

Essex: Portrait of a Sociology Department

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Introduction

At certain periods of time particular universities make a disproportionately fruitful contribution to academic knowledge. In Sociology, for example, Columbia, Chicago and Frankfurt have been outstanding centres of learning and clearly their success arises from a complex interaction of brilliant people, new insights, pioneering research, and the formation of a "school" by training new disciples to disseminate the message. In no sense has Britain produced a competitor to match any of the above mentioned universities. This is partly because Sociology in Britain was a somewhat retarded area, very much a poor relation to Anthropology, and grew out of a pragmatic tradition of reformist Fabian Socialism and "political arithmetic" (statistical studies of society). Until 1960, there was only one chair of Sociology in Britain which had been created at the London School of Economics (L.S.E.) in 1909 for Hobhouse, the political theorist, and which was later held by the philosopher Ginsberg, followed by the statistician Glass. So sterile was the attitude to research, that a non-university organisation, the Institute of Community Studies, revived Sociology and the survey tradition with the famous Bethnal Green studies. By the time Sociology began to take off in the middle sixties it was already a minnow compared to the dominating American universities with their seemingly unlimited resources and hordes of graduate students. In parochial British terms, however, one university began to earn the reputation as the most likely successor to the L.S.E. as the leading sociological centre and that was at the University of Essex, near Colchester.

I spent eight years as a postgraduate student and member of staff there and here I would like to review my experience in terms of a portrait of that department and by analyzing the way it worked and the atmosphere it generated. I will do so with the intention of raising implicitly two questions: what is the purpose of a university and how does one stimulate fruitful intellectual activity in a university institute?

The questions are posed in order to encourage debate on them here in the Netherlands and, implicitly, to contrast the structure and functioning of Essex with tradition and practice in

Dutch sociological education. It is hoped to highlight and contrast academic practice in Anglo-Saxon Sociology by focussing primarily on the example of Essex and by assuming knowledge of the Dutch situation.

The University of Essex

The University of Essex opened its doors to students in 1964 as part of a new generation of universities (including Sussex, York, Lancaster, East Anglia, Warwick and Stirling). These were meant to meet the post-Robbins expansion of higher education. The Robbins Report of 1963 documented the elite, class bias of British universities and demanded a massive increase in student numbers to accommodate the mounting numbers of qualified school leavers, and to provide academic and institutional alternatives to the dominating tradition of "Oxbridge." Essex achieved notoriety even before it had commenced because the Vice-Chancellor designate, Albert Sloman, outlined his innovative vision in the Reith Lectures for 1963 on B.B.C. Radio, entitled "The Making of a University." In the "pre-revolutionary" days of the early sixties his blueprint seemed remarkably radical. Firstly, he advocated a new interdisciplinary approach to academic subjects which was designed to challenge the hegemony of the single-subject "honours" degree, whereby a student followed one discipline in depth for most of his or her degree. Secondly, he proposed to abandon the classical collegiate model of Oxbridge, with its small community ethos and patronising relationship with undergraduates, in favour of largely unsupervised student residences in self-catering flats with the idea of treating the students as mature self-regulating individuals. And thirdly, he determined to build Essex into a research centre to compare with the leading institutes in Europe and America. Ten years later, the Vice-Chancellor reviewed the intellectual achievement of the first decade,

"(...) the central function of a university is learning and the single measure by which it can ultimately be judged is the quality and achievement of those who have a continuing responsibility for this function, the academic staff. The first ten years of the life of the University of Essex have proved, I believe, that its academic plans are sound. By concentrating on a very few fields of study, by choosing those fields so that where possible they complemented rather than duplicated what was being done elsewhere in the United Kingdom, by seeking out staff who were, or were likely to become, vigorous and imaginative scholars in their chosen subjects, the University has become in a very short space of time an institution with an international reputation. It has set a fast academic pace."

Yet within that period, which had begun with visions of unlimited growth and which ended with cheese-paring economies, Essex had acquired the reputation of being one of the most troublesome and militant universities in Britain and there were strong rumours that it might be closed. The details of this metamorphosis from promising vision to truculent delinquent are

beyond the scope of this paper and are only relevant to the extent that they shed light on the Sociology Department. Briefly, however, the radical image became tarnished because the academics undermined the inter-disciplinary aspirations, with each department fighting to establish its own territory vis-a-vis the other departments and to outdo its rivals in the established universities (on the traditional criteria of research, publications and examination results). The lack of opportunity for student participation produced elements of alienation and aggressive radicalism, doubtless accentuated by selective recruitment, brought disruptions in the heady days of '68 and sponsored a series of sit-ins, demonstrations, boycotts, rent strikes, and actions. Essex became notorious for student radicalism and was headline news when several ex-students were sentenced to prison terms of ten years for bombing attacks carried out as members of the so-called "Angry Brigade." Then in 1974 Essex was again on the front pages when students blockaded access to the campus with barricades and when a massive police presence arrested over one hundred students. At one stage the right-wing "Daily Telegraph" had painted an archetypally non-conformist picture of student life at the university. Under a title (which almost echoes the level of "De Telegraaf") of "Campus Freedom Plan Crashes in Wave of Violence," there was a report speaking of "windows smashed, fire-hoses slashed, and "pot" parties held daily" and of "towering residential blocks (student flats) housing hippies, "pot" smokers and vandals."

In short, then, Essex had high academic aspirations as well as a militant student body. Of course, Dutch universities, not least in the Social Sciences, also experienced radical changes and student activism during the late sixties. But first it should be said that Essex, like most of the new universities, was a relatively small, residential, campus-like university situated in a large park outside a small town (in this case Colchester). Physically and socially it is quite unlike the large, urban universities of the Netherlands with their non-residential tradition and considerable student numbers. At Essex, for example, the whole university numbered only 300 students when I first went there in 1965 and by the early seventies comprised not much more than 2000 students. This means that the Sociology Department - which with Politics and Economics formed the Social Science Faculty - has never had more than a few hundred students. In 1975/76, for example, there were a total of 475 students in sociological schemes of study (220 in the first year, 140 in the second year, and 115 in the third year). There were then 26 full-time members of staff plus a small number of temporary, part-time staff. This implies a staff-student ratio of 1:15 but in practice some of the teaching was done by lecturers from other departments so that the actual ratio was more generous.

The Sociology Department

In turning to the development of the Sociology Department at Essex, I intend to document and analyse some structural conditions which might be held conducive to a good academic performance. In no sense is this meant to be an idealised portrait because I was personally often highly critical of the department's policy. The first professor of Sociology and founding chairman of the department was Professor Peter Townsend. Townsend came from the pragmatic, empirical background of the L.S.E. and the Institute of Community Studies where he had worked on a study of the family life of old people in East London. He commenced research on poverty and disability and represented the "social administration" stream in British Sociology which had its roots in Fabianism and which aimed at influencing government policies. Although Townsend was chairman for seven years and was highly influential in recruiting staff, he did not found an Essex "school" of Sociology. This was because people felt that Essex should be in the forefront of sociological developments and this clearly meant a broader theoretical focus than was implicit in British Sociology up to that date. However, there was a general theme of interest in the classic concerns of class, status and power and this was reinforced by the acquisition of Professor David Lockwood, author of "The Black-coated Worker" and leading light in the Luton "Affluent Worker" study. But the eclecticism of the department and of British Sociology in the mid-sixties was clear when the philosopher, Professor Alistair McIntyre, was appointed to the third chair in Sociology.

The point I would like to make is that recruitment focussed on attracting bright, promising people almost irrespective of their academic backgrounds. Arguably, the best Sociology Department in Britain was, in fact, built-up by *non-sociologists*. Very few of the staff had degrees in Sociology and many of them had no higher degree. This arose partly from necessity, in that a sufficient number of trained sociologists were just not available to populate the growing number of new departments in the country and partly from a feeling that formal academic qualifications were not particularly important. Thus the early staff contained a Mathematical Sociologist with a doctorate in Chemistry, an educationalist with a third class degree in Chemical Engineering, a methodologist with a degree in Geography, and other members with degrees in Philosophy, English Literature, Mathematics, History and the Classics. By Dutch standards this would seem to be an almost unprofessional state of affairs with virtually unqualified people, with often no first degree in Sociology and with often only a one year postgraduate course in Sociology as a sort of "conversion," setting out to establish a university course and then teaching it. An yet within four to five years Essex was attracting attention as one of the most productive departments in Britain.

I feel that there were three basic reasons why this should be so. Firstly, the eclecticism and tolerance for diversity of the early years avoided prolonged doctrinal disputes and gave people room to develop their own ideas. Secondly, the university offered facilities, support, and generous sabbatical leave for young academics at an early stage of their career to travel abroad, finish theses and books, and initiate or complete research. And, thirdly, British academics in general are in agreement about what a university is for and know how to play an academic role. Thus the new staff generated activity without having to rediscover or recreate a new purpose and a new ideology. By this I mean that the British university tradition trains people to become independent, critical research workers who can work alone and who can set up and conduct their own research projects. The Vice-Chancellor, for example, was very oriented to Europe, and at one stage was the president of the European Rectors' Conference and he remarked:

"I have spent a good deal of time over the last ten years with the executive heads of universities abroad, particularly the European universities, and I have reason to know, as few perhaps do, the extent to which the British universities are exceptional among universities generally. They are institutions which are universally admired: admired for their freedom to conduct their own affairs, admired for their high standards of teaching and research, admired for their concern for the individual students, admired, in short, for their quality."

Briefly, I shall review these three factors which laid the groundwork for creative work before I go on to specific department conditions which canalised and stimulated the academic work of its members.

While the unholy alliance of Townsend, Lockwood and McIntyre left its mark indelibly on the department, none of them individually dominated to the extent of dictating a model course. Rather, there was a collective feeling that the general first year (shared with Economics and Politics) should be followed by a second year laying the broad groundwork in Theory and Methods and a third year with as many specialised optional courses as possible. Here I should explain that the normal degree course lasts three years in a British university and leads to a Bachelor's degree. An increasing number of students stay on to take a fourth year for a Master's degree which is roughly equivalent to the Dutch "doktoraal" degree. A very small number take a Ph.D (Doctor of Philosophy) and then usually as full-time students at the start of their career but before undertaking substantial teaching duties. Given that most universities now have a broadly-based first year course it means that specialised subjects are covered in only two years. This clearly contrasts with the six to seven years that it takes the average Dutch student to complete a degree. In practice, this involved students at Essex in several compulsory courses in the second year (Theory, Methods, Social Policy and Social Change, and one other course chosen from a number of

options) and a wide range of optional courses in the third year including Sociology of Education, Social Psychology, Social Policy, British Social History, Comparative Sociology, Sociology of Britain and Other Advanced Societies, Industrial Sociology, Labour Movements, Mathematical Sociology, Social Structure, Alternative Societies, Deviance, and Sociology of Modernisation and Development. Further options could be taken in other departments and there was a strong emphasis on Sociology related to the United States, the U.S.S.R. and Latin America (with language facilities provided for the last two areas). Furthermore, students had to complete a "dissertation" of not more than 10,000 words during their final year. There were twenty-six full-time staff in the department making it one of the largest, if not the largest, in Britain. Given their diverse backgrounds and wide interests it was impossible to speak of an "Essex Sociology" but basically the three orientations were class, status and power in advanced industrial societies, social policy and social change, and deviance (the last arising from the replacement of McIntyre by Professor Stanley Cohen).

Publish or perish

Everyone in the department was expected to do research and to publish. This was not only taken for granted but was specifically related in the university ordinances to the granting of permanent appointments (tenure):

"It shall be the duty of Professors, Readers, Senior Lecturers or Lecturers to devote themselves by research and publication to the advancement of knowledge in their subjects, to give instruction therein to students of the University and to take part in examining and generally to promote the function of the University as a centre of learning and education (...) decisions as to confirmation of appointment will be based on evidence of contribution to scholarship, and confirmation may be deferred for up to two years to give further opportunity for the provision of such evidence (...) Confirmation of an appointment as permanent is regarded by the Senate as a very important step; its Staffing Committee requires positive evidence of contribution to scholarship, normally in the form of research work published, or accepted for publication, or research work which takes the form of a thesis accepted for the award of the degree of Ph.D. which included work done during a probationary appointment at the University of Essex. *Neither publication nor the acceptance of a Ph.D. is of itself regarded as evidence of the quality of scholarship required for the granting of permanency.* The Committee also requires evidence of competence as a teacher. Other forms of evidence of contribution to scholarship can be taken into account where circumstances warrant exceptional treatment (...) Permanency will not be recommended without any evidence of contribution to scholarship."
(my underlining)

In practice, the emphasis came to lay on publications and little effort was made to assess competence in teaching. Many of the

staff did not bother to write a thesis but simply wrote books or papers. To a certain extent there was almost an irrational and spiralling pressure to produce publications - as if the very act of publication transformed a paper from chrysalis to butterfly - which was based very much on the American principle of "publish or perish." But the norm implied publication in reputable academic journals and with academic publishers (such as the university presses and in established series). In my case, I was prevented for a number of complex reasons from publishing my doctorate and tended to write for semi-academic journals and magazines. I was informed that I had not "written enough." When I explained that I had *written* a doctorate of 550 pages it became clear that my Ph.D. was of little use as a bargaining counter for tenure because it could not be published. I was advised to get a "serious" article into an academic journal as soon as possible in order to make sure of getting tenure. As it was my tenure was held up for one year largely because I had not published in the "right" places. There was a story, probably apocryphal, that one of the professors would take a "curriculum vitae" of a job applicant and go through the list of articles in red pen reducing say forty publications to six or seven.

The "right place" meant the major sociological journals - *British Journal of Sociology*, *Sociology*, *American Sociological Review* and the more specialised journals in Philosophy, Theory, Criminology, etc. - and non-commercial publishers (paperbacks with trendy commercial publishers or "potboilers" did not count as much as a hardback with, say, Routledge, Methuen, Macmillan and the university presses of Cambridge, Oxford and London). But it was a corner-stone of university and departmental policy that competence should be available for inspection; that meant publication. In the academic year 1972/73 the Sociology Department, which then numbered twenty three full-time members, produced twenty nine publications, including six books and in 1973/74 they brought out thirty one publications of which four were books. In fact, the productivity was higher because only "serious" articles are forwarded for inclusion in the annual report. Of course, some people were more productive than others but, in general, the majority of staff produced at least one "serious" article in an academic journal per year. Other indicators of merit were attracting outside grants (the department was awarded ten research grants from funding agencies in 1972/73 and eight grants in 1973/74) sitting in editorial committees, holding fellowships or visiting lectureships, attending conferences and reading papers to learned bodies, being invited on to national or international professional committees, and being appointed as external examiner to another university. In order to stimulate production, the traditional "sabbatical" whereby an academic is given a free hand every seventh year to pursue his own work unencumbered by teaching or administrative duties, was altered to allow a term's leave (a term constituted roughly a third of an academic year) for every two year's service. This allowed young

lecturers to finish a thesis or established staff to initiate a project, engage in fieldwork, or complete a book. I started full-time teaching at Essex in 1970 and was able to take the Autumn Term 1973 off in order to take up a Nuffield Fellowship at the University of Amsterdam and also to have the Spring Term 1975 free to return to the Netherlands on a Leverhulme Fellowship.

Academic autonomy

To a large extent such arrangements are based on "trust." The contract for a British academic generally specifies no hours of work nor any period for holidays. In most universities the academic year is divided into three terms of roughly ten weeks each (in Oxford and Cambridge eight weeks each) which are divided by vacations of four weeks at Christmas and Easter and twelve weeks in the summer. Theoretically, then, it is possible to have five months of the year practically free of duties. Needless to say, "vacations" are perceived as periods for catching up on chores and writing although there is nothing to stop an individual disappearing to some surfing resort in the Bahamas at the end of each term. Some people did take advantage of the enormous personal freedom accorded staff- in the same way that some life fellows at Oxbridge had long, parasitical and barren careers at the expense of the colleges - and there was little to be done once they had been awarded tenure. But autonomy is one of the most cherished ideals of the British academic tradition and the lecturer assumes it as a right rather than a privilege. From early on in the secondary school, children are encouraged to develop a high degree of personal expression, both in speaking and writing, and are expected to use libraries for elementary "research" orientation in writing the numerous essays expected of them (and all examinations are written). As an undergraduate, the student is expected to know how to use the facilities but can rely on various styles of institutional support from college subcultures to "moral" guidance from tutors or advisers.

The academic emphasis is on producing potential research workers who know how to review secondary sources, to dig out primary sources, and to present arguments succinctly and logically. The extreme example of this approach is the definition of students by some traditionalists as potentially troublesome creatures whom you take by the hand on their first day and lead them to the library and, three years later you fetch them for their final examinations, while hoping that in between you see them as little as possible. This assumption of intellectual independence (which is often curiously coupled with a patronising concern for the student as a social animal arising from the "in loco parentis" relationship between university and student in the residential tradition) is even more exaggerated with postgraduate students, who were once described as an "attic excrescence" at Oxbridge and who are expected to be capable of conducting independent research with

only intermittent supervision.

When academic staff are appointed, then, they have usually been socialised to functioning autonomously and do not require narrowly specified guidelines. Indeed, there is almost a feeling that academic work is a lonely and individual pursuit (I am clearly referring here to the humanities and social sciences) which must have its personal hallmarks and somehow people working in groups are mistrusted - the tolerance limit tends to stop at two people working together. For example, a Ph.D. produced by more than one person would be considered almost a contradiction in terms. But again the social side of academic life, with common rooms and staff dining rooms for informal contacts, are probably more accentuated than in Dutch universities (although all such facilities were open to everyone at Essex - another innovation). Intellectually, however, a university lecturer was expected to stand on his own feet and, if he preferred instead to stand on someone else's shoulders, then it was anticipated that he would be discreet about it. To a certain extent I am giving an idealised picture which obscures the possibility of various styles but I believe the general theme to be accurate for Essex.

Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the autonomy of the British (and American) academic is the most striking difference with Dutch higher education. For instance, I found it almost unbelievable that I had a contract stipulating that I should work 41½ hours per week at the Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht, that I was supposed to ask for "buitengewoon verlof" if I wanted to spend one night away from the university at a conference, and that attempts were made to quantify time spent on preparing lectures, reading books, and perusing journals. Clearly such contractual obligations arise partly from the "civil service" control of universities in the Netherlands although some people may regard such regulations in a token light. An example of the assumption of independence came when I was appointed at Essex. I was told that I would be teaching five courses - Introductory Sociology, Methods, Educational Sociology (for undergraduates and also graduates) and Organizational Sociology. That was the end of the conversation. Teaching methods, recommended reading, and essay questions were not discussed and I was expected to sort it out for myself. In practice, there were informal talks with colleagues and existing course outlines to guide me but, for those courses for which I was solely responsible, I was entirely free to compile reading lists, decide on themes, and set work for students. Later I became interested in Alternative Societies and offered to put on a Third Year optional course. The Chairman of the department remarked that because of sabbaticals there was not a lot of choice for the students and agreed to the option. We never discussed its content in any detail and I simply drew up an exhaustive booklist and a rough course outline and got on with it.

Administration of the department

Such freedom was possible because bureaucratic interference with academic practice was kept to a minimum. There was a departmental meeting roughly about once a month although the feeling was that they should only be held when they were necessary. The whole administration of the department was informal and flexible. There were, of course, personal rivalries and antagonisms and occasional crises over the direction the department was taking but the bureaucratic consequences of "democratization" in a Dutch "vakgroep" would have been considered quite alien. One asked for money, for an assistant and were likely to get in on the rule of thumb that people who had not previously been granted an assistant were given priority. You were entitled to two conferences a year but if you were reading a paper or going abroad then the department would try to assist with the fares. Money was doled out on a fairly egalitarian basis until it simply ran out! The Chairman holding the purse strings was a senior academic (i.e. senior lecturer, reader or professor) who had been elected by the whole department and who assumed the chairmanship on top of his ordinary duties (he did have a slightly lighter teaching load and a small allowance for entertaining). His powers were completely undefined in theory but in practice he was forced by informal pressure to perform as a benevolent despot while the senior staff influenced important decisions (such as the recommending of tenure) and the whole department ratified general proposals. Norms surrounding admissible expenses for travel and for entertaining visiting speakers were vague and nearly always honoured by the department (except for the occasionally exorbitant blow-out). In short, the individual academic was given the maximum of freedom to define and carry out his work within a flexible and non-bureaucratic structure. I was not aware of many of these aspects until I came to Holland and witnessed the encapsulating bureaucracy, with its forms and minute regulations for allowances, which intrudes into academic life.

The anti-institutional neurosis

But having painted a rosey picture of contented academics reeling off an endless supply of publications in arcadian bliss, it is perhaps only fair to add that this had its consequences for student motivation. The ethos of the department could be described as "progressive" and some of its members gave voluble and active support to the various student protests. There was a move away from traditional, closed examinations to continuous assessment based on written work and hierarchy and authority were played down in favour of informal, face-to-face relationships. Most students used first names when addressing staff. Yet the cosy, liberal surface concealed a number of underlying ambivalances. Some students, for instance, were attracted by the novelty and radical reputation of Essex only to be disappointed by the reality. Their radical expectations came up against the department's demands for high academic standards,

the continual pressure to produce (between fifteen to twenty essays per year) and the obvious distaste of some staff for teaching. There was no group assessment so that students felt under scrutiny in that essays and exams persistently graded them into categories on the basis of the staff's preferences. British higher education is intensive and emphasises quality. But with the massive post-Robbins expansion of the sixties, many first generation students entered university with no fixed aim or prior socialization to academic values. At Essex there was a very definite reaction to academic pressure and to the sifting and grading function of education - which labels you first, second, or third class - and this took the form of low motivation, poor attendance, and alienation. Bright students could flourish but mediocre students could flounder. Classes were sometimes painfully disjointed as sullen students stared catatonically at the walls.

Satirically, I called this condition the "anti-institutional neurosis." Somehow the almost utopian vision of a new style community only bred insecurity and aggression. The isolation of the campus, the high-rise flats, the vacuous structure, the initial lack of facilities, etc., all conspired to throw the individual back on the student culture while the trendy academics negotiated lucrative contracts with publishers, disappeared to conferences in exotic places, appeared on television, swapped wives, and climbed the academic ladder. I described the symptoms of this neurosis as, "(...) listlessness, apathy, time disorientation, weakening perceptions of reality, loss of interest in personal appearance, acceptance of the anti-institution as the only reality, nail biting, nose-picking, staring into space, loss of will-power, inability to inarticulate, and the adoption of the institutional posture (a somewhat crumpled, dependent, child-like stance accompanied by a gentle rocking of the body and hair tugging)." I am convinced that the apathy was in part generated by the underlying contradiction between a progressive image and the hard reality of academic pressure, constant evaluation, the high expectations of academically oriented staff and the ultimate hurdle of exams.

I should add that, although Essex enjoyed a reputation for radicalism, the students had achieved only nominal power on a number of committees and had not penetrated to the pedagogic preserve of the departments which was considered sacrosanct. The book-lists in Sociology were often detailed and exhaustive and the students were expected to read a lot (in 1971/72 the library which contained over 200.000 volumes, recorded more than 100.000 borrowings for the first time) and to write a large amount. Not surprisingly there were persistent rumours of plagiarism. One lecturer began a course by recommending E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (in paperback about 900 pages) for the following week. One student remarked that this seemed a tall order in one week and was told roundly that if he thought that then perhaps he had chosen the wrong course! Even if that attitude was not typical I do

feel that it represents a certain attitude to work, motivation, and students which made high demands on students. Perhaps because of this some students were not happy at Essex and a sort of "new town blues" seemed pervasive. Yet 91% of all students completed their studies compared to a national average of 86%. This contrasts starkly with the drop-out rate in some Dutch universities - 9% of all students at Essex failed to complete their studies (the national average is 14%) compared to a 56% drop-out rate in Sociology at Utrecht.

Conclusion

In this sketch I have tried to give an impression of a Sociology Department in a stimulating but trouble-ridden "new" university. In particular, the emphasis has fallen on the pressure to produce, both for students and staff. Although this ethos can have its crude aspects, like American universities which are reputed to *weigh* applicants' publications, it led at Essex to a fertile sociological harvest. At the time I found this emphasis frustrating but, in retrospect, I now believe it to be essential to generating a creative climate. Initially, Essex tended to judge its performance by crude quantitative measures - such as numbers of postgraduate students and size of the staff - with the arch-rival L.S.E. as the yardstick. Increasingly, however, the emphasis fell on quality. Quality is an elusive concept but one guarantee of it is to accept the judgement of a critical and informed academic community. That means that a person's work is scrutinised and evaluated by experts in his field in the hope that they will be more objective than his immediate colleagues. As such, editorial boards, examiners for doctorates, readers for academic publishers, and organisers of conferences are considered to be the repositories of the discipline's master craftsmen who evaluate the work of aspiring apprentices. For example, when I was to be examined for my Ph.D. the department chose two of the foremost authorities in the field. I was not consulted about this, had never met them before, and saw them for the first time when I went to be examined. They made me go away and revise the thesis which delayed my doctorate for one year. I was the third member of staff at Essex to have to do this and all of us were victims of the same examiner who had a "tough" reputation. But this was considered to be a guarantee of the quality of an Essex Ph.D. Of course, all sorts of informal norms can regulate such academic discourse but the ground rules are, I believe, sound. This means that pressure and competition become an intrinsic part of academic life (90% of articles submitted to the *American Sociological Review* are rejected) and that critical evaluation by peers in a prestigious academic community becomes essential. Quality, then, becomes defined as that which the leading figures in the discipline consider to be worthwhile and publishable. The unpublished genius may well be a genius but under such a system he will have trouble making a career. He will find it difficult to argue for extra increments, to

expect promotion, and to demand tenure. So, he must produce original work in order to survive.

Finally, in essence the British university revolves around the concept of autonomous, critical intellectuals who are expected to make original contributions to academic knowledge. Heavy teaching loads, high staff-student ratios, and administrative burdens are seen as inimical to this effort and the structure is based on freeing academic staff for intellectual pursuits. Of course, there are all sorts of qualifications to this ideal and not every university is as research and publication conscious as Essex. But the Sociology Department at Essex, perhaps coincidentally, managed to achieve a high reputation in a short period of time by a combination of eclecticism, freedom, stimulation and pressure. This preoccupation with rank and status may seem strange to Dutch readers who work in a smaller, less stratified system. Anglo-American higher education, on the other hand, is indelibly status ridden and can be highly competitive and even harsh. My impression is that Dutch universities are less differentiated and less neurotic about productivity, while more time is spent on discussion, teaching duties and administration, but that, for a number of reasons, they are slowly adapting to the Anglo-American model of "publish or perish." Finally, I would like to think that this intellectual portrait of a Sociology Department sheds light on the functioning of academic life in Britain. While appreciating the drawbacks of this system, I am convinced that the essence of the university ideal lies in a judicious and fruitful balance between freedom and pressure in order to stimulate academic excellence.