

CJS Online

Sociologists for a New Millennium

Canadian Journal of Sociology Online July - August 2002

Bridges and Doors: Framing Interdisciplinary Dialogues

Daniel Béland

University of Calgary
dbeland@ucalgary.ca

Now a political sociologist working on social policy from a comparative and historical perspective, I have loved social theory since the first year of my undergraduate studies. And I must recognize that reading Bakhtin at an early stage of my academic development incited me to think of my own intellectual journey in dialogical terms. This may sound pretentious, but the phenomenon is as simple as it is universal: academics tend to frame their ideas as a reaction *against* ideas framed by other academics. Indeed, young scholars often imagine a dialogue between themselves and established authors who occupy a preeminent position in their field.

Considering this, it seems appropriate to mention authors that inspired me while stimulating my critical thinking, forcing me to move forward. In fact, the most interesting authors are perhaps those who formulate provocative ideas that you feel you must criticize because they appear as both fascinating and inherently problematic. But in order to criticize a theory, to frame an alternative model, one generally draws on empirical findings and on alternative theories found in the literature. The dialogue then becomes subtler: a rich polyphony gradually replaces the original dialogue. This is especially true when the author is drawing on different intellectual traditions to formulate a new approach or, perhaps more modestly, an “original synthesis.”

As a French-speaking *Québécois* who completed his doctoral studies in France and the United States before obtaining a tenure-track position in Western Canada, I tend to perceive myself as a potential intermediary between French and Anglo-Saxon intellectual traditions. I became aware of the gap between these traditions at the beginning of the 1990s, when I was an undergraduate student at the *Université du Québec à Montréal*. Many of my sociology professors had been trained in France, and the publications of French authors such as Boudon, Bourdieu, Crozier, and Touraine were constantly discussed in class. Simultaneously, it was impossible to escape this simple reality: I was a North American, living in a slightly different world than the one analyzed by these European authors. I fully realized this when I moved to Paris in November 1995, a few days after the referendum. As a new PhD student, I discovered how the French academic culture was different from the North American ones, and how issues were framed and addressed differently on the other side of the Atlantic. Apart from my supervisor’s course, one of the most interesting intellectual experiences of my Parisian stay was actually the seminar of a political scientist from Yale, Stephen Skowronek, who introduced me to “historical new institutionalism.” I found this theoretical model more interesting than the approaches then popular in French political sociology, and I decided to draw on the scholarship of authors such as Theda Skocpol (1979, 1992) when preparing my dissertation on the politics of pension reform. [1] But thinking that policy ideas were not taken seriously enough within this theoretical approach, I started to criticize these authors while referring to the work of the French sociologist François-Xavier Merrien. During my year at George Washington University as a Fulbright

scholar, I had several fascinating conversations with some American scholars who helped me to better organize my ideas and move forward at the theoretical level. Sometimes, a brief but lively conversation has more impact on one's ideas than hours of solitary reading. *Dialogisme quand tu nous tiens...*

Currently Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Calgary, I find myself writing articles about social policy drawing on a theoretical model outlined in a book derived from my dissertation (Béland, 2001). Strangely enough, one of my most recent papers represents an attempt to frame a dialogue between two theoretical traditions that are rarely linked in current debates in political sociology: "historical new institutionalism" and Bourdieu's field theory. While preserving the basic assumptions of "historical new institutionalism," I extend the idea of structuration beyond formal political institutions and policy feedback, arguing that policy ideas and economic interests appear as key structural factors within the political field. Inspired by the work of the French political economist Bruno Théret, I try to demonstrate that Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus can prove useful in the theoretical articulation of ideas, interests, and institutions within the context of "historical new institutionalism."

In conclusion, it seems essential to formulate the following creed: I think of myself as a social scientist teaching in a sociology department; that is, someone passionate about interdisciplinary work. My supervisor Pierre Rosanvallon, whose research transcends limitative academic boundaries, probably pushed me in that direction. And Canadian scholars such as John Myles inspired me in my quest for international and interdisciplinary dialogues. During the decades ahead, I wish that Canadian sociology would become even more interdisciplinary than it is today. [1] And I also hope that my modest attempt to draw on different intellectual traditions in an interdisciplinary manner will contribute to this challenging task.

Notes

1 Since the 1970s, "new Canadian political economy" has contributed to the interdisciplinary turn in Canadian sociology (Clement, 2001).

References

- Béland, Daniel. 2001. *Une sécurité libérale? La politique des retraites aux États-Unis*. Paris: L.G.D.J.
- Clement, Wallace. "Canadian Political Economy's Legacy for Sociology," *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 26: 405-420.
- Skocpol, Theda. 1979. *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
- Skocpol, Theda. 1992. *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*. Cambridge (Mass.): Belknap Press,.

<http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/cjscopy/newmill/Béland.html>

July 2002

© CJS Online