**Special Section: Formations of Class and Gender, 25 (or so) years on**

Michaela Benson

**Abstract**

This article introduces the set of articles included in the Special Section *Revisiting Formations of Class and Gender*. It considers the legacy and continuing influence of Skeggs’ (1997) landmark work on scholarship around the world and across a wide range of disciplines. Further, it celebrates the work of someone who has been instrumental to making *The Sociological Review* what it is today—from the pathbreaking scholarship that appears on the pages of the journal, to our work to create spaces for a demonstrably alive sociology, demonstrating that Skeggs is one of those rare academics for whom the knowledge and understanding developed through her scholarship, translates into practice and action.

Our special sections are a new initiative that intend to reassess and critically engage with landmark works and their ongoing influence. It is fitting that *Formations of Class and Gender* (Skeggs 1997), which celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2022, should be the first of these, setting the tone for an initiative that we plan to become a staple of *The Sociological Review.*

In the years since it was published, this work by Bev Skeggs has become one of the most influential scholarly texts on questions of class and gender and their intersections. When it was published, the book broke new ground in recognising the role and significance of class to questions of gender and identity. Drawing on rich, longitudinal ethnographic research with white working-class women in the northeast of England, it developed an incisive theoretical framework that powerfully brought together feminist theory and Bourdieusian analysis. It was significant not least for the challenge it levelled at the social and cultural theory of its times.

Over 25 years on, its legacies are clear in the generations of scholars working on these topics and building on the theoretical agenda established in the book. That such scholars hail from a broad range of disciplines including sociology, media and cultural studies, human geography, and social anthropology, and from around the world, with the work translated into Korean, Swedish, French and Spanish (at the instigation of Argentinian scholars), demonstrates the significance and reach of the work and its theoretical provocations.

As I discuss in further detail below, the papers in the section each revisit this landmark study, offering important insights into its multiple legacies. They ask questions of the original work in ways that foreground current scholarly concerns and take account of today’s social, economic and political conditions.

**Bev Skeggs and *The Sociological Review***

Beyond its scholarly influence, it is further fitting that we launch the special sections initiative by celebrating this foundational work because of Bev’s longstanding and committed labour over the past decade to growing and developing *The Sociological Review*. This labour is not documented elsewhere—at least not in ways that fully do justice to what, by Bev’s own description, has been a labour of love (Skeggs 2024). This might seem a sidebar to the overall theme of this special section, but I state it here to make clear that Bev’s project has always been about more than her research. To my mind, she is one of those rare academics for whom the knowledge and understanding she has developed through her scholarship informs not only what she says but also translates into practice.

For many years, Bev was at the helm of *The Sociological Review*. In 2013, she founded our charity—*The Sociological Review Foundation*. She also led our editorial team for several years, before passing on the baton to me. She initiated our first manifesto, which made clear the value of the sociological imagination for making sense of the world around, more so in times of emergency and crisis. And she followed through, making sure that we used our charitable funds to make space and build capacity for the sociological imagination to flourish.

To my mind, it is clear that underpinning her action was an understanding of sociology that it decidedly undisciplined. Following Bev’s lead, we have built on our longstanding reputation of being the ‘quirky’ journal—so named, I believe, because our scholarly project and ambitions have always stretched beyond disciplinary boundaries—to build the infrastructures and communities of practice that are vital for sustaining the sociological imagination outside our institutions.

Over the years, Bev built the foundations for *The Sociological Review* to grow in new directions. While it may never have been explicit, the form that this has taken responds to Les Back and Nirmal Puwar’s call for *Live Methods* (2012). This shared project has now grown to variously offer a space to bring together ‘writers and researchers who all share a commitment to rethinking sociological craft and forms of representation’ (ibid 2012), of developing a ‘live sociology’ attuned to present-day social realities under conditions where the empirical forms of enquiry that had given sociology its edge had ceased to be its sole domain. This call was notable for highlighting the affordances and opportunities there were for reclaiming the distinctive value of the sociology, a contrast to the claimed empirical crisis (Burrows and Savage 2007) that might otherwise sound it’s the discipline’s death knoll.

While the journal remains at the centre of our activities, we now have a reputationfor offering far more to and for sociologically minded communities within and beyond the academy. I list here just some of our initiatives:

* Our publishing platform (<https://thesociologicalreview.org>) which hosts *The Sociological Review Magazine*, a publication that communicates sociological research and understandings to broader audiences;
* bespoke initiatives to support Early Career Researchers, including *Strictly Come Writing*, a fully funded writing retreat that is now in its tenth year;
* the annual seminar series, where we offer funding for colleagues in the UK and abroad to run their own seminar series;
* the *Uncommon Sense* podcast (<https://thesociologicalreview.org/podcasts/uncommon-sense/>) and collaborations with other podcasters and producers;
* the image-maker in residence programme;
* events and workshops including our *Undisciplining* conferences, annual and public lectures;
* projects that include the *Connected Sociologies Curriculum* and *Solidarity and Care*; and so much more.

It is Bev’s vision that got us here. Bringing on people who could help her to realise this vision, her early actions opened the space for building community beyond our immediate networks and to bring more people into the project.

Working alongside Bev at *The Sociological Review*, I have witnessed firsthand and been inspired by her commitment to the organisational and institutional labour required to keep the sociological imagination demonstrably alive, as laid out in the first iteration of our manifesto. Through this work, she has built the community and infrastructure to support and sustain this long term. Just as she identified the conjunctural moment within which her research for *Formations* was taking place, the labour at *The Sociological Review*, also responded to a particular conjuncture. It is no accident that this took place against the backdrop—in the UK at least—where the public value of social science research was being called into question by the Conservative administration, where the University sector was under increasing pressure due to changes in government funding for core teaching activities and the introduction of student fees, among other things. Building a space outside our usual institutional frameworks, providing support where this was otherwise lacking, was—and remains—crucial to keeping the sociological imagination alive, of demonstrating what sociology can be.

More than this, the shape that *The Sociological Review* has taken reflects Bev’s broader ethics and scholarly practice. The care that she demonstrated towards those taking part in the research for *Formations*—and indeed in her later work—is in full view in the work she has done for the sociological community. By her own admission, her approach to theory is eclectic (Lewis, Benson and Skeggs, this issue); her curiosity about putting theory to work, testing its limits and questioning what does and does not work to explain lived experience and social realities, drives both the richness of her scholarly writing and was sustained in the diversity of work published in the pages of the journal under her editorship. The community and solidarity that she was able to foster, build and sustain in the early days of her academic career and which is laid bare in the pages of *Formations* and her subsequent publications—drawing from across wide constituencies outside the academy—is also reflected in her ambitions and achievements for *TSR*. Her approach to leadership—the trust and support that she offers to others, her careful and gentle approach to offering guidance, while also being able to have difficult conversations when necessary—is one I aspire to in my own practice. The acuity that meant that she could identify the limits of social and cultural theory for understanding the lives of White working-class women, is also at play in the work she has done at *TSR* in developing meaningful and sustainable alternatives for how we do academic publishing, public sociology, and capacity building.

This is by no means an exhaustive list; there is much more that I could say about someone who has been a longstanding mentor, colleague and friend.

It is fitting then, that the contributions to this Special Section speak not only the achievements of Bev’s scholarly work. They also document the profound impact she has had on how we practice scholarship in these times of crisis and, in particular, the care that is so crucial in how we relate to those taking part in research and for sustaining and supporting those within our scholarly community.

**Revisiting Formations of Class and Gender**

When we put out the call for this special section in 2022, we encouraged contributions which would give some insights into the legacies of this work. The selected contributions each in their own way demonstrate the continuing influence of this work, across generations but also field sites. Each represents an intimate dialogue with Bev’s original work.

The first of these contributions is an interview that Chantelle Lewis and I conducted with Bev in Summer 2022 (Lewis, Benson and Skeggs, this issue). This was an emotional experience for all of us. It was the first time we had been together in person since the Covid-19 pandemic, and Bev was recovering from treatment for breast cancer. The resulting interview is one that makes audible the curiosity that characterises Bev’s work, her openness to changing her mind (and admitting where she didn’t quite get it right), her critically syncretic approach to working with theory, and her commitment to active listening. It also offers reflections on the decidedly undisciplined approach she has followed throughout her career.

The interview format was one that Chantelle and I thought was appropriate for this special section because it allows you to hear from Bev in her own words, and builds on our own longstanding commitments to dialogic knowledge production through podcasting (Lewis, Regis and Ofori-Addo 2021; Benson 2023). Such intimacy—albeit in written form—brings Bev’s intellectual project to life in ways that I think might otherwise be muted. We hear the back story to the work that went into *Formations*, her excitement and curiosity about social and cultural theory, and her questions about how to take this off the page, to ask questions, for example, about how ideology—at that time, under the Thatcher regime—was lived, experienced and resisted.

This is followed by Asiya Islam’s exploration of formations of gender, class and caste in urban India. Bringing *Formations* into dialogue with Global South feminist scholarship, this paper considers whether the entanglements of these formations resemble or diverge from those identified in Skeggs’ original work. Islam’s argument is particularly incisive in considering how the honour and prestige that characterise her field sites in India resemble or differ from the respectability analysed by Bev. What this paper shows is how the lessons, analysis and conceptual developments derived from one ethnographic setting might have resonance in a very different setting. Indeed, Islam’s intervention is one example of the wide-ranging geographical appeal of the work. It is also testament to *Formations* as a rich ethnography that is at once theoretically-informed and memorable for its attentiveness to the emergent and inductive development of theory and concepts.

Simone Varriale’s contribution focuses on the anti-essentialism at the heart of *Formations*. As the paper outlines, a key contribution of this earlier work is the careful line it treads in demonstrating that class positions, dispositions and practices are not fixed in their relationship to one another. Yet, the development of what has been understood recently in the scholarship as cultural class analysis has all too often overlooked this theoretical contribution, and the warning offered in *Formations* about the representational limits of this work have been unheeded. The result: fixed understandings of class and culture.

Centring this anti-essentialism, Varriale considers how Skeggs’ contribution might respond to the current conjuncture in the UK arguing for the need to consider a working class, one characterised by those occupying a range of legal statuses in the context of the UK’s current migration regime—one that has long been characterised as increasing hostile—in this way considering how processes of racialisation and migratisation are entangled with class formations. As the paper emphasises, this is an important corrective to the methodological nationalism that otherwise characterises research on class.

Juliet Watson, Freda Haylett, Jacqui Theobald and Suellen Murray take *Formations* to Australia in their consideration of how homeless mothers navigate the barriers to being ‘good mothers’ in the context where they lack access to resources and support structures. Working with respectability as a concept they show how these women reassert their moral standing through various forms of invisible labour. As the authors stress, what this makes visible are the alternative subjectivities that challenge homelessness as the first and foremost social position occupied by these women. In this way, they reveal both the punitive consequences and transformative potential of becoming a mother while homeless. The paper spotlights how Skeggs’ formative framework for understanding gendered and classed subjectivities can be put to work in other settings.

Helen Wood and Jo Littler’s contribution closes the section. They offer their insights into *Formations* as formative, a touchstone for work exploring the dynamics of class and gender, but also for centring both understandings how inequalities are produced—and, notably, the role of ideology within this—and the lived experiences that precede from these. They trace its influence on several disciplinary subfields in sociology, media and cultural students among others. As they highlight, this work emerged in response to a particular scholarly environment and offered what we might claim as a conjunctural analysis of class and gender. Indeed, the richness of the text and depth of the analysis is made possible precisely by the bringing together of different ways of understanding the social world. But more than this, it emphasises how this might offer a road map for thinking about the current conjuncture, a time of widening inequality, new formations of class, gender and sexuality, and a crisis of care.

What is clear to me in editing this special section, is that this is book remains good to think with. The contributions show how on re-reading 25 years plus on, it continues to offer inspiration, speaking across time to spark new ways of thinking about the current moment. Undoubtedly, the selection of papers offers just a small flavour of the continuing influence of *Formations* across a range of disciplines and subfields. Yet, to my mind, they are a rich resource through which to think with Skeggs’ early work. And I have no doubt that in the time since we launched our call for papers in 2022, the work has travelled to an even wider geography and into an increasing number of subfields.

Finally, in closing, I want to thank Xiaodong Lin and Eeva Sointu for their work selecting, peer reviewing and editing the papers included in the section. And to the all the authors for bearing with us as we took our time with preparing this, our first special section.

**List of References**

Back, L. and Puwar, N., 2012. A manifesto for live methods: provocations and capacities. *The Sociological Review*, *60*(1\_suppl), pp.6-17.

Benson, M., 2023 ‘How to do sociology with … podcasts’, in Coleman, R., Jungnickel, K. and Puwar, N. (eds) *How to do sociology with …* London: Goldsmiths Press. pp 223-231.

Lewis, C., Regis, T. and Ofori-Addo, G., 2021. Sociological podcasting: Radical hope, care and solidarity in a time of crisis. *Soundings*, *79*(79), pp.94-109.

Skeggs, B. 1997 *Formations of Class and Gender*. London: SAGE.

Skeggs, B. 2024. Institutional Labour. *Bev Skeggs’ Archive.* Available online at: <https://bevskeggs.com/bevs-labour/>