

Craig Calhoun, ed.

Sociology in America: A History.

University of Chicago Press, 2006, 880 pp.

\$US 30.00 paper (978-0-226-09095-5), \$US 85.00 hardcover (978-0-226-09094-8)

In its leading and closing chapters (by Craig Calhoun and Alan Sica respectively), *Sociology in America* looks at the foundation of sociology in the U.S. by Ward, Small, Giddings and Sumner. Most chapters follow this lead, making repeated reference to these men and showing how scholarship developed from the tradition they instituted in continuity and rupture from Spencer and Comte. This history can be considered in three parts: first, the founders of the discipline; second the strengthening of its theoretical foundations; and third, specific themes that have run throughout its history.

The first part is concerned with the establishment and the foundation of sociology in opposition to social work and social reform. As the first sociologists competed with the latter for funding, they strove to create associations and departments that would reflect their view of the nature and tasks of a sociology that was, for the most part, yet to come. Spencer's heirs were the great losers in this battle within the American sociological field, after having previously benefited from his renown. The following generation, in reaction to the philosophy of history and to the almost exclusively theoretical focus on global processes of social evolution, often studied in Germany, far from the influence of Comte's positivism. While this generation put forward a less global approach to society, it also maintained a rigorous line between theory and practice, isolating itself from social work. Gender and the dominant understanding of academic work also divided sociologists in the male-dominated University from social or charity workers, even though the writings of the latter resemble today's sociology as much as do those of the former.

The case of Charles Elwood, whose efforts are shown by Stephen Turner to be emblematic of the men of his generation, serves to steer the focus away from ideas. Instead, dominance in sociology departments came from the impact of personal and professional relations, and of religion, following American sociology's origins in Christian charities. However, as Neil Gross argues, the influence of ideas and philosophy on sociology's development remained important, insofar as both pragmatism and phenomenology originated in philosophy and still nourish current social theory.

The social, political and historical context of the practice of sociology, from funding possibilities to the opening of sensibilities to certain ideas, has been determining for its evolution. Charles Camic examines how the Depression's effect on foundation funding, on available positions, and on the American Sociological Association contributed to decentralize the discipline both thematically and geographically, while the New Deal brought government funding and with it the possibility for large scale data collection. It thus marked an empirical turn in the discipline, although economists, political scientists and lawyers were favoured over sociologists on the public stage. In turn, as seen in the chapter by Andrew Abbott & James T. Sparrow, the Second World War led to the rise of the "individual-collectivity" model, institutionalizing the dominance of Parsons against the Chicago school, as well as to a socially detached, if not outright conservative sociological attitude. Both tendencies drove sociology away from conflict in favour of the study of mobility and bureaucracies.

Sociology thus evolved into a hegemonic field, dominated by what George Steinmetz calls methodological positivism, which he defines in its epistemology as a search for laws, in its ontology as empiricist and in its methodology as scientism or naturalism. The overview he offers of the sociological field before and after the war allows us to grasp the importance of the epistemic shift

within the discipline. In the following chapter, Craig Calhoun & Jonathan VanAntwerpen reconstruct the constitution of this “mainstream” sociology and confront it with a study of the diverse tendencies within the elite of the few decades following the war. They make a strong case for a reconsideration of conventional opinion about the hegemony of Parsons, Merton and Lazarsfeld and the conservative nature of their work. The historical shift toward a field without a mainstream is recorded in Doug McAdam’s chapter about the impact of the sixties on sociology and the move toward a public sociology that is less applied and more left-oriented, and in Immanuel Wallerstein’s examination of the worldwide revolution of 1968.

The twofold approach of *Sociology in America* covers both “mainstream” and “radical” sociology while highlighting the differences in position within these categories. Its chapters taken as a whole thus blur the common lines of opposition in order to present a balanced account of the development of sociology and of its main subfields, much of which occurred through radical criticism, itself borrowing much from what it attacked as mainstream.

The current debate on the place and nature of qualitative research in sociology finds its echo in Marjorie L. DeVault’s chapter examining its roots and its developments through an increasingly self-interrogating practice of empirical research. This history of qualitative research also bridges the gap between social work and sociology by illustrating its double origin in the two tendencies in Chicago, inside and outside of the University. It presents qualitative research at once as emerging from social and activist concerns and as leading to further activity.

The sociologies of gender and of ethnicity are discussed in such a manner as to highlight the profound changes in the discipline which occurred in the 1980s and 1990s following the achievements of the social movements for equality. The shift from the idea of sex roles to that of gender is shown as a step away from the old ideology and its dualistic conceptions, and toward an approach that could itself be at once scientific and political – away from justification and closer to explanation. “Closer” here is the key term: as Myra Marx Ferree, Shamus Rahman Khan and Shauna A. Morimoto suggest, the discipline has yet to integrate this change toward a sociology of gender in the way it functions as a whole and in the way it understands the role of gender, with feminist theory and scholarship still being in great part excluded from the main journals. How specifically these changes have occurred is explored by Barbara Laslett through the personal and academic life stories of Elsie Clew Parsons, Jessie Bernard and other women who helped develop the concept of gender relations and contributed to the collective autobiographies of *Feminist Sociology*.

Similar problems and approaches arise in the sociology of race: after a hundred years, sociology is only beginning to incorporate the insights developed by W.E.B. DuBois about the interconnectedness of structures and systems of inequality, argues Aldon Morris, who also looks at the sociological factors that surrounded DuBois’s life and hampered the influence of his work. The sociology of race followed Chicago sociology and its own biases, instead of building on his view of racism as an effect of inequalities, opposed to the idea of race as its supposed (legitimate) cause. Those hundred years are also approached genealogically by Howard Winant, who studies them through the four great paradigms in the sociology of race: biology, pragmatism, structural functionalism and civil rights, and the opposition of social movements to neoconservatism which has left us today without a clear paradigm. The result is a quick look back at the history of sociology as defined in earlier chapters, highlighting the study of race relations along the lines of the opposition between integrationist and conflict based sociological views.

A criticism of the combined approach of “race, gender and class” is offered by Patricia Hill Collins in the most interesting and challenging chapter of the book: while the boundaries of such a field are

difficult to draw, we must question whether the possibilities opened by the attempt to go beyond the sole study of race, or gender, or class are *in fact* being developed within sociology. The author thus looks at the history of both sociology and American society as being segregated, giving people and topics their sole social and scholarly locations and working along naturalist and essentialist lines. Indeed, social desegregation – and that of academic departments – went hand in hand with the study of race, gender and class. Such studies then moved toward transdisciplinarity to include nonacademic elements, the study of multiple social groups, as well as the intersection of race, gender and class.

Other areas are also represented, if briefly and summarily: the interaction of sociology and criminology is approached by Short and Hughes through the history of criminology's growing independence from its sociological origins, toward interdisciplinarity – although Sutherland and Merton still loom large. Similarly, the sociology of education is shown as a field that quickly became separated from sociology through privileging discussion with educators. It then moved back toward the centre of sociology in the late 1950s, together with a then new interest in inequality in schooling. The two orientations, of sociology of education and of educational sociology, have however never fully merged, leaving the field somewhat divided, Pamela Barnhouse Walters argues.

Despite its accomplishments, the book does not succeed in all of its aims. For instance, the desire to steer the history of early American sociology away from its usual focus on the Chicago school and on Parsons leads to an absence of a systematic approach, and their recurrent yet insufficient treatment. The topic of class and stratification is also underrepresented, mentioned in many chapters but never developed on its own.

Furthermore, the very subject matter seems to be overly limited. While we do have a comprehensive history of sociology in America, the influence of European sociology is all but absent (not to mention work from outside Europe), leaving the impression of a largely self-contained and self-sufficient field. The presence of émigrés is also an underdeveloped aspect of this history of American sociology, with Sorokin and theorists from the *Institut for Sozialforschung* receiving little more than a few mentions in passing. This being said, a chapter on internationalism does confront the question. While recognizing the American-centrism of the discipline, with the U.S. acting as the empirical and theoretical centre and norm, Michael D. Kennedy and Miguel A. Centeno highlight the international directions in sociology, particularly over the last thirty years. This adds a critical element to the American content of the enterprise, but it does not provide us with a comprehensive view on what research *is* being done on international topics.

These few criticisms aside, the great merit of Craig Calhoun's work is that it succeeds in giving a sociological history of sociology – that is, it understands sociologists as agents acting within a specific field and responding to pressures from the fields of charity and of academia. In fact, it breaks so well with the tradition of writing histories of sociology as histories of thought that this success is also its main flaw. However, we can hardly hold it against Calhoun and his collaborators, given the need for such a history in the first place and the abundance of theoretical histories to which we can still refer.

Calhoun thus presents a history of the discipline and of what Camic (p. 228) calls “the changing professional situation of sociologists”, and not one of specific men and women or schools of thought. Indeed, through the contribution of some of the leading American sociologists in each field, every chapter opens new perspectives for the study of the history of sociology and for its renewal.

Jérôme Melançon

Université Paris 7 Denis-Diderot
jmelancon@gmail.com

Jérôme Melançon is a PhD student in political and legal sciences at Université Paris 7 Denis-Diderot, working on a dissertation on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's social and political philosophy. He has published on Pierre Bourdieu, Marcel Gauchet, Claude Lefort and Walter Benjamin. He is currently a sessional lecturer in sociology for the University of Regina.

<http://www.cjsonline.ca/reviews/amsoc.html>

December 2007

© Canadian Journal of Sociology Online