

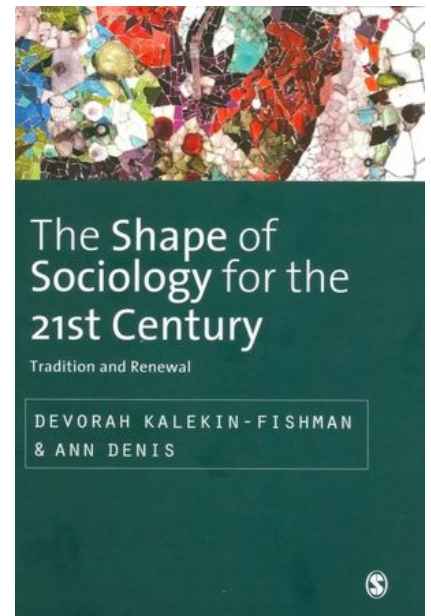
Parsons, Althusser and Foucault were once demigods of the social sciences, but is there still room for them in the 21st century?

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*Over the past century, the field of sociology has experienced extraordinary expansion and vitality. But is this growth positive or negative – a promise of diversity or a threat of fragmentation? This critical volume explores the meaning of sociology and sociological knowledge in light of the recent growth and institutionalization of the discipline. Reviewed by **Chris Husbands**.*

The Shape of Sociology for the 21st Century: Tradition and Renewal. Devorah Kalekin-Fishman and Ann Denis (eds). Sage. April 2012.

One of the tasks that the Exposition Universelle Internationale, held in Paris in 1900, set itself was to review the development of various academic disciplines in international terms. One of these disciplines was the social sciences, and the report on this was issued in 1901. It looked at social-science teaching at several educational levels but, concerning universities, it was clear that Belgium was among the most advanced, with the Universities of Ghent, Liège, Brussels and Louvain (Leuven) having organized schools of social sciences. Next developed was the situation in France, with cognate developments also reported in Germany, Switzerland and Spain; the USA was not included but the UK received little consideration.



One may now ask what has been achieved by the social sciences in the past century plus. A cynic of the discipline would say that we are not as far advanced as we ought to be. On the theoretical level, the discipline has embraced and discarded a whole panoply of nostrums, almost too numerous to list, that really ought never to have excited much interest in the first place – ethics, the crudest form of eugenics in the early years (albeit strongly criticized at the time), and in the more recent era Parsonian structural functionalism, ethnomethodology, Althusserian structural Marxism, structuration theory, and even globalization. Talcott Parsons famously asked who now reads Herbert Spencer, but one may equally ask who now reads some of the one-time iconic names of even the more recent era, including Talcott Parsons – Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas, even Michel Foucault – once demigods, now fallen (or falling) idols all. Also, slightly

differently but related to its obsession with 'novel' theorizing, the subject has probably produced almost as many pointless neologisms as Twitter and texting combined.

Thus, one may ask of current sociology what can be salvaged from the past history of the subject, comparing what at least some of those identified with it at the beginning of the twentieth century were doing with what analogously is being done now. Certainly, there is a continuing tradition of the practice of ethnography (albeit derived from anthropology), although this can perhaps never quite escape scepticism about its reliability as a research method. A form of survey research was being practised a hundred years ago and has been well developed into the present era; however, the basic approach of seeking respondents with questions for them to answer (though now much sophisticated) has remained the same, and it is in the more particular area of survey technology (not a precise competence of most sociologists) where the improvements and developments have occurred – in sampling, for example, which has been the province of the statisticians, or in data-capture technologies, that being the province of IT specialists.

However, where the subject has achieved much is when it has kept its feet on the ground and stuck to studying the real world, whichever one of the very different empirical methodologies has been used, whether ethnography at one extreme or large-scale survey research at the other, *pace* the current difficulties often encountered in sampling many present-day populations. It is from this particular, and unashamedly prejudiced, perspective that I approach a review of this book. Can it make a case that many of the, frankly, disappointments of the subject over the past hundred years, as also recognized by numerous sociologists in recent years and including many of this book's authors, might be redeemed in the twenty-first century? Or will there be more *passé* or vacuous concepts in the twenty-first century such as the 'ideological state apparatuses' or the 'structural functionalism' of the twentieth? And which sociological idols of their time, if any, will later fall into intellectual obscurity?

The book itself is the product of a genuinely international effort and it would be wrong not to recognize this dimension. It arose from an initiative in 2008 in the International Sociological Association and contains nineteen chapters – there is some disproportion (over half) of authors from English-speaking countries of majority-European extraction (Australia, Canada, UK, USA), with a smattering of other individual authors from Continental Europe, leaving sole representatives from Belarus, Brazil, Israel and The Philippines.

It is frustratingly difficult to review nineteen disparate chapters, each obviously independently prepared, but the collection as a whole sees itself, according to its back-cover blurb, as being analytical and critical in its view of what twentieth-century sociology has achieved and how this might be taken forward. Perhaps some authors do concentrate too much on how tired twentieth-century concepts – postmodernity, globalization – might be taken forward into the twenty-first. Also, despite 'globalization', the one article (by Susan A McDaniel) reporting any empirical research, which looks at the institutional location of authors and subject matter of articles and book reviews

in the three top mainstream American (and thus world) sociology journals in 2006 and 2007, finds a very parochial American concentration.

It does not require a seer to see that the world of the twenty-first century will be faced by manifold problems: the implications of climate change, of likely racial hostilities, of mass migration, of economic inequalities, and of diminishing natural resources. These topics all receive some coverage by various authors in this book, who recognize that a principal task of sociology – if it is to have any worthwhile future – is to analyse and confront these issues with meaningful research on how they will affect humanity and how some of their worst effects might be mitigated. The mundanities of theory in which some twentieth-century sociology allowed itself to luxuriate will have little relevance to these tasks.

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