

## Michael Young, *Social Science & The British Left, 1945-70*

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**Author:** Lise Butler

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All historical actors ultimately defy our neat labels. Practically speaking however, some are more defiant than others. One such figure is the dynamo ‘social entrepreneur’, Michael Young. (1) It has become a cliché to rattle off the dizzying array of institutions, projects and ideas with which Young was involved in his long and energetic career. But then, it is difficult to resist a list as eye-catching as: the Labour Party’s 1945 manifesto; the foundational sociology text *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957); the concept of ‘meritocracy’; the Consumer Association and *Which?* Magazine; and the Open University. While Young’s professional life is tricky to pin down, its diversity—and his archive at Churchill College, Cambridge—offers a promising avenue through which to approach post-war Britain. In this rich, textured, and revelatory book, the historian Lise Butler has seized this opportunity with both hands.

The achievements of Butler’s *Michael, Young, Social Science & the British Left* are twofold. First, she explores the work and ideas of Young himself. Butler (p. 15) illuminates Young’s influential critique of actually existing social democracy and his own ‘explicitly political’ agenda: the centrality of community and family to social life; smallness over bigness; active citizenship; consumer advocacy; opposition to producer monopolies; and the prioritisation of happiness over narrow materialism. Her account deepens our understanding of Young’s motivations—in particular, the importance of family and women to his thought and activism after 1952.

However, Butler also achieves a second, more ambitious goal. By using Young as a ‘unique vantage point’ (p. 230), she traces the growing importance of the social sciences for both the intellectual thought-worlds of the Cold War West and the lively debates of post-war social democracy. Her account scrutinises the ‘networks’ connecting academics, advocates and political actors within different institutional settings and explicitly bridges intellectual and political history (p. 12). It ‘moves between lecture rooms in Oxford and Cambridge and policy circles in Westminster, and between London’s urban working-class neighbourhoods and its middle-class suburbs’ (p. 19). It also reconstructs ‘Cold War intellectual networks’ spanning North America and Western Europe (p. 210). In short, this book ranges far beyond Young and his well-known collaborators like Peter Willmott. Its cast of characters includes: the libertarian socialists G.D.H. and Margaret Cole; the child psychologist Joel Bowlby; the anthropologist Raymond Firth; the sociologist

Talcott Parsons; the social researcher Peter Townsend; and Labour politicians from Tony Crosland to Edith Summerskill.

On this basis, Butler convincingly demonstrates the importance of social science for British left-wing politics and policymaking between the 1940s and the 1970s. Her argument dovetails with a wave of revelatory scholarship on social science and its dynamic relationship with the politics of identity over the last decade. (2) Historians like Jon Lawrence, Selina Todd, and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite have critically examined surviving social-scientific fieldnotes and used these to reframe questions of class, community, gender and race in British society. Yet, Butler focuses more on the social scientists themselves. In many ways, as she argues, her account is the chronological sequel to Jose Harris's influential work on the influence of idealist philosophy on the emerging Victorian and Edwardian welfare state. (3) The resultant prominence of themes such as community, altruism and active citizenship did not wither after the Second World War. They were instead absorbed and reformulated by a self-consciously humanitarian social scientific agenda. 'It might even be said ... that the social scientist laid claim to the intellectual terrain previously occupied by the moral philosopher' (pp. 6-7). Her deeply researched account thus illuminates how 'British social science was closely integrated with progressive politics, shaping the core assumptions, values, and responses that policy makers on the left took to social change' (p. 222). Indeed, she suggests that there is more than a grain of truth in Raymond Aron's famous characterisation of post-war British sociology as 'an attempt to make intellectual sense of the political problems of the Labour Party' (p. 2).

The distinctive approach Butler takes is immediately apparent in the first chapter, which pivots around the 'Conference on the Psychological and Sociological Problems of Modern Socialism' held in Oxford, 1945. Here, Michael Young takes a backstage role, while other actors stride into the spotlight. Held in the wake of Labour's famous landslide, the conference sought to bolster the prospects for New Jerusalem through mobilising psychology and sociology. Listeners and contributors, including G.D.H. Cole, Leonard Woolf, R.H. Tawney, T.H. Marshall, and Karl Mannheim, agreed that social sciences could provide the intellectual resources to renew liberal and socialist commitments. However, Butler reconstructs a debate between a pessimistic contribution from the Labour economist Evan Durbin, and other more optimistic and voluntarist viewpoints. By exploring the inheritances of Edwardian and interwar progressive thought – and its fascination with social psychology and disturbing interest in eugenics – Butler explains Durbin's 'pessimistic, eugenicist, and psychoanalytically informed view of national character' (p. 43). This led Durbin to defeatist conclusions about the inherent wickedness of most of the population. However, Durbin's views were 'stridently rejected' (p. 43). To show this, Butler explores the key contributions, including Joel Bowlby's adaptation of his famous attachment theory into an argument that citizenship could be fostered through active democratic participation, Margaret Cole's celebration of pluralism and guild syndicalism and A.D. Lindsay's liberal Anglican argument for small groups and voluntary associations. Butler characterises the result as a 'marriage of group-focused psychology and sociology with elements of guild socialist and pluralist political thought' (p. 22). Finally, she argues that this synthesis would strongly influence one thirty-year old observer and participant in the conference, Michael Young.

Young takes centre stage himself in chapter two. Butler discusses his formative and 'astonishingly close' (pp. 51-2) relationship with the philanthropists Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst. It seems likely that this relationship helped Young land his first significant job at the think tank Political and Economic Planning (PEP), which the Elmhirsts helped fund. PEP embroiled Young in left-of-centre policy debate and provided him a route into the Labour Party Research Department. Butler then explores Young's increasing involvement in 'Active Democracy' projects of the later 1940s, which aimed to foster active citizenship and highlight the 'human factor' in local government, healthcare, and the industrial workplace. She traces the influence of the industrial psychologist Elton Mayo on this agenda and situates it alongside similar research by Ruth Glass and with work published in the *Pilot Papers*, the pet project of Mass Observation founder, Charles Madge. A common theme was a 'critique of the ways in which state institutions could make people feel disconnected, unmotivated and powerless', and an optimistic view of the potential for active citizenship (p. 68). These currents pushed Young into increasing dissatisfaction with the statist and technocratic overtones of Labour's 1945 agenda, despite his continuing employment by the party. Young's

disillusionment culminated in his off-message pamphlet *Small Man, Big World: A Discussion of Socialist Democracy* (1948), which decried 'Bigness' as the 'Enemy of Humanity', identified 'Smallness' as essential for democracy in modern society, and championed broad-based social sciences over narrow economics. All these would prove to be enduring themes.

The third chapter is pivotal for understanding Butler's reading of Young's work. It highlights Young's unpublished paper for the Labour Party, *For Richer, For Poorer* (1952), as a turning point in Young's politics and thought. The pamphlet argued that women and children were particularly vulnerable to the negative aspects of modern industrial and suburban society, and that the family should be placed at the centre of Labour's agenda. This contention arose from several places, Partly, it grew out of the lessons Young drew from his six-month sabbatical touring the world (funded by Labour and by the Elmhursts) and his decision to study for a doctorate in sociology under Richard Titmuss, whose own work on family and population is explored. However, in keeping with her theme, Butler also draws attention to how Young's ideas synthesised older Edwardian preoccupations with cutting-edge social scientific research agendas. For the former, Young drew on what a 'pre-second-wave feminism' (a term perhaps open to challenge), and thus echoed an 'established feminist project to empower and compensate women as mothers' (pp. 97, 229). Butler notes the overlaps with the coterminous campaign for family allowances and that one of its partisans, Labour MP Edith Summerskill, admired Young's pamphlet. Yet, Young also drew on new strands of psychological research, in particular Labour MP Stephen Taylor's work on the 'neurosis' of the suburban housewife.

Importantly, this synthesis put the 'dependent position of women at the heart of an analysis of working-class life' and 'contained the intellectual seeds of a broader project' (p. 85). The pamphlet was, therefore, a 'key moment' (p. 100) in Young's career. There are intriguing biographical hints as to why Young was so fascinated this agenda, including his unstable family upbringing. Probably wisely, Butler does not pursue this point. Instead, she valuably stresses the importance of this theme for Young's future work. She suggests that it is no coincidence that *Family and Kinship* was originally going to be called *Mothers and Daughters* (p. 140), and that Young's later creation, the Institute of Community Studies (ICS), 'might, in fact, have better been called the Institute of Family Studies' (p. 123). There are many criticisms to be made of Young's rather essentialist view of women (see below), but it should be stressed just how unusual his perspective was in left-wing policy circles. Indeed, Butler elsewhere quotes a revealing Active Democracy pamphlet from 1949, which imagines a representative 'citizen' comparing their first experience of a hospital to when 'he first went to boarding school or into the services' (pp. 59-60). This neatly illustrates just how much post-war intellectual discussion of citizenship assumed that the 'citizen' was an upper-class male. Nor was the Labour Party, with its focus on the industrial male worker, more likely to place women and the family at the centre of its politics – hence, Summerskill aside, the seemingly widespread disinterest in Young's pamphlet inside the party. Young's increasing focus on working-class women was disruptive to the politics of the post-war left.

Once she establishes her interpretive lens, Butler applies it to Young's famous work in the 1950s. In chapter four, she explores the ICS, and its critique of post-war urban planning and the welfare state. She argues that *Family and Kinship* (and its celebration of Bethnal Green's extended family networks over the suburban nuclear family) arose from a 'deliberate intellectual and political project to emphasize the continuing relevance of the extended family in industrial society'. It was also expressly intended as a political intervention on urban planning, offering an alternative 'model of socialist citizenship, solidarity and community' to that of Labour Party and to any 'model of socialism ... organized around the interests and political culture of male industrial labour' (p. 106). To add further context, Butler discusses Young's 1951 trip to India and report on mutualist land reforms. She also traces the influence on the ICS of Bowlby's child psychology, the functionalist psychology of Parsons and Edward Shils, and Firth's anthropological scholarship on matrilineal societies. In keeping with her focus on social science, and not just Young, Butler also explores the work of fellow ICS researcher Peter Townsend (who was impressed by *For Richer, For Poorer*), and his own critiques of the welfare state. Like Young, Townsend's resultant work on pensions and relative poverty heavily emphasised the family.

Chapter four then offers a fascinating reading of Young's famous satire the *The Rise of Meritocracy* (1957). Though often separated from his other work, Butler uses her argument to highlight the importance of women for Young. It is revealing, Butler suggests, that in Young's dystopian future, it is women who lead the 2034 Technician's Revolution against the oppressive meritocracy. This choice, whether conscious or not, reflects Young's wider project to build a politics around feminine care rather than masculine work. '[B]ecause women often stood outside of the formal professional structures of the dystopian meritocracy ... they had become the social group best equipped to resist it' (p. 152). She also, however, points to some slippage between the clueless narrator's views and those of Young himself, as both shared a somewhat essentialist view of the role in women – and here Butler introduces Juliet Mitchell's famous critique of Peter Townsend in 'Women: The Longest Revolution' (1966). Nonetheless, Butler sees Young's research preoccupations as reflecting an 'anxious conviction' that Labour was 'blind to human motivation, and overly committed to a politics of production which saw people as workers first', and that 'the family had been overlooked by the left and should be reclaimed as a progressive force' (p. 155).

Butler makes a similar case in chapter five, which centres on the Consumers' Association and Young's exploration of consumer politics in *The Chipped White Cups of Dover* (1960). Young himself saw consumer advocacy as separate from his other work, but Butler explicitly disagrees with him (p. 159). His interest in consumption, she suggests comes from his prior interest in women, in the family, and in identities and solidarities formed outside the workplace. For Young, 'consumer politics were articulated and justified in terms of the family's return to the centre of British economic life' (p. 169). Butler sustains this argument by drawing on Young's lectures at Cambridge on social development. In these lectures, Young advanced a stadial sociological schema, in which the family began as a central economic unit in an agricultural society, declined in economic importance during the industrial era, and returned to the centre of economic life in modern times – only this time, as a site of consumption, not production. The chapter also draws a useful contrast between Townsend and the other ICS researchers. While Townsend famously rediscovered poverty, Young became interested in the politics of affluence. Hence, from the late 1950s, the ICS's normative preference for the working-class extended family over the 'affluent' nuclear family weakened significantly and it began to offer more positive readings of the latter.

Chapter six returns to Butler's central focus: the connections between post-war social science and centre-left politics. Despite Young's critique of the Labour Party, he continued to influence key figures within it—notably the revisionist thinker Tony Crosland, who similarly distrusted nationalisation and producer-oriented politics. Therefore, after Wilson took power in 1964, Crosland offered Young the founding chair of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). Butler represents Young's tenure at the SSRC as the culmination of his enduring project to champion the insights of synthetic, interdisciplinary social science (over economics or abstract political thought) for policymaking. Young struggled with some of the administrative requirements of the job – as Butler observes, his 'energetic career' attests to the fact that he

was 'a lot better at setting up exciting new ventures than administering mundane but necessary ones' (p. 196). She generously focuses on the former by exploring the 'Next Thirty Years' project, which reflected Young's growing belief that 'the social sciences could help policy makers forecast and plan for the future needs of society' (p. 198). Butler situates this within an 'increasing global fascination with the future' (p. 199) and highlights similar initiatives sponsored by the Ford Foundation or the RAND Corporation in the United States. She then traces how the later 1960s severely disrupted this agenda. Intensifying racial conflict, anti-war protests and contentious industrial disputes all challenged the often naively optimistic assumptions of futurological thinking. The Next Thirty Years project accordingly ran aground. Nevertheless, by examining the networks surrounding both this project and Young himself, Butler traces some origins of the journal *New Society* (f. 1962), its influential 'Non-Plan', and the related 'Open Group', which involved not only Young and Willmott, but also figures like Peter Hall and Samuel Brittan, who would become deeply significant in 1970s debates.

It seems churlish to ask more of such an interesting book. It may have been illuminating to consider in more depth the international and global contexts of post-war social science. Butler does note transnational connections, like Young's fellowship at Stanford, funded by the Ford Foundation (where he rubbed shoulders with everybody from Clifford Geertz to Daniel Bell). But the looming presence of communism and its influence on debates about socialism in Western Europe was surprisingly under-explored. It seems likely that the drive for a pluralist, tolerant and participatory socialism, which respects rather than tramples over existing social networks, was at least partly a response to the Soviet and Maoist spectres. The intriguing influence of the Indian village on both Young and the Elmhirsts is, similarly, given comparatively little attention, and could perhaps have been situated within a rapidly expanding historiography of modern Britain that foregrounds imperial and postcolonial legacies. Finally, especially in a book about social science, some engagement with the extensive social scientific literature on 'networks' (such as 'policy learning' or 'social network analysis') may have further illuminated how Butler used that concept.

In her conclusion, Butler returns to her central arguments: the importance of the family for post-war sociology and the close interconnections between social science and social democratic politics. As Butler notes, her account resonates with live debates today. There has been a significant revival in communitarian politics since Ed Miliband's leadership of the Labour Party (2010-15), encapsulated in the 'Blue Labour' movement, while over the last year a new tranche of books on 'meritocracy' have hit the bookshelves. Influential here is the ongoing work of David Goodhart—who famously contrasted the 'somewheres' with the 'anywheres'—and, as with much of this literature, Goodhart often engages directly with Young's ideas. (4) Butler shies away from drawing simplistic 'lessons' from her history, but she does comment on this debate. Her account shows that Young's empirical findings were profoundly shaped, and frankly distorted, by political commitments—something especially obvious in the blindness of works like *Family and Kinship* to the issues of migration, 'race', and multiculturalism. This leads her to warn against any left-wing politics built on an idealized 'traditional working-class community'. But she also draws more positive messages too, highlighting Young's insistence that 'relationships matter' as a nugget of insight into our present moment (p. 229). In that sense, though she approaches the topic from the top down rather than bottom up, Butler's argument echoes Jon Lawrence's recent account of 'community' in modern Britain. (5)

Although her endpoint is in 1970, Butler also hints at subsequent developments. Unsurprisingly given their interconnection, both Young's brand of social science and revisionist social democracy were profoundly challenged by the rise of the New Right, the Bennite left, and post-1968 liberation politics. The political conflicts are well known, but the intellectual challenges were just as profound: the advance of Marxism and new forms of feminism in universities and polytechnics and monetarist or new classical theory and increasingly complex econometrics in think tanks and economics departments, jarred against the thought-worlds of Young and his peers. In hindsight, the SSRC's foundation in 1964 looks something like their high-water mark. Indeed, the defunding of the SSRC and its rechristening as the *Economic and Social Research Council* in 1981, and Young's joining of the schismatic Social Democratic Party in the same year, take on an 'end of an era' resonance. There are, however, other conclusions one could add. It is noteworthy that the 1990s witnessed a revival in communitarian political thought, centre-left sociology, and social scientific

advocacy (think Anthony Giddens, *Bowling Alone*, *Demos*, and Geoff Mulgan). Young himself contributed to this rejuvenation. Perhaps revealingly, this new wave arrived just as the centre-left revived *politically* too, as shown most obviously in Labour's 1997 landslide. New Labour's fascination with New Keynesian economics, technocratic metrics, and 'equality of opportunity' significantly qualifies this point. Nevertheless, the existence of one type of social democracy does not preclude the presence of another – after all, Young's post-war agenda bumped shoulders with a rival centre-left politics, centred on macroeconomics, corporatism, and 'industrial modernisation'. There may be some mileage in comparing the fortunes of pluralist, communitarian social science and the revisionist centre-left in the broader sweep of modern Britain, up to the present day.

That would, however, be another project entirely. Butler's account provides, through the technicolour prism of Michael Young, a rich perspective on both social scientific and left-wing policy debates in post-war Britain. The result is a fascinating, deeply researched and revelatory book.

## Notes

1. Asa Briggs, *Michael Young: Social Entrepreneur* (Basingstoke, 2001).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. This was given impetus by Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain Since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford, 2010).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Jose Harris, 'Political Thought and the Welfare State 1870-1940: An Intellectual Framework for British Social Policy', *Past & Present* 135:1 (1992), 116-141.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere* (London, 2017); David Goodhart, *Head Hand Heart: The Struggle for Dignity and Status in the 21st Century* (London, 2020).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Jon Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me? The Search for Community in Post-War England* (Oxford, 2020).[Back to \(5\)](#)

Image on landing page: cover image from *Family and Kinship in East London*, by Michael Young & Peter Willmott, Penguin Modern Classics.

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/332839>