

11. Back to Research Services Limited

MA: Yea, it was the end of the war, and I went back to Research Services, which was a subsidiary of the London Press Exchange ... and Research Services was formed after the war, as an independent company... well yes, “independent” in quotes. As a separate company, with me as the Managing Director. Which had another advantage from my point of view – it meant that one was not nearly so dependent on the clients of the LPE for research. During the war I had already done some, or directed some, research of this kind, outside. For example, throughout the war I directed the Ministry of Agriculture’s National Food Survey, which still goes on you know, almost exactly the same form as I worked out in 1938/39. The National Food Survey in 1982 has just appeared. It is interchangeable almost in appearance, and in method, with the very early one.

I managed to do several things during the war of that kind. I did a survey ... oh, this might interest you because it is a link. I was asked to do a study of the newspaper reading, in the third winter of the war, by the British soldier. What did he read in the way of newspapers? So, I did the usual thing ... drew a sample, drafted a questionnaire, briefed interviewers, sent them out. They interviewed soldiers and sent the result back. They were tabulated, and then it was given to Allen and Unwin to publish. But since I was technically a civil servant I couldn’t say that during my spare time I also did surveys for other people. So I had to invent a name. And it was published under the name of Philip Kimble¹. [laughs] It seemed to me a sensible, attractive solution to me. And erm, somewhere or another there must be a copy of it around.

DA: Fancy doing all that work and then having to publish under a pseudonym.

MA: Yeah, I know [laughs]

DA: You must have been a bit fed up about that?

MA: No, no, no.. no, it never worried me.

¹ Not yet located.

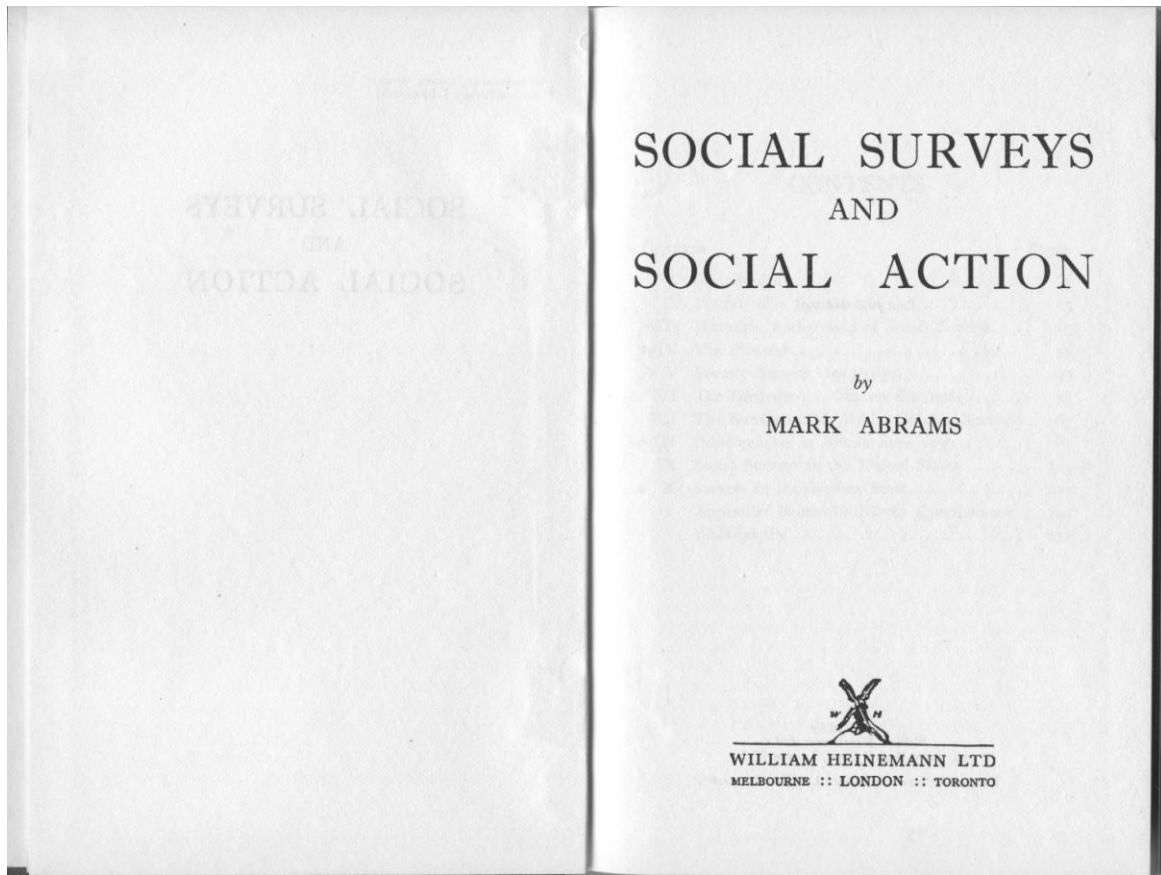


Mark Abrams, 1951

DA: You also ... was it in 1951 ... published a book on social surveys?

MA: Yea, *Social Surveys and Social Action*².

² Sonia Jackson observes, *Social Surveys and Social Action* was considered a classic text and had a whole course built around it at Barnett House – Social Work and Social Policy department at Oxford. In the mid 1950's.



Social Surveys and Social Action (1951)

DA: How did you find time to write it but also what made you want to write it?

MA: Well, I was asked to go to the University of Chicago as a visiting Professor of Social Research. I found that what this meant was taking a seminar, once a week, once a fortnight, and talking about how you do survey research work, what the difficulties are, other techniques of doing research, and so on. And when I first went there I said to the President of the College, "You know once a week, that's not much of a teaching load, is it?" And he said, "Oh, you don't know our students. It is a week's work to prepare a lecture that will satisfy them." He turned out to be right. I remember the first lecture that I gave was on research for the welfare state, and then I said "Well, any questions?" ... we were sitting at a very large table. And the sort of questions that they fired me was ... "Well, that was interesting, have you read so and so?" ... and I said, "No, no, I am sorry I haven't read it" ... and they said, "Oh" ... then the next question was, "Well, what about so and so. Have you read that?" ... my answer would again be, "No I haven't got around to that" They had read much more than I had! [laughs] When there were ever any absentees, the alibis given me, the explanation given to me always was, "He/she had to see his/her analyst this morning." [laughs] Oh they were real high flyers there.



Mark Abrams, Los Angeles, 1952

DA: They sound appalling!

MA: But anyway after a while I found I could cope, and needed something to do, so I wrote this book, *Social Surveys and Social Action*, and it was published here, and it was, in those days, a great success, I think. Heinemann sold 8,000 copies! Up to till I had not heard of any book of that kind being sold of 8,000 copies. And it was reviewed in America, I remember Morris Janowitz³ reviewing it and saying, “The flavour of Fabianism, unfortunately, is to be discovered through all this book [laughs]. It is all about policy making, the Welfare State”. You know that was published, and again they asked me a few years later to revise it ... bring it up to date and I said yes and at the end of the year they said, “Look Mark you still haven’t even sent us a synopsis.” And I said, “ Oh, maybe next week.” And they said, “Don’t be silly, you mean never.” And I said, “All right, never.”

DA: But it became a sort of handbook?

MA: Mmm. Yea, yea, very widely read. But I am saying that one of the advantages of having Research Services, after the war, as a separate company, was that one could undertake, not only work for government departments, some of which was extremely interesting, but one could even undertake work for competitors of the London Press

³ Sonia Jackson notes, Morris and Mark must have become close friends as it was Janowitz that acted as Philip’s sponsor when we went to America in 1966 and he and his wife Gayle were incredibly kind to us.

Exchange. They didn't mind in the least. I would undertake work for National Benzol, which was an LPE client, and simultaneously for Shell, because they didn't mind either. But some of those early post-war surveys were very interesting.

The one for example, on the productivity of British labour in the construction of Fawley Refinery. Where what happened is the Americans, ESSO, planned this refinery on the assumption that you would need a minimum of three British workers to do what two American workers would do. They had thought they were being optimistic about that. And then suddenly, they found the thing was going to be finished on time! Better than on time, if anything. So, would I do a survey to find out why these clowns were behaving in such an un-British way. And the answer was simple – the quality of management. That any British firm that they had gone to, the management was sitting in the Dorchester and they wouldn't go near the site at Fawley, whereas the Americans, they were on the site, they were there at 8 o'clock in the morning, their door was always open. If there was any difficult job, difficult in the sense of that it was technologically newish to the British workers, they would say "Fine, we understand why it is difficult, you were trained as welders, but welding for a refinery is different, we appreciate that ... in two weeks we can give you the necessary training" ... and they said "Two weeks? An apprenticeship in this country is five years", and Bob Cole, the American in charge, would say "Maybe it is five years, but you will be expert refinery welders in two weeks ..." and they were. Or they said they wanted tea in the afternoon [laughs] and, how could you get tea? There was no water supply laid on there in the marshes. And they said, "That's okay. Water will be laid on. There will be a tap. You will have to boil water, but there will be boiling water" ... and it was, within a week.

DA: Very efficient then?

MA: And he persuaded them. "Look I'll give you an extra (I don't know what it was) tuppence an hour if you will agree to interchangeability of jobs. If there is nothing for this crew to do, but there is a lot to be done there, then you all will get an extra tuppence an hour if you shift and do it, basically." And they said "Fine, okay." So it was the attitude of management.

And also if there was any dangerous work to do, one of the American managers would say, "Aah, aah, look we are going to put this on flare tonight. And when you put the rig on flare it can be dangerous. It usually isn't, but it can be. So, we will handle it". And, so you know, one explained, it was explained -- it is the question of competence, the attitude in relationship to British management. I remember one of the men, as I interviewed a lot of

themone of them saying to me, "You know, I tell you, you get your self-respect back when you work for someone you respect. And if you work for someone you don't respect, then you are ashamed of what you are doing". And that was it. That was the sort of job, you see, that came along.

DA: But at the time, that was presumably rather, not a popular message, to say things like, the management were incompetent.

MA: You bet it wasn't.

DA: Did you actually try to publicise that?

MA: It was published as a small book. It had a joint author, an American woman called Grey, who had worked with Merton in America ... passing through England she stopped and we worked together on this. It was published. And I got invitations from a few branches of the electricians union, because they had been closely involved in this, to go round and talk to some of their groups, which they organised to listen to them, and to talk to productivity teams, which the country at the time was bursting at the seams with people calling themselves productivity teams⁴. And all waiting for trips to America, to talk to them. And I did, I lectured to them.

.....So that was the sort of thing that happened. So when NEDDY⁵ was set up, they also wanted to know why on earth people went out shopping, and they were offered good, fine, solid English glassware, and they said no, they preferred ... have you got any Swedish? Haven't you got any Danish glassware? ... or they were offered British crockery and they said haven't you got any German crockery? Why was it, why did this happen?" And I said, "The easiest thing is to ask the retailers. They will know why they don't place their orders with you."

So we did about 13 different industries and I remember the one on cameras. It was at the end of the war and British manufacturers of cameras had a monopoly. There were no other cameras were available in this country. And then Japanese cameras began to come in. And I finished the report and I said, "Well look, what the buyers in the retail store say is that the Japanese camera is technically very much better, that it is much easier to handle, even for good technicians it is much easier to handle than the complex English one. And they get

⁴ Time and Motion.

⁵ National Economic Development Council

better deliveries, even, from Japan, than they get from British manufacturers.” And I had to give this presentation to the little NEDDY that was concerned with the camera industry. And the spokesman for the British camera manufacturers said, “I can tell you something ... first of all what these people are telling you is lies, and secondly, I can tell you this. The Japanese camera manufacturers will be bankrupt in three years time”.... They are not bankrupt yet! But the English manufacturers are!