

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Alex Law and Eric Royal Lybeck, Eds., *Sociological Amnesia: Cross-currents in Disciplinary History*. 2015, London: Ashgate 216 pp. \$119.95 hardcover 9781472442369

In the decades after the 1960s and the “crisis of sociology” predicted by Alvin Gouldner, scholars have written extensively about the formation of sociological canons, the field dynamics that create “dominant French philosophers” and the related social processes marginalize critical thinkers and result in “forgotten intellectuals.” There are obvious incentives that tend to produce more studies of canonized major thinkers than of scholars who operate on the margins of academic fields and major intellectual networks. There is more existing scholarship on canonized thinkers (biographies, organized archives of papers) to build on and thus it will be easier to publish articles and books than on marginalized intellectuals. The academic job market itself functions to reward more status to already established elites in a field. If you are a theorist, for example, your chances of gaining a tenure stream job in sociology will be greater if you present yourself credibly as an expert on Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Goffman or Bourdieu than if you have written a dissertation on a thinker who has been forgotten, widely discredited, is largely unknown or who offers a fundamental challenge to sociological orthodoxies. So we get many published works on canonized thinkers, and very few studies of forgotten and marginalized thinkers. Law and Lybeck’s excellent study of the “sociological amnesia” that leaves once prominent and influential thinkers on the sidelines of our disciplinary memory addresses precisely these larger issues while offering us a number of first-rate case studies of sociologists and intellectuals we can usefully reconsider.

There are eleven case studies in this volume, and it is tribute to the editors that every single one is well written, interesting and illuminating. The book starts with Peter Baehr’s excellent “British Sociology and Raymond Aron,” a discussion of French sociologist Raymond Aron’s influence on British sociology based on a careful empirical examination of course syllabi. The concluding chapter is Stephen Mennell’s fascinating “Nobert Elias: Sociological Amnesia and “The Most Important Thinker you have Never Heard Of.”” And in between these first rate bookends, the case studies are scholarly and provocative. And they raise larger questions about what sociology might look like in the future.

Despite the fact that Aron was central to international relations and political sociology in the 60s and 70s, was world famous as what we would today call a public intellectual as well as an “interlocutor of the powerful” such as Henry Kissinger, was the creator of such concepts as “industrial society” and was well known as an influential commentator on the sociological classics, he was largely marginalized among the teachers of the discipline by the time of a comprehensive survey of the discipline in Britain in 2001. Baehr, building on the insights of his own important book *Founders, Classics and the Concept of a Canon* (1994), explains Aron’s decline by the fact that he did not create “digestible concepts; theoretical systems; methodological design,” something related to the fact that he was “too broad ranging, too humanist, too unclassifiable to attract a critical mass of sociologists” (31).

Elias, by contrast, is not a primarily a story of decline and forgetting, but one of revival and partial institutionalization and canonization. As Mennel emphasizes Elias was a largely ignored marginalized exile from Nazi Germany born at the end of the 19th century who attained his first permanent academic position in England in the mid 1950s at the age of 57 and slowly gained fame as a theorist of the “civilizing process,” historical sociology, sports and culture from the 70s on. Close to Karl Mannheim and connected to the Frankfurt School critical theorists and friends with Pierre Bourdieu, and employed at Leicester and a university in Ghana, Elias’s career path, as Mennell outlines it, was a complicated combination of marginality and elite networks, surely something that helps explain his reception. Unlike Aron, however, Elias had a dedicated and some would yet suggest a cult-like following who helped promote the interest in his work that really started to gain traction when he was in his 70s. Offering a case study perhaps more accurately about a thinker who has not been forgotten, but who has not been fully integrated into the sociological canon along with other great thinkers such as Durkheim, Weber, Goffman or Bourdieu, Mennell makes an impassioned and thoughtful case for the power of Elias’s cultural psychology and historical sociology while lamenting his incomplete canonization. The famous Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker and author of *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and its Causes* (2011), in fact, suggested in print that Elias is “The Most Important Thinker You have Never Heard Of.”

The book’s most original and methodologically rigorous engagement with existing scholarship in the new sociology of ideas is certainly Matteo Bortolini and Andrea Cossu’s “Two Men, Two Books, Many Disciplines: Robert N. Bellah, Clifford Geertz, and the Making of Iconic Cultural Objects.” With a comparative case of two major scholars of the

1950s era who were both linked to Parsons and the Harvard elite and each published an impressive amount of high quality scholarship, the authors compellingly explain why Geertz's *The Interpretation of Culture* (1973) became an iconic text in the cultural turn in the social sciences while Bellah's *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (1970) has largely been forgotten despite rave reviews at the time. Bortolini and Cossu explain the different reception of the two books by looking at differences in their respective disciplines (anthropology versus sociology) in terms of their permeability and openness to culture, as well as a fit between Geertz's methodological proposals and his work as an exemplar for a cultural turn something that did not exist for Bellah, a scholar who had shifted from positivistic roots.

While not all of the chapters in the book are concerned with developing general theories of scholarly reception and reputations, they all have interesting things to say about their specific cases. Bridget Fowler's chapter on Lucien Goldman has insightful things to say about Goldman's sociology of literature and its challenge to Bourdieu, Alvaro Santana-Acuna provocatively suggests an alternative path for an early sociology that could have been followed if the discipline had canonized Gariel Tarde's "social monads" approach as opposed to Durkheim's "social fact" paradigm. E. Stina Lyon offers a well crafted and insightful exploration of a Viola Klien's forgotten linguistic study on the literary style of French novelist Celine, an example of an important and ignored early contribution to the sociology of culture. And Kieran Durkin contributes a powerful argument for a reconsideration of the empirical social character studies on the German working class in Weimar and Mexican peasants in the 1960s and 1960s written by psychoanalyst, critical theorist, public intellectual and sociologist Erich Fromm.

The major flaw of the book is that while the authors have written a very comprehensive review of the literature on scholarly reputations, and have sketched the outlines of a new theory of reputations based on Bourdieu, Elias and Foucault, the theory in the introduction is not really connected to the case studies, as excellent as they are. Moreover, the authors make no attempt to comment seriously on the contradictions the case studies reveal. It is true, of course, that a case could be made for relooking at Alasdair MacIntyre's "Lost Sociology" as Neil Davidson does, and it is certainly work remembering the pioneering public intellectual work of South African feminist write and social theorist Olive Schreiner as Liz Stanley suggests. But it is obvious that if we had a discipline that valued public intellectual and philosophical work so much that we remembered these contributions, we surely would have to have forgotten other things, particularly some of the empirical contribu-

tions done by Bellah, Fromm, Elias as well as other researchers more deeply embedded in sociological research programs. A discipline that would remember the radical elements of Cornelius Castoriadas as much as Christos Memos wants us to, would have been more not less likely to forget Raymond Aron's sociology rooted in his conservative and realist politics. Matt Dawson and Charles Masquelier have written an excellent discussion of the social philosophy of G.D.H. Cole, but their careful scholarship shows how hostile he was to social science, preferring to see himself as a "social idealist." Do we really require a sociology of knowledge to explain why he was forgotten by a professionalizing empirically oriented academic discipline in the mid and late 20th century?

The problem with explorations of forgotten intellectuals undertaken without a reflexive broad theory of intellectuals, disciplines and modern higher education is that the discussions can easily coalesce around contradictory perspectives from the defenders of various forgotten thinkers agreeing that disciplinary sociology is inadequate and exclusionary. A more difficult, and ultimately more productive task is to move beyond the details about the cases, and even handedly and analytically theorize and debate the various stakes in these reputational games and field struggles, recognizing that trade-offs and exclusion are both inevitable and ultimately desirable. What do we want intellectual life, universities and sociology to look like, and why, and what are we willing to give up to reach these contestable goals? And of course, who are the different we's in that formulation, something a truly reflective sociology can help illuminate. *Sociological Amnesia* is a unique and groundbreaking work that should be commended for entering uncharted ground with well chosen, written and edited case studies. But the larger issues remain to be discussed in broader ways, the necessary next step for studies on forgotten intellectuals.

McMaster University

Neil McLaughlin

Neil McLaughlin teaches sociological theory at McMaster University, and writes on the sociology of intellectuals, knowledge and disciplines. His most recent project addresses the reputation of philanthropist and currency speculator George Soros.