

# **CJS Online**

## **Sociologists for a New Millennium**

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### **‘Canadian’ ‘Sociology’?**

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When an email arrived asking me to contribute to a forum on ‘new generation’ Canadian Sociologists I was surprised.

First, I am a New Zealander. My first two degrees were completed in that country, then I took up a Canadian Commonwealth Scholarship at Carleton University at the beginning of 1991. I opted for Canada, rather than the United States or Britain, in large part because of my intellectual agenda. At this time academics and the broader left in New Zealand were struggling to come understand the implications of the so-called ‘New Zealand Experiment’. The story is now well known; a nominally social democratic government enacted an unprecedented policy programme based on deregulation, privatisation and marketisation during the 1980s. I was searching for conceptual tools with which to understand and analyse this experience, particularly the consequences for women, and Canadian political economy appeared to offer these tools. In addition, there were important similarities and difference between Canada and New Zealand (amongst others, indigenous peoples struggles, colonisation, resource based economies, migration, multiculturalism and economic restructuring) that offered opportunities for comparative understandings.

Second, I am a disciplinary hybrid. While I currently work in a Sociology Department, I have an undergraduate degree in Human Geography and Political Science, and a Master’s degree in Human Geography. It was only when I began my doctoral research that I formally studied Sociology, and even then I continued to be inter-disciplinary in my approach. All three members of my advisory committee (Wallace Clement, Rianne Mahon and Janet Siltanen) were active participants in the Institute for Political Economy, which brings together academics from across the social sciences. During my time as a Sociology doctoral student I also taught in the Geography Department and had close connections with Political Science colleagues. My external examiners, Jane Jenson (Political Science) and Simon Dalby (Geography), underlined these inter-disciplinary intellectual engagements. Today I continue to work with colleagues from both Geography and Political Science (see, for examples, Larner and Le Heron 2002, Larner and Walters 2002), and I am just as likely to attend seminars and conferences in other disciplines as my own.

On reflection, however, this status as insider and outsider – in both disciplinary and national terms – leaves me in an interesting position to comment on Canadian sociology. Most immediately, my time in Canada has left a profound intellectual legacy and I welcome the opportunity to formally reflect on that. Further, although I came back to New Zealand to take up an academic position at the University of Auckland when I finished my doctorate, I have regularly returned to Canada and continue to work with Canadian colleagues. Finally, my insider/outsider experience is likely to be much more common amongst the new generation of ‘Canadian’ ‘Sociologists’. Amongst other things,

the internationalisation of academic labour markets, the removal of the 'Canadians first' hiring policy, and the effects of the long anticipated staffing crisis in Canadian universities are likely to significantly change both the demographic composition and the intellectual orientation of sociology.

For me, it was Canadian political economy that proved to be the 'glue of interdisciplinarity' (Clement 2002) and allowed me to think comparatively and conceptually about the 'New Zealand Experiment'. I was already familiar with socialist-feminist scholarship in this area. Indeed, I had chosen to come to Carleton because of the important contributions the late Suzanne Mackenzie made to both human geography and feminist political economy. After arriving in Canada, I was exposed to broader political economy and sociological traditions. Significantly, these included not only the neo-Gramscian scholarship well represented in the pages of *Studies in Political Economy*, but also the governmentality literature, first introduced to me by Lorna Weir and which subsequently re-framed my doctoral research in quite unanticipated ways (see, amongst others, Larner 1997, 1998). I was also struck by the connections between academic work and political struggle in Canada. Almost immediately I was exposed to the links between Canadian political economy and the broader Canadian left and then, particularly as I became more familiar with the writings of Toronto-based academics, began to consider the more specific relationships between sociological scholarship and feminist and anti-racist politics. I also learned a great deal from my Quebecois colleagues who, like me, were insiders and outsiders in Anglo-Canada.

More generally, Canadian political economy and Canadian sociology provided a rigorous theoretical and methodological grounding that continues to influence, shape and strengthen my research interests in globalisation, governance and gender to this day. The fostering of interdisciplinary approaches, the emphasis on substantive topics, and the understanding that context and contingency matter are themes I now explore with my own graduate students. These also proved valuable lessons as my colleagues and I began to design larger research projects that aspired to be both theoretically and substantively challenging (see, for example, Larner et al. 2001-4, Larner and Molloy 2002-4). In New Zealand, where sociology has often been shaped by interconnections with public policy debates, it has proved important to stress that the research questions are not pre-given, and the answers not necessarily known (Thorns 2002). In this regard, Carleton's Centre for Labour and Community Research, which brought together faculty and students from politics, sociology, geography, communications, public administration and law, has been a valuable model to emulate. The challenge for us all is to create new spaces for learning and debate that escape traditional disciplinary divisions and hierarchies.

At the same time, I would offer two challenges to Canadian sociology. If there is a generational difference in approaches to Canadian sociology, one of the points of difference may be the debate between those advocating materialist and post-structuralist approaches. During the time I was at Carleton these theoretical approaches tended to be mapped onto substantive areas; materialist approaches were the domain of political economy whereas post-structuralism was most often used to examine cultural phenomenon. Even though this analytical distinction was often hard to maintain, the interconnections and interrelationships between the economic and the cultural were sometimes not well understood, nor often explored. For graduate students and junior faculty who transgressed these demarcations - and there are increasing numbers of us - questions of committee composition, examiners and publication venues are often vexed. It is, of course, quite natural that a new generation

of scholars will define itself through and against the scholarship of its predecessors. I am reminded of an exchange witnessed in the late 1990s, where a pre-eminent Marxist accused his younger post-structuralist colleague of 'rejecting his father' when he repudiated a more orthodox materialist approach. My point is that while we may appear ungrateful, much of the innovative scholarship of the 'new generation' will emerge out of such engagements.

My other observation is that too often Canadian political economy and Canadian sociology assumes the nation-state holds as THE unit of analysis. Even in an era of globalisation, the task is understood to involve identifying the issues of local/national significance, those that give Canada its unique character (Hiller 2002:258). In this context, I wonder about the intellectual spaces that will foster studies of the following: trans-national networks of indigenous peoples; new forms of imperialism; genetic modification; global subjectivities; reterritorialisations? These issues, all of which are profoundly sociological, require theoretical orientations and methodologies that move scholarly work beyond nation-state centred conceptions of sociology and the social. In the new millennium the intellectual formation known as Canadian Sociology may well diverge from other forms of sociology done in Canada by a new generation of academics.

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