

Review

Mad Hazard
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Memoirs by sociologists are rare, owing largely to an historic, antiseptic¹ conditioning at one time in the name of Science and refracted as “Theory” and “Methodology.” The boundary maintenance was supposed to separate the subjective from the objective as well as fact from value (and even the personal from the political). Those separations no longer apply, giving rise to an abundance of reflections, both personal and professional. The proof texts are legion. Consider in the span of little more than a decade the following edited collections:

Bennett M. Berger, ed., *Authors of Their Own Lives: Intellectual Autobiographies by Twenty American Sociologists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

Martin Oppenheimer, Martin J. Murray, and Rhonda F. Levine, eds., *Radical Sociologists and the Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

Ann Goetting and Sarah Fenstermaker, eds., *Individual Voices, Collective Visions: Fifty Years of Women in Sociology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

Barry Glassner and Rosanna Hertz, eds., *Our Studies, Ourselves: Sociologists’ Lives and Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

What is striking is how the many contributors to these edited collections take for granted that they are actually doing something quite different than scientifically based scholarship. An epigraph in Sarah Fenstermacher’s concluding chapter in the 1995 collection announces:

There’s more to the self than Mead’s, the “I”.
—Anonymous

Yes, and Mead called the “more” both “me” and the “generalized other.” But the generalized other confuses us about how to make sense of such assertive titles as “authors of their own lives,” “individual voices,” and “our studies, ourselves.” Subjectivity is notorious for concealing not only *what* a person is thinking but what motives may be informing such thinking. The deeper you go, the clearer it becomes that the memoir is itself a kind of motive, an aspiration to exemplify one’s existence in all sorts of familiar terms that the generalized other ordains.

This is an introductory and lengthy way to consider Stephen Turner's remarkably detailed account of the inevitable merger of the personal and the professional in the life of what Logan Wilson called the academic man.² As a prelude, the first fifty pages of his memoir recite a fascinating genealogy, replete with a physiognomic anecdote about his French roots. He offers a trenchant, despairing account of his early life in Chicago where the murders of the local barber and dentist were part of his earliest memories. This took place in a momentous time of transition in the South Side of Chicago with the arrival of African-Americans leading to white flight. A move from his first neighborhood to another nearby led to years of bullying by local boys, reminiscent of the experiences of another sociologist who grew up in Harlem several decades earlier.³

Turner describes his family circumstances (particularly his relationship with his father) and his educational experiences until college as important for his later realization that he was an intellectual, and a sociologist at that: "It is a commonplace that people who are excluded from society, or separated from it in some way, are prone to becoming sociologists: society and its variations are an unavoidable intellectual problem for them. Sociologists have often come from missionary backgrounds. They experienced one social world in a marginalized way as missionary children, only to return to a society they were also marginal to. I was born into the most studied of sociological domains – the South Side was the laboratory of the University of Chicago Sociology department. But it was a domain in decomposition and one in which I was multiply marginal" (p. 29). His accounts of being a voracious reader likely contributed to the kind of marginality that created in him a longing to get to the bottom of things along with an impatience with others (including many sociologists) whose careers succeeded further on multiple surfaces that placed ambition for professional and public recognition above learning for its own sake.

A quarter of the way into Turner's account of his various personal and political encounters, he begins his recounting of a life in academic sociology with anecdotes about conflicts in departments while expressing his fidelity to what Chicago meant to him: "... I had unconsciously picked up at Chicago something of the habitus of a university professor. The spats, the posturing, the administrative work-arounds that always had to be negotiated, the recognition that rules were there to be bent or overridden, the need to find the right person to sign the right document, all of which are normal to academic life, were already normal to me. And I also had a kind of attunement to the relation between hierarchy or status and real merit and real knowledge, and I recognized that they were different things. Tulane was the first place I really exercised any of these minor talents, but not the last" (p. 52). At the same time, from the standpoint of intellectual conflict, the enormous popularity of sociology (pop and otherwise) that grew out of the 1960s led to an internecine warfare between adherents of quantitative and qualitative research, whose nearly hand-to-hand combat brought forth the first order of intellectual polarization that would eventually be more or less reconciled but followed by an even more pernicious ideological tribalism.

The emerging voices of feminist sociologist were the first significant sign of ideological commitments ascending in the profession.⁴ Initially, the appearance of growing numbers of women in any profession would be derisively called "feminization". What stands out in retrospect is that in its earliest phase, affirmative action was intended to increase the supply of women in all the professions. Medicine is an illustrative case in point. In the present decade, more women than men will become physicians, leaving the remaining challenge of "equity" a matter of breaking the "glass ceiling". All the while that the supply and demand curves were mutating, Turner stuck to his guns, in pursuit of creating a niche for himself between sociological theory and the philosophy of science.

The forging of his academic career takes up an extensive part of his memoir. This includes a kind of codicil to the idea of paradigm shifts in the history of science. Instead of direct head-on collisions with a reigning consortium of sociological masters (e.g., Parsons and Merton), as Turner discovered: why not publish in a journal not under their direct influence? If there ever was an intellectual center in sociology, by the 1970s, it would not, indeed, could not hold. I wonder if the same status and ideological dynamics that animated the transition from Lewis Coser's *Masters of Sociological Thought* to Patricia Madoo Lengermann and Gillian Niebrugge's *The Women Founders: Sociology and Social Theory 1830-1930* are indicative of the

inevitable generational conflicts that a marginal sociological figure like Lewis Feuer recognized in both his *The Conflict of Generations: The Character and Significance of Student Movements* (1969) and *Ideology and the Ideologists* (1975).

Half-way through the book, Turner recounts an epiphany following a summer seminar led by Richard Rorty at Princeton. The search for moral universals by way of social theorizing was a fool's errand: "... the conflicts between social theories were not decidable. No amount of critique would make Parsonsianism or Marxism go away. They each illuminated something, but very partially, so they could not pretend to be a comprehensive social theory, or even the correct social theory. Nor did they, or need they, share standards, count the same things as scientific, and so on. They were not 'paradigms,' in Kuhn's sense, because they never could shoulder out their rivals. Sociology was not a 'multi-paradigm science,' either, because what was wrong about these 'paradigms' is that their aspirations for closure were bogus" (p. 98). This was not a Mertonian epiphany arguing for a demotion from "grand" to "middle-range" theory. Instead, as I would concur, sociology has always been productively caught between explanation and practice, that is, between making sense of the world and living in it. This is one highly commendable aspect of Turner's approach to memoir writing.

The importance of J. P. Mayer in assisting Turner in his intellectual development cannot be underestimated. The growing awareness of the stifled and arrogant presentations of mainstream social theory brought Turner in touch with a canon of debates and debaters that included the work of Leo Strauss, Christopher Dawson, T. S. Eliot, Michael Polanyi, Michael Oakeshott, Friedrich Hayek, Karl Popper, Jürgen Habermas, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and others. These new intellectual alliances help to explain Turner's obvious contempt for the then better-known figures in sociology. But rather than wallow in such contempt, he has used it to provide an object-lesson in the kind of perseverance that can turn personal and professional circumstances into scholarly achievement. A transcendent serendipity is often at work when hope diminishes. Turner never expresses the sorts of self-pity now dominant in our therapeutic culture. His expansive learning regarded the internecine battles over Ph.D. requirements in sociology as of the lowest importance compared to questions such as what could be said about an abiding nihilism among European intellectuals and the rise of Nazism and what might Weber had said about Hitler. I would add that battles over statistics requirements are a uniquely American form of nihilism.

Turner recounts the ways in which a foray into research about John Wesley Powell and the U.S. Geological Survey anticipated a broader research agenda around the question of "how can claims of expertise be reconciled with liberal democracy as a political form?" (p. 124). This led to other research projects including a fascinating inquiry into differences between the operations of science versus social science journals. Interspersed with these accounts are illuminating reminders of the "ideologization" of the American Sociological Association. In the 1980s, Turner notes, the ASA "had been taken over by SWS (Sociologists for Women in Society)." One mafia was succeeded by another. A censoriousness accompanied these successions, regardless of who assumed the power, as illustrated by James Coleman's experience of the negative reaction to his work on white flight, which led to his never attending another ASA meeting. As Turner's enthusiasm for the ASA waned, he pursued more rewarding opportunities by attending meetings of the American Political Science Association and sometimes the Philosophy of Science Association.

Turner's discussion of why the history of sociology is important for understanding the foundations of contemporary progressivism is well done: "Sociology was the last living relic of the great social reform movements of the nineteenth century" (p. 136). But "Merton, Parsons, and the attempt to create a behavioral science of sociology was a disaster – of historical interest and intellectual interest only as a disaster, The evolving 'progressive' ideology, in contrast, was both an intellectual disaster and a political and academic success" (p. 137). These are wise insights, indicating why the work of Parsons and to a great extent, Merton, have all but disappeared from a canon of sociological theory that now requires the stamp of intersectional approval upholding progressive ideals while abandoning professional boundaries. Such an argument is congenial to no surviving side with any voice in present debates.

The last quarter of *Mad Hazard* is in its own way, depressing, except for the touching interludes of Turner's celebration of his marriage and family life. He captures in granular detail the shifting prospects of publishing in sociology which, by the 1990s, precluded many of the topics that were important to him. In one respect, his narrative makes considerable sense seeing how his accounts of the struggles that brought sociology much attention in the 1960s had by the 1990s produced the bitter fruits of grievance and accusations of discrimination and worse. I do think he appreciates that these transformations were not unique to sociology, only that sociology led the way in promoting the new dispensations of ideological purification. No one inside or outside of academia has really escaped this process whether as proponents or critics.

We do not learn of Turner's seemingly terminal illness until the final few pages. His gratitude for a vocation of immense value to him (and certainly many others) confirms for me that all gratitude is local, right down to the paws of a cat.

NOTES

- 1 Already in 1965, Rose Laub Coser, reviewing Phillip E. Hammond's edited collection *Sociologists at Work: The Craft of Social Research* (1964) in the *American Journal of Sociology* noted, "The publication of this book marks a turning point from the 'antiseptic' approach to research, which makes believe-and unfortunately inculcates this into students with oftentimes paralyzing consequences-that research consists in proving or refuting an initially well-formulated hypothesis through an initially well-formulated research design." Of course, in more recent times, the celebrity intellectual, although few among sociologists, would be more likely inclined to write a memoir, since positive public notice is no doubt highly correlated with self-importance.
- 2 Logan Wilson, *The Academic Man: A Study in the Sociology of a Profession* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942). Two decades later, Jessie Bernard published *Academic Women* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State Press, 1964).
- 3 Irving Louis Horowitz, *Daydreams and Nightmares: Reflections on a Harlem Childhood* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1990). 2nd ed., 1998.
- 4 Feminism achieved the loudest and most sustained voice on the basis of the growing number of women in the profession. On the other hand, race and racism—specifically in regard to African Americans—produced a much longer history of dissent within sociology, starting with W. E. B. DuBois' profound meditation on why he left the field. See W. E. B. DuBois, "Sociology Hesitant," in *boundary 2* 27:3, 2000, pp. 37-44. And see also Joyce A. Ladner, *The Death of White Sociology* (New York: Random House, 1973).