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The Mass Observers: A History, 1937-1949

James Hinton

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Annebella Pollen, University of Brighton

As an organisation concerned with the large scale accumulation of data concerning everyday life in Britain, the vast quantities of material generated by the pioneering social research project Mass Observation have rightly been the central preoccupation of researchers. The broad range of material generated since 1937 – including first-hand accounts provided through diaries, observational writings, photographs, questionnaires and surveys - provides a unique opportunity to access mood and opinion of sections of the population previously overlooked and aspects of social life previously underexplored in the middle decades of the 20th century. The resulting archives have provided unparalleled resources for historians and have proved invaluable to the understanding of British social history. So extensive are its papers that many researchers to date have found sufficient information about MO and its distinctive research methods in the archive itself. A major history of the organisation has, until James Hinton's comprehensive account, remained curiously unwritten. This book, then, is not about MO's findings as much as it is about the history of MO and specifically, its members. The organisation lacked a formal constitutional set-up and generated few internal records. As its principal archival concern was with output, Hinton needed to trawl a much wider range of documentary material in order to fill important gaps in our understanding of MO's origins and workings.

Hinton explicitly lays out what distinguishes his history from current knowledge in his introduction. He refutes that MO was a Marxist and surrealist enterprise; he disputes the claim that it was formed of three originators (he suggests instead that the poet and later sociologist Charles Madge and the amateur ornithologist and anthropologist Tom Harrison were central, and that the participation of film-maker Humphrey Jennings was passing and minor). He also extinguishes – one hopes finally – assertions that MO was a 'quasi-colonial' enterprise by public schoolboys on safari among the working class of the north of England. Hinton argues, in particular, that the organisation's changes over time have been misunderstood. He counters, centrally, the common misconception that MO was most

interesting in its early years and that its wartime work somehow represented a dilution of aims, leading to its 'degeneration' into a 'mere' market research company. Hinton asserts that the war years were, in fact, MO's prime, where the organisation was at its most productive. He argues that MO was not a failed revolutionary endeavour, nor one terminated or otherwise compromised by its funded work for the Ministry of Information, nor one made redundant by the coming of a post-war Labour government. These are major claims. Each of the ideas the book overturns are deeply entrenched in the secondary literature, making this book essential for all current and future scholars of MO.

In reconstituting the missing history of MO, Hinton's account is comprehensive in its ambitions and its achievement. Through diligent empirical research – Hinton's footnotes regularly fill and sometimes exceed a quarter of each page – the book is dense with evidence, but he also writes sensually about the physical qualities of MO's enterprise. His summary of the Bolton headquarters is that they are 'overcrowded, under-financed, dirty and interesting' [122]; this is elaborated through accounts of the noise and squalor, of the insect powder that needed to be sprinkled on the soiled bedsheets, and of the stale sweat and halitosis of the observers who stayed there, who largely subsisted on diets of fish, chips, bread, jam and cigarettes. Hinton lingers over the personalities of the observers, evocatively describing their personal style and personal hygiene to draw pungent character portraits of those who shaped MO. The figure of Tom Harrison – for his prodigious energy was undoubtedly the central force in MO - is drawn with particular relish. Hinton repeatedly describes him as boastful, tactless, prone to exaggeration and even to near-megalomania; overall, his is an 'overwhelming presence'. Carving out an identity for himself as a kind of bohemian scientist, Hinton describes him as running MO as a 'charismatic autocracy', dedicated above all to the project of 'relentless empiricism'. As one of the observers noted, even records of the pattern of saliva around a spittoon could not be dismissed as irrelevant to his aims [30-31].

Importantly, Hinton also spends time uncovering and analysing the role played by lesser-known staff members. These figures matter: who is doing the observing shapes what is observed and Hinton is especially attentive to class and gender make-up in the organisation as well as to the variety of motivations (artistic, anthropological, political) that variously attracted personnel to the project. The tales of infighting and sexual relationships between MO personnel not only add colour to the narrative but also add nuance to the account of an organisation sometimes seen reductively as a homogeneous data-producing machine. MO's finances are also covered carefully by Hinton: what was commissioned, who covered costs and who received a salary; funding came sporadically (and usually inadequately) from a number of locations, including personal, political, scholarly and commercial sources. Hinton also illuminates the significant 'methodological and temperamental differences' [147] of Madge and Harrison, who kept separate territories within the organisation, took different approaches to their research and clashed over their overall vision for MO, not least the

Ministry of Information-funded work, which Madge ultimately described as ‘spying on their own side’ [161].

The eccentricity of Harrison’s leadership is finely observed, and these vignettes enhance the readability of this rigorous account of the mechanics of MO. Of particular interest are the organisation’s political interventions. In the 1937 municipal elections in Bolton, for example, Hinton explains that MO ‘shouted down the Tories with a super-powerful loudspeaker van broadcasting a mixture of George Formby, political insults, and Tom Harrison crooning “voodledoddledo and hatchacher noises”’ [46]. The research that justified such eccentric methods on this occasion was ostensibly the study of the effect of political canvassing on voting patterns, although it also served to deliberately skew results. In order to account for the results of their interventions, MO needed to have access to the resulting voting returns slips; Harrison later controversially arranged for the returns to be ‘borrowed’ overnight, and this information was subsequently sold on to political colleagues. A year later, in addition, when researching ‘the causes of non-voting’ in Fulham, London, MO actively promoted non-voting by circulating falsified Tory campaign leaflets so bewildering and contradictory in their content that they functioned to convince the recipient that abstention was a better solution than support for a muddled party. As Hinton notes, in both these cases, the claims made by MO that it was an independent organisation working in support of science and democracy were sometimes strikingly disingenuous. At war with the ‘bloody experts’, however, it was important for MO to take a different, personal approach to research. They believed, as Madge put it, that ‘working class people react strongly against any “official” enquiry’ [126]. Their approaches might have been unorthodox and are even described as ‘ill-disciplined’ by Hinton, but he convincingly defends them by the close of the book as ‘marvellously fruitful’ and sociologically imaginative [378].

A book that largely focuses on the working methods and internal dynamics of a social research organisation might not immediately appear to have much to offer the general reader, but MO, in its method, organisation and results, was never merely social research. While there is no doubt that the book will be principally of interest – indeed, it will be required reading – for academics who wish to understand and even to use MO materials, this is a book that also has a broader appeal. As a new cultural history of a uniquely important and pioneering project that aimed, as Hinton notes, ‘to go beyond conventional sources generated by the operations of power, and, in so doing, to deliver a democratic people’s history from below’, this book provides important missing information about the structures, personalities and means through which this ambition was achieved.

Dr Annabella Pollen is a former Mass Observer and was Research Fellow for the project Methodological Innovations: Using Mass Observation, 2009-10. She is currently Senior Lecturer, History of Art and Design, and Director of Historical and Critical Studies, University of Brighton.