Whither Symbolic Interactionism in Canada? A Response to Helmes-Hayes and Milne's 'The Institutionalization of Symbolic Interactionism in Canadian Sociology'

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In their substantial work, "*The Institutionalization of Symbolic Interactionism in Canadian Sociology*", Rick Helmes-Hayes and Emily Milne provide a hitherto undocumented and unanalysed account of the development, spread, and state of symbolic interactionist theory in Canada. Such a work is a valuable contribution to sociological history in Canada and to research on sociological theory more generally. Such a treatment is long overdue. It is as if we perennially see Canadian sociology as ultimately derivative of American and European sociology and thus not worthy of examination in its own right. In particular, the absence of such scholarship is perhaps due to the misassumption that symbolic interactionism is a uniquely American invention (Low 2008). Thus, it is noteworthy to examine the spread of the perspective in the Canadian context.

In the best of qualitative methodology and ethnographic tradition Helmes-Hayes and Milne base their arguments not only on archival research but on interviews with many of the key figures in the institutional establishment of symbolic interactionism at Canadian Universities. Of particular value in terms of the early establishment of symbolic interactionism at Canadian universities are the firsthand accounts from interviews with Jane Burnet, James Curtis, Jim Giffen, Oswald Hall, Robert Prus, and William Shaffir, and Leo Zakuta. Helmes-Hayes and Milne's focus on the importance of institutionalization centres is a useful way of understanding how ideas and perspectives can outlive the people who employ them. Likewise, they are right to point out the importance of publications in establishing a legacy, citing "the most significant book"

in this regards, Jack Haas and William Shaffir's (1978) *Shaping Identity in Canadian Society* (Helmes-Hayes and Milne, 2017: 40).

Their analysis tracks the scholarly use of symbolic interactionism in Canada from its beginning at McGill University with the appointment of Carl Dawson as Chair and the later hiring of Everett C Hughes, both of whom brought the perspective from the University of Chicago in the early 1920's, through the heyday of the 1970's and early 1980's with the establishment of the substantial institutional cluster at McMaster University, to what they see as a decline in the use of the perspective among Canadian sociologists over the 1990's and 2000's to the present day. Notable in their extensive survey of symbolic interactionism in Canada is Helmes-Hayes and Milne's attention to tiny outposts such as the University of Manitoba (Cheryl Albas) and University of Waterloo. To these I would also add the University of New Brunswick where beginning in 1976 Chad Bowman, Alan MacDonell, and Brent Mckeown championed the symbolic interactionism perspective in their teaching and research (MacDonell et al. 1993). They were joined by interactionist Will van den Hoonaard in 1985. And if we accept phenomenology as very closely related to symbolic interactionism (McNall and Johnson 1975), then we can also count David Rehorick, appointed in 1976, among those sympathetic to symbolic interactionism at the University of New Brunswick.

What Helmes-Hayes and Milne's analysis shows, in addition to the importance of institutional centres in establishing theoretical schools of thought or clusters of faculty making up schools of activity (Gilmore 1988), is the undeniable temporal and ephemeral nature of ideas and perspectives. Institutions are constituted by people and once people disperse, the character of the institution is changed. For example, Helmes-Hayes and Milne show how generational change at McMaster University demonstrates how this once robust institutional cluster of symbolic interactionist scholarship declined due to faculty retirements. They chart a similar fate at McGill University which by the 1980's could only boast of only "three core SI faculty" Pru Rains, Malcolm Spector, and William Westley (Helmes-Hayes and Milne, 2017: 36). However, the temporal and ephemeral nature of ideas does not necessarily mean a permanent decline. As William Shaffir puts it there are those at McGill working in the symbolic interactionist tradition who "may not have called themselves 'symbolic interactionists,' but who obviously subscribed to the philosophy underlining" it (Helmes-Hayes and Milne, 2017: 36). Likewise, there are currently nine faculty in the Department of Sociology at McMaster University: Lori Campbell, Jeffrey Denis, John Fox, James Gillett, Paul Glavin, Neil McLaughlin, Dorothy Pawluch, William Shaffir, and Marisa Young, who align themselves with social psychology

which McMaster University (MAC 2017) states concerns "self-conceptions and identity and the ways that social structure and culture shape emotions, social cognition, the negotiating of meaning in everyday life, [and] small group dynamics," all of which are core theoretical foci of symbolic interactionism.

Based on the changes to how symbolic interactionists identify themselves and the cross pollination of theoretical areas in the postmodern and interdisciplinary academy, Helmes Hayes and Milne write that it appears as if "classical SI" has "been all but subsumed" (Helmes-Hayes and Milne, 2017: 50). At the same time they conclude, "despite [the] claims" of their more pessimistic informants, that they "hesitate to write an obituary for classical" symbolic interactionism." I concur, and rather than conceptualizing symbolic interaction in Canada as in a state of decline, what I see is a waxing and waning of the prominence of the perspective. It is useful in this regard to look at the legacy of the symbolic interactionists of the first generations of Canadian sociology in terms of the students they have trained who have gone on to become symbolic interactionist scholars themselves. To illustrate, William Shaffir trained at McGill absorbing Hughesian symbolic interactionism, he went on to train me at McMaster University, and I am now at the University of New Brunswick, and to date, am training four doctoral students who under my supervision have chosen to do their dissertation research framed by symbolic interactionism. Each one, after being first introduced to the perspective, wanted to know why they hadn't heard of it before and each described their discovery of symbolic interactionism as finding their intellectual home. Some of these students will go on to academic positions at Canadian Universities. Such generational passing on of theoretical traditions is not really very different from how symbolic interactionism arrived at McGill University in the first place. The perspective travelled from the classical works of Georg Simmel via Robert Park to Herbert Blumer and Everett C. Hughes at the University of Chicago (Low 2008, Low and Bowden 2016).

Another example of the temporal and ephemeral waxing and waning of symbolic interactionism in Canada is the Qualitative Analysis Conference, affectionately known as the Qualitatives.[1] Helmes-Hayes and Milne (2017: 47) write that this conference was "an institution", originally intended to provide an incubator and a haven" for researchers taking a symbolic interactionist perspective"[2] but that over time it "came to be a site for [symbolic interactionism's] transformation." While they

1. Referred to by Helmes-Hayes and Milne as QAC in this volume.
2. Most of who were American faculty who were refugees from what was then an academic environment hostile to symbolic interactionism (QAC 2008).

are absolutely accurate that the Qualitatives have become a bigger tent both in terms of research design and theoretical orientation over time,[3] the prominence of symbolic interactionism at the conference depends on who is organizing it from year to year. Even when not hosted by Robert Prus and van den Hoonaard, staunch champions of classical symbolic interactionism and traditional ethnographic research, the focus of this conference even today is reflective of symbolic interactionist and ethnographic traditions. To wit, most papers this year focused on contested meaning, interpersonal relations, subjective experience, role playing, identity formation, and generic social processes which are all hallmarks of the symbolic interactionist tradition (QAC 2017). Most notably, the theme of this year's Qualitatives conference was the 34th Annual Qualitative Analysis Conference: "The Glorious Triumph" of Symbolic Interactionism: Honouring the Past and Forging the Future (QAC 2017).

I am more optimistic about the fate of symbolic interactionism in Canada because after all, much of the stuff of culture is a symbol system and theoretical perspectives are also symbolic in nature. And as Margret Archer (1989) argues, once ideas become part of culture they cannot disappear, they perennially wait for people to come along and pick them up and use them. To illustrate, while an undergraduate student at Concordia University I found a copy of Blumer's Symbolic *Interactionism: Perspective and Method* for sale in the sociology lab. It was through reading that book that I became a symbolic interactionist myself, not because Concordia University was an institutional centre for symbolic interactionism. Moreover, the roots of symbolic interactionism are varied. People can come upon the perspective not just through the writings of Herbert Blumer but also through the work of Everett C. Hughes and the classical writings of Georg Simmel meaning that scholars can be introduced to symbolic interactionist ideas from many different sources (Low 2008, Low and Bowden 2016). Thus, to paraphrase Mark twain (1897), I am reasonably confident that the reports of the death of symbolic interactionism in Canada have been greatly exaggerated.

Finally, to build on the foundational work that Helmes-Hayes and Milne have provided here would be research examining symbolic interactionism in both French Canadian[4] and English Canadian sociology. Such research, paired with this work would be a way of bridging what

3. Although I find it perplexing that Helmes-Hayes and Milne (2017: 47) state that the conference now includes research using other than qualitative methodology. It never has in the many years that I have been involved in the conference.

4. An examination of the state of symbolic interactionism in French Canadian Sociology was bracketed out of Helmes-Hayes and Milne's analysis.

Low and Bowden (2016: 116) style the "two solitudes of Canadian Sociology," a gap in scholarship that Dorais rightly (2015) describes as regrettable. Because many Anglophone sociologists in Canada cannot read French they are "unaware of the corpus of French sociology and are thus blind to the Hughesian" and symbolic interactionist, "strain that runs through it" (Low and Bowden 2016: 116). Answering the question of the fate of symbolic interactionism in Canada is necessarily incomplete without examination of symbolic interactionism in French Canadian sociology at Université de Laval, another institutional center for the perspective.

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