Canadian Symbolic Interactionism on the Global Stage: A Comment on Helmes-Hayes' and Milne's, 'The Institutionalization of Symbolic Interactionism in Canadian Sociology, 1922-1979'

Arthur McLuhan
Antony Puddephatt

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Introduction

In a recent *CJS* special issue developed around their paper titled "The Institutionalization of Symbolic Interactionism in Canadian Sociology, 1922-1979: Success at What Cost?" Helmes-Hayes and Milne (2017) document the emergence and establishment of symbolic interactionism (SI) in English-language Canadian sociology, and then consider its fragmentation and decline from 1979 into the present period. This is followed by commentaries from Jacqueline Low (2017), who gives a more optimistic impression of the present state of SI in Canada, and Neil McLaughlin (2017), who considers its sectarian nature as a social and intellectual movement. This is a worthy discussion in the history of Canadian sociology and the sociology of ideas. We thank these contributors as well as the editor of *CJS*, Kevin Haggerty, for putting together this

useful set of dialogues. Certainly Canadian SI is an important part of our wider national sociology tradition, and it is important that we recognize its past, present, and future institutional development in light of as much evidence as possible.

We begin with a brief summary of Helmes-Hayes and Milne's claims before starting into our own critiques and insights about the state of SI in Canada. Situating their work in the history of Canadian sociology as well as the analysis of theoretical traditions, Helmes-Hayes and Milne find that SI was institutionalized in Canada in two key phases: 1922-1959 and 1960-1979. During the first phase, SI was incorporated slowly in Canada. Carl Dawson, and later Everett Hughes, introduced and promoted SI-based theory and research at McGill, establishing SI's first departmental stronghold in Canada. In the second phase, McGill remained an important centre for SI research and training into the 1970s, but departures from McGill led to McMaster assuming the leadership role. By 1979, SI had become an influential approach in Canadian sociology in terms of faculty positions, research publications, and accommodative programs. However, beginning in the 1980s, they posit that SI had begun to decline and deinstitutionalize. They have robust sets of institutional data pre-1979, but rely only on secondary sources and impressions from interviews with contemporary interactionists to surmise the place of SI in the present period. They argue that while mainstream sociology has incorporated and adopted many SI premises, concepts, and methods, SI itself became fragmented, and as such, was no longer necessary as a distinct, unified, and coherent approach. SI's institutional success set the stage for its impending institutional demise.

In what follows, we assess Helmes-Hayes and Milne's claims and offer an alternative "definition of the situation" for SI in Canada. We begin with a critique of their measures of institutionalization of SI in Canada, identifying errors of inclusion, exclusion, and internal consistency. Second, we ask whether SI really has deinstitutionalized in Canada if we apply the conceptual definitions that Helmes-Hayes and Milne originally offer. Third, we consider Canadian SI in the context of the global stage, which, we argue, is a more appropriate indicator of its current state of institutionalization and influence. Finally, we assess the "sectarian" question for SI in Canada, and envision a much more robust and open future going forward.

Measuring the Institutionalization of SI in Canada

To document the institutionalization of SI in English-speaking Canada between 1922-79, Helmes-Hayes and Milne (2017) utilize a three-pronged definition of "institutionalization," which becomes the conceptual lynchpin to their analysis. These three indicators include "the appointment of SI and SI-accommodative scholars to permanent, full-time faculty positions; the regular and frequent appearance of SI-based scholarly research in prominent mainstream sociology venues; and the appearance of SI or SI-accommodative courses in university calendars" (150). By closely considering how they operationalized these indicators, some of the measurement issues become apparent. We argue they make at least three types of measurement errors: those of inclusion, exclusion, and internal consistency.

First, some indicators are overly inclusive of what counts as SI. For example, a publication is SI-based if *one of the following* indicators is present: interpretivist theory, observational methods, *or* interviews. This measure would result, for instance, in Helmes-Hayes having an impressive career in the interactionist tradition, producing seminal and partly interview-based studies of Everett Hughes and John Porter, and Helmes-Hayes and Milne making one of the most recent contributions to SI with their interactionist (i.e., interview) analysis of the evolution of SI in Canada. Similarly, Neil McLaughlin, who encourages us to "let go of symbolic interactionism," has also contributed interactionist work rooted in his observations of McMaster's sociology department. Notwithstanding Low's (2017: 197) claim that Helmes-Hayes and Milne's study represents "the best of qualitative methodology and the ethnographic tradition," we are reasonably doubtful that Helmes-Hayes, Milne, or McLaughlin would classify their work as interactionist. We are being glib here, but certainly there are myriad non-SI traditions that could be described as interpretive, and which employ qualitative methods. They are probably catching many non-SI publications with these choices.

On the other hand, some of the indicators are overly exclusive of what counts as SI. For example, in identifying faculty members as "being SI," Helmes-Hayes and Milne restrict their definition to those who use fieldwork methods—requiring both direct observation *and* interviews. This would exclude (i) those who do sociological theory in SI but do not employ qualitative methods, (ii) use participant-observation, but not interviews, or (iii) conduct interviews but do not do participant observation. This restriction would seem to miss many SI faculty. Similarly, SI-based publications were counted as "The regular and frequent appearance of SI-based scholarly research in prominent mainstream Canadian

sociology venues" (155). Surely this will not do. In a field of knowledge that originated and developed largely in the United States, and today is becoming increasingly global, why only count articles in just the major Canadian Sociology journals and textbooks? The highest quality, most respected, and most recognized Canadian SI-based work would mostly likely be published in non-Canadian journals—that is, after all, where the action is. This restriction results in numerous Canadian SI contributions in the global publishing space that would not even appear on their radar screen.

Finally, we notice problems of internal consistency, beginning within their indicators. For example, Helmes-Hayes and Milne assume that the methodological approach of SI is restricted to "fieldwork methods," which is defined as direct observation and interviews. Yet to do this would exclude other interactionist methods, such as Manford Kuhn's paper and pencil survey, the "Twenty Statements Test." But this creates a problem of consistency, since they earlier define Kuhn as an important exemplar of the SI tradition beyond Blumer. We also have the problem of inconsistency across empirical indicators. For example, we find that (i) to do SI methods as a faculty member required direct observation *and* interviews; (ii) to publish SI methods required direct observation *or* interviews; and (iii) to teach SI methods as a program required only the use of participant observation. This represents three distinct versions of what counts as SI methodology in the same article.

Finally, we find further inconsistency when we encounter what might be called the "two tales" of SI put forward pre- and post-1979. Indeed, the broad definition of SI that Helmes-Hayes and Milne used earlier seems to disappear when they make the case for deinstitutionalization into the present day. In considering the contemporary decline of SI, they conveniently narrow their definition to "classical SI" or "Blumerian SI." This is curious, especially since they attempted to avoid this very error in their 1922-1979 analysis: "But surely this [Blumerian restriction] will not do. By such an account, a wide range of scholars who would themselves claim the SI label in some way and/or who would be seen by others as contributing to SI would not count as members of the community" (159). Indeed, they seem to abandon their inclusive criteria for that which is more exclusive, to be able to make their case for decline.

Deinstitutionalization and Decline?

Helmes-Hayes and Milne suggest signs of the contemporary deinstitutionalization of SI in Canada, but without the benefit of the data em-

ployed in the first half of their article. Citing Fine's (1993) analysis of SI in the US experiencing processes of fragmentation, expansion, incorporation and adoption, Helmes-Hayes and Milne suggest that SI in Canada experienced similar, if delayed, processes. Citing Stokes and McLevey (2016) and Michalski (2016), Helmes-Hayes and Milne (2017: 180) suggest "feminists, postmodernists and those… following Bourdieu… have substantial control over the agenda… of interpretive-constructionist sociology… In this environment, there is some doubt whether SI in its Blumerian form will make a comeback." While Helmes-Hayes and Milne "hesitate to write an obituary for classical SI" (181), they deem it "unnecessary as a stand-alone perspective" (182).

We agree with Helmes-Hayes and Milne's earlier position that "a researcher… should be able to point to data that demonstrate that the perspective was institutionalized-when, where, by whom, in what ways" (157). Yet this commitment to systematic empirical study is notably absent in their claims post-1979. Helmes-Hayes and Milne thus drift away from the very empirical model they propose is so useful for documenting these issues and sorting them out. Further, what evidence they do present might actually be interpreted as evidence for the health of SI in the present period. For example, about half of Canadian sociology faculty identified interpretivism as one of their main approaches (Michalski 2016), and about half of Canadian sociological publications draw on qualitative methods (Platt 2006). Rather than being in a period of decline, it seems equally or more plausible that the post-1979 period has been one of growth for both SI and SI-accommodative approaches in Canada.

SI, like all theoretical traditions, is a going concern dependent on the ongoing proclivities and contributions of scholars. As such, what counts as SI literature will be an emergent, adaptive phenomenon, and thus a moving target. This seems to be clear to Helmes-Hayes and Milne in their initial "broad definition" of SI, when they included not only Blumer but also Kuhn, Couch, Stone, Goffman, Becker, and Strauss in their terms of reference. Yet surely in the contemporary period, the household names most cited by the SI community have changed with the times. To take stock of SI faculty and publications now, we would have to consider citations to people like Gary Alan Fine, Kathy Charmaz, Arlie Hochschild, Norman Denzin, and Robert Prus. If these more contemporary SI references were used as metrics for present-day faculty and publications, surely our current institutional health could be more accurately understood.

While the measurement errors we identified earlier are problematic, the most consequential in our view is to exclusively bind Canadian SI within Canadian based publications. This amounts to an error of "methodological nationalism" in assessing the influence of Canadian SI without considering its impact in the global field of scholarship (Scholte, 2005; Beck, 2007). It is likely that the most relevant and globally impactful contributions would be made in the major specialist interactionist publication outlets, as well as other non-Canadian generalist journals.

How well are Canadians represented in these major international SI publications? Let us consider the two journals dedicated exclusively to symbolic interactionist research both in their titles and mission statements: *Symbolic Interaction* and *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*. Since the year 2000 in *Symbolic Interaction*, several Canadian authors contributed peer-review articles. In order of appearance, we have Karen March, Antony Puddephatt, Phillip Vannini (appearing four times), Anthony Lombardo, Hans Bakker, Theo Bakker, Timothy Gawley, Anthony Campeau, Jacqueline Low, Michael Adorjan, Isher-Paul Sahni, Elena Neiterman, Ryan McVeigh, Jennifer Kilty, Charissa Crépault, Stacey Hannem, Alex Tigchelaar, and Lisa-Jo van den Scott. In *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* since 2000, we have Tonya Davidson, Phillip Vannini (appearing twice), Antony Puddephatt (appearing three times), Christopher Stonebanks, Robert Prus, Scott Grills, Christopher Schneider (appearing four times), James Shaw, Jeffrey van den Scott, Jennifer Lavoie, Judy Eaton, Carrie Sanders, Mathew Smith, Hans Bakker, Taylor Price, and Lisa-Jo van den Scott. We are sure that continuing this exercise in related international venues that welcome interactionist work, such as *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Qualitative Sociology*, and *Qualitative Sociology Review,* would only give further evidence of Canadian contributions. We encourage others to conduct a much-needed stock-taking of Canadian contributions to SI by systematically searching these and other relevant journals to get a true sense of Canada's place in the wider global field of SI. Further, a more detailed, qualitative assessment of the kinds of research (topical, theoretical, and methodological) contributed would put flesh on the bones of what Canadian SI really looks like.

As another indication of institutional health, it is worth realizing that many Canadians are quite well integrated into the major American SI organization, the *Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction* (SSSI), which helps explain why we have not yet built our own separate society for SI north of the border. Robert Prus and Scott Grills each served

as president of SSSI in 2007-08 and 2011-12 respectively. Both Scott Grills and Antony Puddephatt served as Vice-President for the society, in 2007-08, and 2014-15 respectively, and Stacey Hannem is incoming Vice-President for 2018-19. Lisa-Jo van den Scott has served as treasurer since 2013. It is only in the past 10 years that Canadians have had any real presence on the executive of SSSI, which suggests institutional growth in Canada, rather than decline. We also note that the 2017 SSSI annual conference was held in Montreal, and featured Jean-Francois Coté as the keynote speaker, Carrie B. Sanders as the winner of the SI early-in-career award, and Deborah and Will van den Hoonaard as joint winners of the SI lifetime achievement award. The institutional integration of, and recognition for, Canadians in SSSI seems to be in excellent shape.

Yet SI has also been growing internationally, with the American society making strong efforts in recent years to reach out to other parts of the world. Phillip Vannini (2008) notes that SI has a growing presence in Canada, but also England, France, Poland, Australia, New Zealand, and Israel. We see that SI is also growing in Italy, Germany, Sweden, Bulgaria, and Serbia. This growth is evidenced, for example, by the newly formed (2010) *European Society for the Study of Symbolic Interactionism* (EUSSSI). This organization is institutionally connected to and supported by the American SSSI, and has made great in-roads. In Poland, they are in their 13th year of hosting *Qualitative Sociology Review*, an open-access journal dedicated to publishing interactionist ethnography. The editorial board contains a notable number of Canadian interactionists, including Michael Atkinson, Benjamin Kelly, Steven Kleinknecht, Antony Puddephatt, Dorothy Pawluch, Robert Prus, and William Shaffir. We see signs of interactionism gaining ground in Russia as well, with Robert Prus writing an introduction for the first ever Russian-language translation of Herbert Blumer's (1969) treatise on symbolic interactionism. Canadians have also taken on leadership roles as editors for special issues on symbolic interactionism in journals such as *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* and *Qualitative Sociology Review*.

Certainly, more empirical research is needed to better understand our global impact in the field both quantitatively and qualitatively. Citation analysis might show how much traditional interactionist figures (e.g., Mead, Blumer, Hughes, Park, Strauss, and Becker) are used in contemporary Canadian SI publications, versus how much newer and perhaps more relevant contemporary interactionists are utilized (e.g., Fine, Hochschild, Denzin, Charmaz, Prus). Such an analysis might also give a better idea of the scholarly impact of Canadian SI in the increasingly interdisciplinary and global field. From our brief survey, however, there

seems to be much to be proud of and to look forward to. We encourage future research that might explore, describe, and add needed detail to this promising picture.

Exorcising the Specter of Sectarianism: An Open Future for Interactionism in Canada

Helmes-Hayes and Milne's (2017) interviews with contemporary Canadian interactionists reveal an ambivalence, especially on the part of the junior SI crowd, toward the somewhat "sectarian" past of symbolic interactionism. Neil McLaughlin (2017) argues that Helmes-Hayes and Milne did not go far enough in their consideration of this emotional and dogmatic side. He calls for a deeper analysis of the sect-like quality of SI in Canada as a social-intellectual movement. He writes "The bizarre, almost cult-like, worship of Mead… can be best understood as the early formation of an intellectual sect that went on to colonize sociology with a theoretical system that… could explain everything" (208). Confronting these cult-like aspects of SI is important, McLaughlin argues, to properly understand its history and potential future.

Is it true that SI is sect-like? As practitioners having experiences in the field for the last 15 or so years, it has certainly felt that way from time to time. Puddephatt recalls his critiques of Blumer's interpretations of Mead (Puddephatt 2009) being met with charges of incompetence, and worse, that he was an intellectual traitor, lumping his work into a supposed wider and worrying tradition of "Blumer-bashing." There has tended to be a "with us or against us," feel to interactionist circles, where total allegiance was expected. To be at all critical of the exemplars, or to move too far outside of orthodox SI theory, has often been met with disdain by the old guard. For example, Sheldon Stryker (1980) was largely outcast from the interactionist community for trying to introduce structural emphases to the tradition, and Norman Denzin (1992) has been met with derision for linking SI to postmodern sensibilities. More recently, Lonnie Athens (2015) has been disparaged for challenging the root assumptions of SI in his new brand of "radical interactionism." Often the normative boundaries of a school can best be discovered by the reaction that ensues when people breach them.

There are good reasons that traditional SI might have taken on this sect-like quality, in sociological hindsight. As Mullins (1973) notes, SI emerged as the loyal opposition to the dominant structural-functionalist sociology of the time. Blumer (1969) has been deemed the "grave-digger" of mainstream American sociology, launching damning critiques of

then dominant hypothetico-deductive methods and armchair theorizing. The legitimation of SI involved casting other approaches as fundamentally inadequate. These early wars between positivism and Chicago-school qualitative approaches fueled interactionists' sense of marginalization by their mainstream contemporaries. Within this social context, feelings of exclusion and efforts to claim legitimacy produced a bitter and emotionally charged social movement for SI. Robert Prus (1996) has loyally followed Blumer in this way, denouncing competing positivist and postmodern approaches. Rather than acknowledging their utility and suggesting that interactionism offers some distinctive and complementary advantages, Prus denies them any legitimacy whatsoever.

There are many reasons to think that this dogmatic and sectarian approach to SI might be a thing of the past. What used to be a hostile and oppositional field between SI and the largely positivist mainstream is very different today. The main ideas and emphases of SI have largely been absorbed into the mainstream, marking what Fine (1993) terms the "glorious triumph" of SI (see also Maines 2001; Sandstrom and Fine 2003). This would seem to be the case in Canada today with about half of sociologists identifying interpretive theory as one of their main approaches (Michalski 2016), and qualitative methods being far more widely used (Platt, 2006). The previously hostile environment to SI has been replaced by a much more agreeable atmosphere for interpretive and qualitative work.

Further, Vannini (2008) demonstrates that SI is evolving beyond the boundaries of sociology to be more interdisciplinary, as well as the boundaries of the USA, to be more global. These positive changes extend our influence, and benefit from a range of exciting new ideas and creative cross-pollination with theoretical and methodological traditions from around the world. As Low (2017) noted, the Canadian *Qualitative Analysis Conference* has exhibited exactly these new global, interdisciplinary, and eclectic trends, growing in size and influence as a result. The days of dogmatism seem to be far behind us. Rather than losing its identity, Canadian SI has adjusted to a more complementary situation with surrounding fields of knowledge. Maintaining a shared focus on the group-based features of identity, activity, process, and meaning binds us together, even while we entertain new ideas and sets of concerns. In considering the question posed by Helmes-Hayes and Milne (2017) of "success at what cost?" we seem to be profiting quite nicely, and are far from entering our "twilight years." Rather than "letting go" of symbolic interactionism as McLaughlin (2017) suggests, capitalizing on our momentum and embracing a more open, interdisciplinary, and global future for our Canadian tradition would seem to be the most promising course.

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Arthur McLuhan (Departments of Sociology and Interdisciplinary Studies, Lakehead University) engages with sociologies of morality and social problems, self and identity, and subcultures in everyday life. He develops formal theoretical accounts of these issues by examining social processes that are empirically grounded in the comparative and ethnographic examination of social worlds. Currently, his research is focused on developing interactionist accounts of character and competence.

Email: arthur.mcluhan@lakeheadu.ca

Antony Puddephatt (Department of Sociology, Lakehead University) studies the social philosophy of George Herbert Mead, especially as it relates to language, meaning, knowledge, and social action. He has connected these interests to a wide range of areas, such as science and technology studies, theories of social work practice, and environmental sociology. He also conducted research on the social world of competitive chess, the institutional culture of Sociology in Canada, and the rise of open-access publishing. With William Shaffir and Steven Kleinknecht, he is co-editor of *Ethnographies Revisited: Constructing Theory in the Field* (Routledge, 2009) and with Bradley H. Brewster, he is co-editor of *Microsociological Perspectives for Environmental Sociology* (Routledge, 2017).

Email: apuddeph@lakeheadu.ca