

## Sociology, my love

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Katherine Twamley, Mark Doidge & Andrea Scott (eds.): *Sociologists' Tales*. Contemporary narratives on sociological thought and practice. Bristol: Policy Press, 2015. 304 pp. ISBN 978-1-4473-1867-5.

*Sociologists' tales* presents a story about sociology and sociologists' careers in the UK. The three editors of the volume are all convenors of the British Sociological Association Early Career Forum, and their aim in curating the book was to get more established scholars to encourage and advise the next generation of sociologists, like they themselves. Altogether 33 British sociologists, 19 females and 14 males, agreed to participate in this endeavour, including some internationally prominent professors, such as Zygmunt Bauman, Beverley Skeggs, and Anthony Giddens. On the whole, the backgrounds, ages, positions, and disciplinary interests of the contributors vary substantially. The only selection criterion was that the contributor should have a permanent position, thereby being able to give hints to newcomers regarding how to "make it." Most contributions in the volume are short narratives, and five are based on a conversation with one of the editors. All contributors were asked to address the same questions: "What is sociology to you? Why study sociology, why did you? Why 'be' a sociologist, what does that mean? Looking back on your career, what would you have done differently? What advice would you give to someone starting out in a career in sociology?"

Although each sociologist's tale is unique, taken together they are, first and foremost, declarations of love for sociology. For some, it was love at first sight. Sometimes it required a matchmaker – in most cases an inspiring teacher – to arouse one's sociological passion. John Scott, for instance, recalls his great and committed teachers who made him certain that "this was how I wanted to spend my life" (p. 145). Ever since the beginning, sociology has been a dearly loved life companion. There may have been personal losses, career deadlocks, and departmental worries, but they have not undermined one's love for sociology as a discipline. For instance, Gayle Letherby, whose career path has not been the most typical one, describes her relationship with sociology as "a love affair" and concludes, "If I am ever ambivalent about my place in higher education, which I sometimes am, I am never, ever ambivalent about my status as a sociologist" (p. 168).

Sociology's appeal springs from different sources. For one thing, sociology is portrayed as a welcoming subject. Many authors tell that they were the first in their family to enter university, and sociology provided them an easy, down-to-earth access. It allowed investigating real-life problems, often combined with activism outside academia, thereby promoting social justice and the pursuit of a better

society for all. Moreover, sociology offered for them tools to better understand one's own working-class and/or minority background. Sociology has been welcoming also to migrants from other disciplines. Several of the authors have originally studied other fields, and only later on moved into sociology. For instance Yvonne Robinson, who identifies herself as a black woman, compares her experiences in sociology and geography where she started. She writes (p.125), "I have always struggled with the enduring whiteness of geography and its failure to get to grips with gender inequities." Her fit within sociology has been much more comfortable, "at least in terms of being better represented by people like me."

At root, the love for sociology is intellectual. The authors highlight that sociology is a treasure trove of insightful and powerful ideas and perspectives to understand the world and one's own place in it. Beverly Skeggs, for instance, emphasizes: "I love the way that sociology never ceases to surprise me, of how it enables me to switch into new ways of seeing" (p. 42). The authors are attached to very different theoretical and methodological approaches. From this diversity, only feminism clearly comes up in the book. Its importance is acknowledged in several male tales, but for female sociologists in particular, it has been exceptionally influential both intellectually and by backing up career trajectories. What the authors share is the respect of sociology's diversity. Sociology is presented as a pluralistic discipline with loose internal and external boundaries. Anthony Giddens says that he has "a relaxed view" and Jeffrey Weeks is "deeply grateful" for the lack of canons and "intellectual tyrants." The pluralism is manifest also in the responses to the editors' request to recommend a text that has been particularly inspirational to the authors. The reading list is highly diverse, the only minor exception being C. Wright Mills' *Sociological Imagination*, which is selected by three authors.

In the tales, sociology and sociological careers are contextualized in the transformations of the British political life, especially in the changing higher education landscape. Those who entered academia in the 1960s experienced the expansion of the higher education system, and many were able to get a permanent job while still a doctoral student. In the 1980s, Thatcherism hit badly both sociology and sociologists. Several sociology departments were merged or closed, and some authors found themselves in career troubles, even unemployed. Since then, neo-liberal ideas and managerial practices have occupied academia. Especially the British system of research evaluation (RAE and REF) and its destructive effects are discussed in many tales. The audit culture is widely perceived to pose a danger to sociology. For instance, Les Back (p. 94) states that "as the university becomes more corporatized and audited the risk is that we become much more timid and more conservative in our practice. There is no

future for a timid and conservative sociology.” Likewise, under the current metric context, career building becomes increasingly competitive with intensified pressures to publish and attract funding.

The guidance to junior sociologists involves a sort of double strategy. On the one hand, juniors are given very traditional advices and encouraged to find out their true passion, do the research they want to do, and follow their star. On the other hand, it is admitted that under the current harsh conditions, junior sociologists need to be more strategic than the older generation. Robert Mears, for instance, speaks for realistic career plans, emphasizing that the majority will end up in teaching-oriented positions with possibilities for only modest scholarship. Likewise, it becomes difficult to determine what a successful career is really like. Linsey McGoey suggests that success means learning how to “fail better”. Eric Harrison, for his part, offers a long list of tips, including for instance the following: Be known, bring in money, be international, be different, be better.

Overall, *Sociologists' Tales* provides persuasive and inviting reasons why to select sociology and build a career within it. In this sense, the book can be seen as a marketing story, branding sociology to new student customers. Internal conflicts within sociology or hierarchies between top universities and ex-polytechnics are not discussed, albeit some subtle clues can be found in the tales of those who see themselves more at the margins of the system. It is noteworthy that the authors tend to describe their own careers as a result of luck. No doubt, luck has a role to play in human existence, but yet, it is eye-catching that so many sociologists do not reflect on whether there might be some explanations behind luck. In this respect, I find Beverley Skeggs's remark relevant as she wonders, “How those who study power do not often understand their own location in it” (p. 46).

On the whole, the book provides an enjoyable reading experience. The authors are brilliant writers able to captivate the reader. By and large, the tales they select to tell are informative, insightful, and partly touching, having resonance also outside the UK context. The tales convey the authors' love and passion for sociology and their desire to pass it to the next generation. As such, they also entail engrossing, human interest elements, offering glimpses of the private side of working and living with sociology.

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