

BOOK REVIEW

Normal Science?

Andreas Hess

a.hess@ucd.ie

Christian Day  and Stephan Moebius (Eds). 2015. *Soziologiegeschichte. Wege und Ziele* (History of Sociology: Ways and Aims). Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag.

575 pp.

ISBN 978-3-518-29744-5

Price:   22,70

Soziologiegeschichte picks up on some of the themes that were first explored in Wolf Lepenies's magisterial four-volume edition *Geschichte der Soziologie* (1981). Since the latter appeared more than a third of a century ago a state-of-the-art critical companion that deals with the history of sociology has long been overdue. *Soziologiegeschichte* discusses an array of methods, different historiographic approaches, and the purpose and meaning(s) of the history of sociology. However, while this companion is a worthwhile attempt to spell out what the state of the art is, it falls somewhat short at being comprehensive, not least because it fails to look beyond the one discipline that is its main subject.

In Part I Christian Fleck sets the agenda with a list of 'dos' and 'don'ts'. He zeroes in on actors and performers, ideas, instruments, concepts and methods and, finally, institutions and environments, including some of the more problematic aspects of the history of the discipline. In relation to actors and performers Fleck makes a case for employing more social science methods when writing sociological history, for example by shifting our attention from individual contributions, charismatic figures and great names to cohorts and/or entire communities of social scientists. He also rejects Whig-like history writing; for too long sociologists have regarded earlier attempts just as predecessors, prototypes or as somehow incomplete or immature attempts, always surpassed by the latest attempt.

Despite his leanings towards a strong sociological program, when writing the history of sociology Fleck remains open to other suggestions, especially when discussing instruments, concepts and methods. More specifically and in relation to institutions he stresses the importance of institutional change, the range of conducive or not-so conducive environments and the challenging conditions that often give the sub-discipline a critical political edge (regime change, oppression, exile, etc.).

Some of the questions and problems that Fleck identifies are picked up and deepened in the second part of the book. Thus Jennifer Platt discusses the role of biography and, just like

Fleck, makes the case for focussing not just on the grand names and charismatic figures but also widening the horizon to include a broader, more inclusive spectrum of practitioners and giving more attention to those who, for whatever reason, did not achieve fame.

In what seems to be an immediate rejoinder to Platt, Dirk Kaesler points to the role and function that the classics have played and continue to play in the history and likely future development of the discipline. In Kaesler's view the classics serve as important reference points and disciplinary markers; they provide theoretical and conceptual devices that prevent sociologists from having to start anew every time or to shop around without any guidance and orientation, a point that is also reiterated by Donald Levine's contribution, just with the difference that Levine's focuses more on paradigms than personae.

To the reviewer Randall Collins', Andrew Abbott's and Charles Camic's contributions in Part II represent the core of this volume. Each contribution stands for a different paradigm or approach to the question of how to conceptualise and deal with the history of sociology. Thus, Randall Collins defends an extreme model of sociologization. For him biographies of sociologists are mere results of interaction chains and ritualised networks that primarily serve the purpose of accumulation of cultural and academic capital. The result of the emerging discourse is predictable: a kind of sociological duplication or reflection of the social world and the networks in which sociologists move and encounter each other. In such a conceptualization creativity is not something that is the property of individuals but the predictable outcome of interactions in more or less distinguished academic networks. In other words, tell me to which citation cartel you belong and I will tell you what your chances of 'discovery' and academic capital are.

Like Collins, Andrew Abbott is also interested in duplication but adds that it is also necessary to explain variations within the discipline. For him the answer to the question of why there is so little observable progress and so much variety is that sociology has never and probably never will be a science in the narrow sense of the word. It is more likely to remain an academic discipline which deals with observed facts but that includes their interpretation, too. Inevitably a myriad of epistemological interests and observable facts lead to numerous different meanings and explanations. Some may have a syntactical dimension, i.e. they are relational; some are more likely to remain semantical and refer mainly to meaning-making; while others will be more pragmatic in orientation, i.e. they will remain limited to and bound by action. If that description is true then we have to conceptualise the discipline in a rather different way and think of it perhaps more in terms of a configuration that resembles a number of fractals, i.e. smaller structures that are contained or reproduced in larger structures (Abbott invokes the image of the fern to explain the nature of fractals). There is simply no cumulative process to speak of.

Charles Camic's response to Collins and Abbott is that both approaches don't make for good history writing. Change is an essential historical fact that can't be omitted; however, neither Abbott's fractals nor Collin's ritualised networks and academic communities are able to account sufficiently for the fact that once in a while something new comes into being. Camic is

good in criticising what is left out in Collins's and Abbott's approaches but doubts must remain as to his (and Neil Gross's) alternative proposal, i.e. the new sociology of ideas that is more perceptive of the role of characters and personalities. On first impression the thick description that the new sociology of ideas promotes sounds exciting; yet, as we have seen for example in the case of Gross's intellectual biography of Rorty, thick description can consist of recounting endless banal facts and minor events in order to make a point that could have equally been made in much more concise fashion.

George Steinmetz's and Johan Heilbron's contributions to the discussion add more colour to what would otherwise remain a pretty dry sociological-historical program. Steinmetz reminds the reader of what is often omitted from the discipline's history – colonialism –, while Heilbron provides evidence that sociology even in its early days as a discipline did not develop in concentric circles – let's say from an inner core to the periphery and then projected onto the global stage – but instead relied on international networks.

The remaining contributions from Part III of the book suggest some fine-tuning that any proper history of the discipline might want to consider. Picking up from Fleck's agenda-setting essay in Part I Martin Endreß launches a fundamental critique of what he calls 'presentism' by which he means a kind of analysis that relies on the construction of types and prototypes and in which everything is seen from the perspective of hindsight and in which the latest achievement always looks best simply by virtue of having come last. This makes for odd history writing. As Gerald Mozetič shows in his case study of Gumpłowicz, one should avoid such intellectual traps and self-fulfilling prophecies. Many individuals (amongst them not a few that are now considered classics) did not live up to ideal-type disciplinary boundary maintenance of what would later come to constitute 'the discipline'.

While the book is highly readable and contains some excellent contributions, some omissions are evident. The volume itself reminds the reader that such disciplinary undertakings have the function of border maintenance. Who is 'in' and who is 'out'? There is quite a bit that is left out from this text: from Peter Baehr's discussion of the sociological canon, founding figures and classics, and his useful distinction between founders and discourses, to the Cambridge School (the contributions of Quentin Skinner and John G. A. Pocock in particular come to mind), the historical semantics approach of Reinhart Koselleck, the rhetoric devices as discussed in Hayden White or the performance-related sociological approaches from Erving Goffman to Jeffrey Alexander, to name just a few. From the perspective of enhancing our sociological imaginations *Soziologiegeschichte* delivers a basic but rather frugal package; for more exciting, imaginative and creative ways of writing a discipline's history one probably has to peep across the border and shop around in other departments and disciplines.