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BOOK REVIEWS


In 2005 the American Sociological Association celebrated its 50th anniversary, providing an opportunity for scholars to reflect upon and provide accounts of the intellectual and institutional history of the profession in the United States. David Paul Haney’s *The Americanization of Social Science* is a welcome contribution to this scholarship. Haney examines the struggle for a coherent professional identity among sociologists between 1945 and 1963. In particular, he focuses on the tension between sociologists’ quest for scientific status and academic standing vis-à-vis social relevance and public engagement. Haney argues that those who erected the structural-functional scientific edifice primarily at Harvard and Columbia Universities during this period intentionally relegated to the margins of the discipline those whose works had methodological groundings in the humanities, such as David Riesman, C. Wright Mills, and Vance Packard, and thereby more popular appeal.

In the postwar period, scientific status and statistical analysis played increasingly central roles for social scientists’ professional authority and legitimacy. Haney devotes separate chapters to each development. He highlights the unsuccessful efforts of the Social Science Research Council and Talcott Parsons to have sociology included in what became the National Science Foundation whose leadership believed that sociology was not a science. Haney shows how large-scale government support for the technical competent and socially useful quantitative study *The American Soldier* advanced quantitative analysis.

In a chapter devoted to social theory and alienation, Haney shows how mainstream sociology moved from structural analyses and to measurement of individual attitudes and opinions.

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Paradoxically, it was Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* which jetisoned the term anomie from its Durkheimian use to characterize social structures to a character type of individuals. Later, as Haney vividly shows in a subsequent chapter, the popularity accorded *The Lonely Crowd*, because of it eschewed academic jargon and journalistic style, contributed to Riesman’s estrangement from the dominant currents of 1950s sociology. In 1958 Riesman accepted a position at Harvard, teaching undergraduates in general social science (rather than sociology) in the Department of Social Relations, considered by the university’s “best students” as an “intellectual slum,” a sentiment apparently shared by Harvard historians who asked nothing of the social sciences “other than that they drop dead.” In perhaps the most eye-opening chapters in the book, Hanley draws on archival professional correspondences as well as book reviews to capture the mixed feelings and dynamics associated with the marginalization of diffident sociologists such as Robert S. Lynd, Pitirim A. Sorokin, Riesman, C. Wright Mills, and Vance Packard.

Robert K. Merton personifies in Haney’s narrative the best that sociology has to offer, approaching the study and communication of socially relevant topics in a scientifically rigorous matter, building a cumulative knowledge base and moderating truth claims consistent with empirical findings accordingly. Merton countermanded arguments about sociology’s descent into triviality and arcane language and his advocacy for middle-range theories has lasting appeal. Haney ends the book with a discussion of the prominent role of public sociology came to play within ASA since the mid 1990s, even as the influence of postmodern theories precludes theoretical coherency and perpetuates the unintelligibility of much of contemporary sociological research.

I have some quibbles with the book. The title gives the impression that social sciences other than sociology will be examined, but references to economics, psychology, anthropology, and political science are minimal at best. There is no discussion of how these other professions juggled quest for scientific status and academic standing vis-à-vis social relevance and public engagement. Further, although Harvard and Columbia played a significant if not dominating role in advancing
methodological positivism, Chicago, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Berkeley are virtually ignored. Finally, there is no mention of sociology dissidents led by Alfred McLung Lee forming in 1951 the Society for the Study of Social Problems.

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Social scientists including social policy scholars have extensively documented the dramatic changes that have taken place in recent decades in well-established employment patterns associated with industrialization. Instead of working in secular jobs for most of their lives, increasing numbers of people now change jobs regularly and responsibility for livelihoods, social benefits and careers are passed from organizations to individuals. As is well known, the individualism of the new economy is associated with far greater flexibility, risk taking, individual decisions and responsibility.

The question of how the real-life experiences of people are affected by this environment is explored in this interesting book by scholars who use what is known as institutional ethnography to gain insights into the way lives are shaped by the wider social context. Although the case studies in the book interpret these experiences from a subjective perspective, they are linked to much wider systems and structures of rules and controls. In studying lives, institutional ethnographers also make extensive use of broadly defined texts that provide powerful insights into the phenomenology of everyday experience. The result is an eclectic collection of papers that cover issues such as working on an electronic manufacturing assembly line, managing family life, employment and children’s education, the experiences of Indian immigrants in the information technology sector, the role of microenterprise in addressing the problem of poverty, the way people with disabilities seek to integrate into the job market and the experiences of women subjected to time limits in terms of the TANF program.

The book is the result of papers originally presented at