

Obituary – John Stuart Western AM, 16 March, 1931 – 6 January, 2011.



John Western was born in Adelaide in 1931, grew up in Melbourne and attended Trinity Grammar and Melbourne University where he undertook undergraduate and Masters degrees in Social Studies, Psychology and Social Psychology. His Masters degree in Social Psychology exposed him to the emerging discipline of sociology, and on completing the degree he wrote to a small number of international scholars enquiring about opportunities for postgraduate study. He heard nothing for several months until one day a letter arrived from Columbia University in New York City. Robert Merton apologised for not replying earlier but explained that it had taken some time to sort out Fellowship funding. Western began his PhD in Sociology at Columbia in 1959, graduating in 1962. He worked more closely with the methodologist Paul Lazarfeld than with Merton, and returned to Australia to the Department of Psychology in ANU in the same year. In 1965 he moved to a Senior Lectureship in Government at the University of Queensland, intending to stay there for a few years. In 1970 he was appointed the first Professor of Sociology at UQ in the then Department of Anthropology and Sociology. He remained at UQ until his retirement in 1996, serving as Head of Department for thirteen of those years. He also served as a Commissioner for the Queensland Criminal Justice Commission for four years and established and directed UQ's Social and Economic Research Centre. He continued to hold a part-time appointment at UQ, while working effectively full-time in research, postgraduate supervision, and service contributions to the School and University until his death in January 2011. He was an elected Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia and the Swiss Academy of Development, and in 2009 was made a Member of the Order of Australia for contributions to education and to sociology.

Western made prolific contributions to basic and applied research, publishing over 50 books, monographs and commissioned reports, 70 book chapters and 120 journal articles. Among other areas, his research covered social stratification and inequality, political sociology, urban sociology, the sociology of crime and deviance, the sociology of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and social planning. He dealt with social structures of class, gender, race, ethnicity and social status, and with institutions of family and household, education, the mass media, the state, the professions and work. He secured millions of dollars in research grants and contracts and built one of the largest and most

successful sociology departments in the country. He pioneered and led large-scale quantitative team-based research projects, including longitudinal and sibling studies, which were vehicles not just for research, but for the training and professional development of postgraduate students and junior colleagues.

He was a prolific contributor to the discipline. He first became President of the Sociological Association of Australia and New Zealand (SAANZ) in 1975 and when New Zealand Sociology split from the combined association, Western was prevailed upon to take up the inaugural TASA Presidency, serving from 1989 to 1991. He was joint editor of the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology (the precursor to JOS) from 1982 to 1985 and again in 1989, and he was a member of the organising committees for every SAANZ and TASA conference involving the University of Queensland. He was also a member of the Local Organising Committee for the 2002 World Congress of Sociology, held in Brisbane.

Apart from his own research, Western was an institution builder and pioneer of Australian social science. He supervised approximately 75 PhD students, many of whom have gone on to senior positions in academia, government and industry in Australia and overseas. His supervision was built on experiential learning tied to joint research and publication, involvement in team-based projects, careful mentoring, and professional training in the theories and methods of sociology, and in the practicalities of publishing, raising external funding, and working with others, including non-sociologists and non-academics.

He promoted interdisciplinary and applied work long before they were fashionable. Western's collaborators included political scientists, geographers, planners, statisticians, anthropologists, epidemiologists, criminologists, engineers, environmental scientists, medical practitioners, and lawyers as well as sociologists. His early applied research examined economic behaviour for the Henderson Poverty Inquiry and the impact of the 1974 Brisbane Flood and Cyclone Tracy in Darwin. For the next thirty years he worked extensively with Queensland and Australian Governments in a range of areas relating to social policy, social and environmental impact and social measurement. In 1988 he co-organised the inaugural Social Research Conference in Brisbane, which led, a short time later, to the formation of the Australian Association for Social Research.

Finally, Western engaged extensively with Southeast Asia and the region. He conducted social impact and planning studies for the governments of Singapore, Indonesia, the Phillipines, and Sri Lanka. He established the Master of Community Nutrition and the Master of Social Planning and Development at UQ, targeted to international students, who were largely funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Australian Development Assistance Bureau. To promote academic exchange and interaction, he formed, with international colleagues, the Asia Pacific Sociological Association and served as its Foundation President from 1996-1999.

He is survived by his wife Tasnee, his brother Timothy and family, his sons Mark and Bruce, their wives Janeen and Jo, and his five grand-daughters, Jessica, Kate, Lucy, Miriam and Grace. For all his achievements as a sociologist, they will remember him as a loving husband, brother, father, father-in-law and grandfather.

Mark Western, The University of Queensland

Bruce Western, Harvard University