through the political journal *The New Age* and were particularly associated with the political ideas of Arthur Penty (1906), G. D. H. Cole (1913; 1917), and Maurice Reckitt (Bechhofer and Reckitt 1918). These writers proposed a pluralist politics formed around the organisation of the economy into 'functional' political chambers that could be brought together in a corporatist polity.

A further strand in the third alternative came from the 'distributism' of Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton (Belloc 1912; Chesterton 1910; Chesterton 1926). Their argument was that a wider distribution of property was necessary if greater political equality was to be established. In order to achieve this, they argued, the credit and taxation system had to be reformed. By taxing large-scale property ownership and subsidising small savings, there would be a gradual shift towards a more egalitarian structure organised around independent shopkeepers, craft workers, and farmers.

Branford and Geddes shared much of this complex of ideas, but they added to it an emphasis on cooperation as a principle of social organisation and the promotion of a system of 'social credit'. Both Branford and Geddes had been involved in the cooperative movement from their earliest days in Edinburgh. Sybella Gurney had been an activist and official in the Labour Co-partnership housing organisation and had helped to set up a number of rural and urban housing schemes. After her marriage to Victor Branford she exercised a considerable influence over this particular aspect of the Third Alternative. Victor Branford (1901a; 1901b) had begun to develop his ideas for a new system of national credit on a cooperative basis in 1901 and he saw the agricultural credit unions and the savings banks of Germany as exemplars for a larger restructuring of the financial system. Such a reorganisation of credit, he held, would promote small-scale enterprise and provide the basis for the pluralism that both the guild socialists and the distributists sought to achieve (Branford 1914b). Sociologists were to play a key role in the mobilisation of national credit. As members of national and regional investment boards they would join the 'technicians' of the capitalist system – the bankers, engineers, and accountants – as a counterbalance to the financiers who controlled the existing system of credit (Branford 1921).

These ideas were developed more radically and systematically by Clifford Douglas (1921a; 1921b; 1924) and were to become the basis for a small Social Credit Party in Britain and for the far more influential Alberta Social Credit Party in Canada (Macpherson 1953). They were, however, marginal to British party politics and the Third Alternative failed to establish itself in the political mainstream. Branford and Geddes were, however, associated with a number of organisations promoting the pluralist and corporatist structures that became a significant feature of politics in the 1930s and, especially, following the Second World War.

Social Renewal and Social Reconstruction

The political and economic reforms aimed at by the Third Alternative were seen as conditions for the social reconstruction of the system of temporal power. Branford and Geddes believed that this reconstruction could be achieved only if there was a parallel 'renewal' of spiritual power. This social renewal of the machinery of cultural production would allow the intellectuals and emotionals to regain their autonomy and so to shape the direction of social development. The key planks of this social renewal were reforms in schooling and education, a regeneration of community solidarity, and reforms in the university system.

Education is the means through which a cultural tradition is passed from generation to generation (Branford 1914a: 22; 1923: 20) and both Geddes and Branford were involved in the development of progressive schooling and teaching methods. Both men were members of the Advisory Council at Abbotsholme, the first of the new progressive schools, founded in 1889. Branford sent one of his adopted sons to Bembridge School, founded explicitly on Ruskinian lines and Geddesian ideals. They were both particularly involved with the youth movement founded by Ernest Westlake at Godshill, which became the basis for the Forest School.

The educational ideas that they promoted were rooted in the novel and innovative psychological theories of G. Stanley Hall (Hall 1904), which had themselves taken much from Geddes' advocacy of evolutionism. According to this view, the psychology of the child and the adolescent had to be seen developmentally, with the kinds of education and activity undertaken at each stage of development being appropriate to their maturing skills and instincts. This was controversially linked to a 'recapitulationist' view of personality development, which gave the argument an eccentric character, but the underlying developmentalism was, in fact, a pioneering recognition of ideas that were later popularised by Freud and Piaget. Indeed, Branford and Geddes were among the active advocates of psychoanalytic ideas, especially as they developed in the works of Adler and Jung. A key figure and associate in this area was Theodore Faithfull (1927; 1933), a psychoanalyst and sex therapist who ran the progressive Priory Gate School.

These ideas were central to the Woodcraft scouting movements that were set up in connection with some of the pioneering progressive schools. Westlake's Order of Woodcraft Chivalry, in particular, was based closely on these ideas, and both Geddes and Branford were involved in its governing body. Through scouting, they held, children were exposed to ways of developing the woodcraft skills of the hunter and agriculturalist that were appropriate to the particular stage of development of their instincts. They could then move on to more adult concerns and so contribute to a fully rounded citizenship. A failure to develop these skills, on the other hand, leads to problems in later life, as aggressive skills are un-channelled and so reinforce the societal tendency towards wardom. An integration of woodcraft scouting with schooling was, therefore, an essential precondition for healthy mental development.

The Order of Woodcraft Chivalry at Godshill was also seen as an experiment in community renewal. The scouting camps and labour camps for the unemployed, together with a residential teaching staff, were seen as models for what schools could achieve in the rebuilding of rural communities. Through the advocacy of the housing cooperatives pioneered by Sybella Branford, they saw yet further means to this and, and the principles of community renewal were set out by their associate at Godshill George Sandeman (1913; 1919; 1929). Their involvement in Third Alternative politics brought them into contact with those such as John Macmurray, who was later to become recognised as a leading pioneer of the communitarian strand in contemporary Third Way thought.

Local communities were the building blocks for the civic regeneration of the large cities and conurbations, and it was here that Branford and Geddes saw an important role for renewed universities. Universities can be the bases for a reconstruction of the city conurbations, establishing a new form of spiritual power appropriate to the emerging 'neotechnic' economic stage. A town becomes a city when a strongly developed spiritual life unites its citizens into a 'polity'. The focus of civic spiritual life in the medieval period had been the Church and this was to be replaced in the modern world by reformed and renewed universities (Branford and Geddes 1919a: 145). These reformed universities, following the model of the new German and American research-led universities, but avoiding excessive specialisation, would promote citizenship, community, and collective welfare through a moral commitment to the humanities and 'Humanity' itself. At the heart of the universities would be the sociologists, acting as the integrative focus for the human disciplines and guiding the application of technical knowledge. The role of sociologists in social reconstruction was to be enhanced by outreach activities in the local community and by the involvement of citizens in their survey work. In these ways, it was held, a truly public sociology could be established as the vehicle for reconstruction and renewal.

True to their global view of humanity, Branford and Geddes saw the regional city universities as needing to federate themselves into national and international bodies. A world university with international students and staff, the staff circulating through exchanges with constituent universities, would stand at the heart of this system. Branford's brother Benchara draw up comprehensive plans for such an independent and self-sufficient university on the island of Cyprus (B. Branford 1916), Geddes sought to encourage international work through his planning work for the University at Jerusalem and his Residence at Montpelier, and Victor Branford sought, throughout the 1920s, to involve the League of Nations in international scholarly associations and publication activity.

Conclusion

The sociological ideas of Victor Branford and Patrick Geddes had little influence in their lifetimes and were virtually forgotten after their deaths. Only in the sphere of town planning was there any significant impact. The reasons for this are various. Their aims and aspirations were grand and remarkably prescient, yet the details through which they sought to develop these aims were often naïve and sketchy. As a result, their work combined striking insights and powerful proposals with eccentric illustrations and discussions. The style of writing through which they developed their ideas was, furthermore, dense, rambling, and not infrequently pretentious. Their self-conscious literary and all-encompassing presentation became a barrier rather than a vehicle of understanding. In the struggle to establish sociology in the British universities they were outpaced by Hobhouse and his protégé Morris Ginsberg. Geddes' failure to secure the Martin White chair at the LSE left the field open for Hobhouse's more philosophical — and more sophisticated — evolutionism. British sociology remained largely confined to the LSE, and Ginsberg ensured that the Hobhouse approach prevailed there and, after the Second World War, within the Departments of Sociology that grew up under its wing. Only in the applied social science departments of the inter-war years, where local and regional surveys were undertaken, did the Branford and Geddes view have any significant influence.

Despite their organisational efforts with the Sociological Society and Le Play House, they did not successfully translate their political ideas into a viable political programme. Neither Branford nor Geddes were temperamentally suited to practical party politics and their political engagements were confined to small and — it must be said — eccentric debating societies. They remained outside the mainstream of political debate, having eschewed the centralism and collectivism of the Labour Party, and their optimistic humanitarian internationalism was rapidly eclipsed by the growth of the more parochial and repressive 'middle way' solutions aligned with Italian and German fascism. The corporatist and planning regimes of the period following the Second World War embodied some of their ideas, though without any significant borrowing. The rediscovery in the 1990s of 'Third Way' solutions involving sociological contributions to social reconstruction (Giddens 1994; Giddens 1998) – again without any recognition of the contribution of Branford and Geddes – provides a context within which their ideas might, at last, be reconsidered.

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