


Book Review: The Education of David Martin: The Making of an Unlikely Sociologist by David Martin

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March 18,
2014

*David Martin's autobiography offers surprising and often moving insights into his life, times and intellectual development. As Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the LSE he gives readers a behind-the-scenes account of the protests during the 1960s and 1970s, and also recounts the ups and downs of his role in championing the King James Bible and the Prayer Book in the 1980s. **Mike Gane** recommends this humorous and witty read to LSE alumni, sociologists of religion and culture, and theologians. **David Martin** has responded at the foot of the review, and **Mike Gane** has provided his own reply.*



The Education of David Martin: The Making of an Unlikely Sociologist. David Martin. SPCK London. November 2013.

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David Martin spent many years at the LSE as sociologist of religion, and it is religion which is at the centre of this autobiography which is a very welcome addition to a growing number from academics who lived through the turbulent 1960s. Born in 1929, and coming late to the university, he is able to throw light on the ambience of the LSE and particularly the Department of Sociology in the years after 1962, and up to his departure for a position at the Southern Methodist University, Dallas, in 1986. He invites us to follow his 'pilgrim's progress' from early childhood memories of Methodist family, church, and education that always involved musical participation to his arrival in the Church of England, a kind of late living vindication of the famous Halévy thesis on English social mobility. The Dorset landscape is experienced in his youth as 'numinous' and contrasted with 'mundane' life in Mortlake (pp 19-35), yet it is hard to find any instances of revelation, of experiential mystery, nothing on death. His religion, he says, was not intellectual; it was revivalist, in an account of how an established Protestant Christian tradition is lived, how its variations and departures are negotiated as a life-time education.

But there are breaks. He reflects regretfully that 'after 1960 Christian formation became the preserve of a minority who had received a public school education or who had attended schools, often under Church aegis, where the older moral and intellectual ethos was fostered and nourished' (p.241). What his account reveals above all is that this institutional matrix was conceived and practiced by many as a complete religious experience – the Christian life. Even at the LSE he says he 'refused to profess secular vows' and his inaugural lecture in 1972 was 'my statement of disaffiliation from the faiths

required of the sociologist' – it 'was precisely my Bible-embedded upbringing that schooled me in doubt and inoculated me against the shibboleths of the university' (p. 232). Academics on the right, like David Martin, regard themselves as the true radicals and revolutionaries – the students were just going with the tide. It was the 1960s that saw the great decline, with its 'deadly mix' (p. 97) of hedonism, existential experimentation, the turn to the self, spontaneity without structure, easy revolt and even secular theology within the church (a possibility that Comte did not foresee). It was he who was going against this tide, 'protesting against the protestors'. What does he claim to have learnt that was not already present in the restricted solidarities of the religion of the 'older moral and intellectual ethos' and the sociological cannon? It is perhaps not inaccurate to say that he eventually embraced a version of the sociology of Max Weber, though this is quite well tucked away as he claims himself to have been the first with a theory of secularisation (p. 133). As the account unfolds what emerges is recognition of the virtues of hypocrisy and ethical complexity (p. 2), the ways in which good and evil are intertwined (p. 234), the advocacy of a substantive code fades away into comparative theo-sociology (and to research revivalist Pentecostalism).

The autobiography as a whole is rather like a thesis about the importance of the values of a world that has been incorporated neo-liberalism's elite. But Martin does not follow the neo-liberals all the way even though he frequents the company of Sir Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher. The university should not, for there are differentiated life-spheres, be modelled on the market, he says, but on the family or church. This is the conservative sermon he gives to first year students at the LSE who were expecting something more radical (p. 135). That he grasped the nature of student opposition to conservatism there is no doubt from his account of student discontent at a lecture by Peter Berger. David Martin neglects to mention the vulnerability of pompous conservatism to the superbly devastating wit of the hecklers at the LSE in those moments, for I was also at the lecture (in fact I was one of Martin's musically secular doctoral students 1968-71, and can testify to his own witcraft). He notes simply 'Berger and I were the same age and in the twinkling of an eye we aged a generation' (p. 147).



LSE Sociology Department, 1968. David Martin stands on the far right. Credit:[LSE Library](#)

What in the end does David Martin believe in after he has distanced himself from his father's faith, never fully signed up to sociology, and when the church has lost faith in itself? He says he has come to believe in himself, his own judgement (p. 219), his own participation in the 'Christian story of the Passion' (p. 138, 224) – not belief but faith in the myth, and a belief in the supreme ethical value of experiencing the Judeo-Christian mythologeme. The basic ambiguity arises when it is suggested that religion is 'simply life itself' (p. 237), the same language and same morals arise in all spheres of life (p. 238), for that puts secularity into a sub-religious register: the central issue is always rightness in moral complexity attired in a religious idiom. The story here explains the free choice of a religious faith (Church of England) that was not the one that had been received (Revivalist Methodist) so that this rightness frees itself from naiveté. He concludes simply, 'unlike Bunyan's Pilgrim, the burden of my quest never quite rolled away, though there were Delectable Mountains as well as Slough of Despond and prolonged periods in the dungeon of Giant Despair' (p. 227). As he reiterates the view that a mature-religion-trumps-all position, religion seems to lose definition and the end point of the journey seems still far off: these are interim conclusions (p. 225).

Yet if the autobiography is written from the 'niceness' of vicarage it is not without wit and humour. Recounting the absurd is a major feature of the autobiography, though perhaps only reflected upon through the notion of paradox (p. 128). There are hints of this in the early years but surfaces when taking a school exam when he instead of answers to questions on physics he wrote down the dates of 40 Handel operas (p. 60), and in this chapter on his passion for music we learn of the singing teacher who each night 'made herself up in case any nocturnal happening exposed her unprepared to her public' (p.

63). The absurd goes together with the obscene in his stint in the army as non-combatant (pp 66-78). There are other memorable examples: The Queen's courtier says the LSE Library can't be good, the only good libraries are at least 400 years old (p. 243); the student who presents a blank sheet of paper as zen knowledge (p. 155); streakers at a lecture of Talcott Parsons who was however 'physically and psychologically deaf, merely supposed he had made an inadvertent joke' (p. 153); or Prof MacCrae who asked him to look into the influence of 'aestheticism' on pacificism (his doctoral topic), said months later – after Martin confessed he was getting nowhere – he 'must have been referring to 'asceticism' (p. 117); the classes in the USA that 'revealed the depth of [an] educational disaster' where students imagined that there were two religions in the world 'only Methodists and Baptists' (p. 204). It is as if there is an intellectual struggle for rightness, and, enlighteningly, a coefficient of absurdity. The great exception to this combination is the period described as the defence of the Book of Common Prayer and the King James Bible and the leading role he played in a the campaign to save them in the early 1980s (pp 161-77), but this is because perhaps the whole modernising movement was absurd in itself (p. 129-31). This was his period of passionate commitment against the powers that be to defend the Christian heritage and the 'planned ruination of my inner imagined landscape' (p. 162).

Mike Gane is Professor Emeritus at [Loughborough University](#). He has written widely on French social theory, particularly the work of Jean Baudrillard. [Read more reviews by Mike.](#)

Response to Mike Gane's review of *The Education of David Martin*.

A serious review that offers interesting reflections and commends a book as witty and humorous is not to be sneezed at. But I am mightily surprised by some of the characterisations, mostly relating to my political and religious commitments. However, there is one characterisation that relates to my 'claim' to 'have been the first with a theory of secularisation', forgetting the priority of the main progenitors of the theory, such as Max Weber. I make it extremely clear that there were pre-existing theories and assumptions about the inevitability of secularisation and that my *first* move was to challenge for the first time the ideological elements embedded in those assumptions. I then make it clear that I *then* devised (and published in 1969) the first statement of the *general empirical trends* towards secularisation as these were inflected by major historical patterns, beginning with the contrasting patterns of Britain and France.

I also make it clear that I later extended the analysis of historically inflected patterns to Latin America, in particular Pentecostalism as the Christian analogue of Islamic revival. The emergence of global Pentecostalism provides the story line of the book, virtually ignored in the review, which takes off from the revivalism of my home and all that meant for the Protestant dialectic of hypocrisy and sincerity to which the review rightly draws

attention. This morally secure and happy background was undermined by the broadening of my intellectual horizons, until in late adolescence I conformed to an intellectually fashionable left-liberal Tolstoyan pacifism with a whiff of Blakean antinomianism. Yet the Evangelicalism of my childhood had swept across Latin America and undermined sociological assumptions about the likely direction of development and modernisation. Modernity had turned out multiple and other; and arguably my father's naive faith had trumped sociological sophistication. I rediscovered my street preacher father in climes that someone who left school at eleven had never heard of. Hence the climactic chapter in the book, when in southern Chile I was mistaken for a visiting Evangelist and by way of an impromptu sermon told a gathering of landless peasants the story of my father's conversion, and invited them to tell me their own stories. That moment in November 1991 is signalled as an interim closure in a more benign (and more truthful) version of Gosse's *Father and Son*.

There is a Retrospect to the book, in which I set out with what I mistakenly imagined was extreme clarity, the nature of my political and religious commitments. These the review misrepresents. The review says I did not 'follow the neo-liberals all the way' even though I 'frequented' the company of Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph. I met Margaret Thatcher twice and Keith Joseph once. I did not 'follow' neo-liberals *at all*, nor was I, according to some crude packaging of opinion, 'on the right'. I was conservative with a small 'c' insofar as I believed selfhood and creativity nourished by settled modes of induction, by habit and by hard practice in mastering recalcitrant reality. I was liberal with a small 'l', but deeply sceptical of the liberal understanding of the malleability of violence and dependence on authority. I was also sceptical of the liberal expectation that the corruption of human affairs, especially international relations, will progressively respond to goodwill, reciprocity and reason.

In short I was an Augustinian theologically and a realist sociologically, the sociology reinforcing the theology. My reviewer says I was never 'fully signed up to sociology': on the contrary I am fully signed up to sociology and therefore to its bleak implications rather than to the required delusions of many of its practitioners. Sociology exposed my left-liberal pacifism as an irresponsible delusion providing the pleasures of righteous denunciation rather than sober appraisal of what can realistically be achieved. As someone who arrived at LSE late after reading sociology by private study while teaching nine-year olds, I regarded the students of the sixties as *inter alia* the creatures of that delusion and the modes of education spawned by it. What I cherished as hard-won privilege they despised as effortless entitlement. I regarded the resistant world as permanently defined by recalcitrant structures of authority and accumulated power.

I make clear my commitment to a liberalism with long term sources feeding into English sociology: the Christian hinterland of T.H. Green and L.T. Hobhouse. On page 221 I say unequivocally that I believed 'in the obligations imposed on us by the common good. It was just that I no longer accepted the liberal account of the way the world works and the

way it is bound to go, for example, the liberal triumphalism of Francis Fukuyama. The world cannot easily be divided up into progressives and reactionaries, or good and bad, or those destined to win and those destined to lose’.

The review’s account of my religious commitments is unrecognisable. At one point the review says religion ‘seems to lose definition and the end point of the journey seems far off’ and at another it says that I have come ‘to believe in myself and my own judgement’... ‘not belief but faith in the myth and a belief in the supreme ethical value of experiencing the Judeo-Christian mythologeme’. I have too much respect for Judaism to refer to the American hybrid ‘Judeo-Christianity’; and Christianity is redemptive not ethical. There is no way out of these multiple muddles. On page 218 I iterate affirmations regularly recited as defining Christianity. ‘But in literature, and in great swathes of human history, senseless violence lies within the malignant reciprocities demanded by the rule of honour and power. Christianity has reversed all that by making the mark of humiliation the sign of triumph. Christianity has transferred honour and power, glory and might, from the vengeful act of humiliation to the humiliated body itself. It is the body with the marks of the nails and the wound in the side that rose triumphant from the dead’.

– David Martin, 27th March 2014

Response to David Martin’s reply of *The Education of David Martin*.

I’m glad that my review has afforded David Martin space to clarify one or two points in his autobiography. Readers will no doubt be interested in particular in his relations with Sir Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher at a key moment of British politics in the mid-1970s. I noticed that although advising these politicians he did not seem to be fully signed up to their project and it comes as a complete surprise to learn that he did not adhere to the slightest part of it. Thus the impression I gave in the review was wrong, he did not seek their company, it was the other way around. It is a pity that this is not made clear in the account and that more detail is not provided of his weekend with Margaret Thatcher. As for secularization, as I say, I read on page 133 about the eureka moment ‘I had devised... the first general theory of secularization.’ The words are in that order in my edition. I simply reported this in the review without any comment. As for the loss of focus on the concept of religion towards the end of the book, I read on page 225 that it is a problem now to ‘think of religion as a coherent and self-contained category.’ And I interpreted the final reflections with the appearance of the concept of radical evil as a direct move away from theology into a generalized metaphysics.

As I did not comment on this, or give an account of David Martin’s religious commitments – as he says Augustinian – it is not surprising that it is found to be unrecognizable as an account of them. I note Martin claims he is ‘fully signed up to sociology’ yet throughout the autobiography sociology is held at a certain distance – to be at the service of theology or metaphysics. Indeed Martin writes that this distance was noted by other sociologists. At one memorable point, there is an account of his first period at the LSE when he was to

lecture on Modern Britain, and he writes, 'I knew nothing about industrial sociology, and cared less' (p. 126). I do not report this as a critical comment, and I did not write the review as a critique of political, sociological or theological ideas. I did not comment on his wide reading or even more interesting what he appears not to have read. My aim was to indicate some of the things that caught my eye that might interest readers of the LSE Review of Books and to recommend the autobiography as an important document for those interested in how a sociologist worked at the LSE in the 1960s and after. It was not a rushed review; I would now add, though, a recommendation of caveat emptor. I noted his propensity for wit and perhaps it is not accidental that at the end of his response to my review he quotes from page 218 of the autobiography, and if one turns to that page there is no text, only a photograph of the author. Or is there a special author's edition?

- Mike Gane, 18th July 2015