

Notes on the Discipline/Notes sociologiques

A Productive Decade in the Tradition of Canadian Sociology

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Canadian sociology is now a very diversified field. Important studies or books have been published in most major areas, including the new developing ones: social networks, consumption, social capital, gay studies, communication studies, and sports, among others. On the one hand, it is interesting to note that a majority of empirical studies now take gender into account and make a clear distinction between men and women whenever it is pertinent. Looking at the number of books published recently one cannot say that the life experience of women has been ignored. On the other hand, the situation is different when one considers national duality, English Canada and Quebec. Many studies consider the latter, but a certain number continue to present the whole of Canada as a normative unit overlooking the differences, which may be important in some cases. Language has always been an important barrier which has, to some extent, created two different sociologies in Canada, even when taking into account that francophone scholars refer to their English-speaking colleagues more frequently. Compared to France, the United States, Great Britain or Germany – countries of reference for many English and French speaking sociologists — social theory is less well developed in Canada. In English Canada, there is no equivalent to Fernand Dumont or Michel Freitag, two great thinkers who have built important theories.

In this short contribution, I will refer to seven books and I would also like to include at least four others to this list. Of course other studies should also be added as the nineties produced a large number of excellent publications.

Canadian sociologists continue to express a strong interest in stratification, and especially in class analysis, a topic privileged since the publication of the seminal work of John Porter in 1965. I have therefore chosen some books in this field, especially important for English speaking sociology.

Canadian sociologists did not participate in the international research program initiated by John Golthorpe on social class in advanced industrial societies (the Casmin Project), but a team of researchers was involved in another project — which adopted an approach closer to a Marxist one — directed by Eric Olin Wright. Two Canadian sociologists, Wallace Clement and John Myles, were involved in this last research enterprise where they analysed the role of class and gender in the stratification process in Canada and in other developed countries. The results of this research, *Relations of Ruling* (1994), have suggested that new relations of ruling were constructed around class and gender in all advanced capitalist societies. The feminization of class structure has had an important impact on the worker's claims and work issues, and it brought new issues to the table: pay equity, child care, paid leaves of absence to care for family, and policies against sexual harassment. It also transformed the material interest of the working class and the conditions under which the capital-labour wage relation is negotiated. Among many interesting results, I will mention two findings. First, their comparative analysis showed that Nordic families (including Canadian ones) tend to be less patriarchal in terms of decision-making. Second, postindustrialism in Canada has brought a break with the industrial past and nation-specific class attitudes have been either resilient in the face of, or reinforced by, postindustrialism.

Social class was probably the key concept of Anglo-Canadian sociology during the seventies and eighties, as we can see in reading the table of content of the two major journals of sociology published in English. However, is social class still a useful concept in explaining social phenomena? Today the answer is not as clear. For example, research done by Statistics Canada showed that wage polarization or growing labour market insecurity have grown within, not between, social classes. Other studies arrived at the conclusion that social class approaches have lost their analytical power for explaining much that is consequential to class theory.

In a remarkable book, *Politics and Ideology in Canada* (1999), Michael Ornstein and Michael H. Stevenson emphasize the importance of class and ideology as keys to understanding the crisis of the Keynesian welfare state and the transition toward a new political order. Published at the end of the twentieth century, this book is in fact more typical of the sociology done in the seventies and eighties, and for this reason I have hesitated to include it in the list. The book is based on the analysis of surveys conducted between 1975 and 1981, and one may regret that it was published so much later. Nevertheless, the authors propose an analysis of the Canadian society which,

although it is in line with other works done since the seventies, will help us to understand the shape of Canadian political culture at a decisive moment in its history. According to the authors, public opinion was strongly linked to class rather than to party politics. The book helps one understand the changes in the ideology of the elite, the contemporary debates about public policies, and the future of the welfare state, which are important issues at the turn of the century.

I would like to mention the publication of three good books (not included on my short list), which refer the concept of social class in a broad sense. The first one was written by Christopher McAll, *Class, Ethnicity, and Social Inequality* (1990). According to the author, social classes are less defined by the system of production, and more by other attributes such as: residential practices, education, culture, and pattern of consumption. According to McAll, ethnicity is closely linked to social class; he also criticizes the ideology of multiculturalism because it masks real class opposition. This book offers a remarkable discussion of these classic concepts.

In *The Education-Jobs Gap* (1998), D. W. Livingstone — a sociologist who wrote many books on social class in Canada — argues that, contrary to a common vision upheld by newspapers and deputy ministers, the major problem in education-work relations is not education, *but work*. He criticizes the “myth of the knowledge economy” and maintains that there is underemployment of knowledge in the labour market. Economic restructuring is the main source of the wastage of workers’ useful knowledge, as illustrated by the talent-use gap, structural unemployment, credential gap, subjective underemployment, and involuntary reduced employment, six facets that are examined empirically in this well-done, and provocative, study.

I would like also to mention the work written by a sociologist originally from Quebec and now teaching at Princeton, Michèle Lamont, *Comparative field work is rare in sociology*, and this book, *Money, Morals, Manners* (1992), will remain an important contribution to the knowledge of the middle class in America and France. Lamont proposes new ways of interpreting national differences and gives importance to cultural resources. Her analysis brings her to criticize Bourdieu’s theoretical framework.

Multiculturalism and national identity questions are two important topics present in Canadian publishers’ catalogues during the nineties. Publishing books about the Canadian crisis has become a real industry over the past 20 years, but, generally speaking, political scientists and historians were much more active in this field than are English-speaking sociologists although Reginald Bibby and John Conway have proposed very interesting views on these questions. Quebec is an exception in this case, because sociologists and anthropologists there have published numerous good works on these two topics. I have chosen three books in this field, one in English and two in

French. Two sociologists made important — and complementary — contributions to this field in the nineties: Fernand Dumont about nation building in Quebec and Ian Angus about the same process in English Canada. These two great books must be read in sequence as they deal with the emergence of two different nations in the sociological sense. Both studies use the same conceptual instrument, they are sociologies of interpretation. Both these books explain why “Canadian identity appears to be fragmented”, to quote a book by two Quebec sociologists, Gilles Bourque and Jules Duchastel.

There is a clear effort in English Canada to interpret the building of a new national identity. Ian Angus probably offers the best sociological contribution to analysing the national identity crisis. He uses the works of two important English Canadian intellectuals, Harold Innis and George Grant as a starting point. He recalls Grant’s nostalgic view of a romantic British Canada that no longer exists, replaced as it is by a new identity much more in tune with Canadian reality. Outside Quebec, the relative decline of the French fact has favoured the English culture, making it the dominant historical reference. English language playing the same role in Canada that the French language plays in Quebec: it is the language of identity, the language of communication. A new discourse on Canadian identity is presently being built in English Canada and it reflects the structure of its population. The latest publicity campaign — “My name is Joe and I’m Canadian” — which opposes an English Canadian to an English American, illustrates exactly Angus’ way of thinking. “English Canada may be defined through this metaphor of the new world encounter with the wilderness combined with the invention of a border departing us from the United States — a border in the wilderness” (p. 132). For the author, Canadian multiculturalism does not affect the new Canadian identity because this form of multiculturalism, in an unilingual English speaking Canada, welcomes particular rights. In this case, contrary to what Reginald Bibby thought for example, multiculturalism is not in opposition to a common national identity. According to Angus, national identity is constructed mainly by discourse.

Quebec society is exemplar in the modern world in the sense that we can trace all major steps of its development almost since the beginning: occupation by aboriginal people, colonization by the French, Conquest by the English, survival of the French and cohabitation, immigration, marginalization of aboriginal nations followed by an important revival. Both Quebec and Canada are new nations according to Gerard Bouchard’s concept. Fernand Dumont has analysed the birth of this new society using an original conceptual framework, fully developed in the appendix of *Genèse de la société québécoise* (1993). He upholds that nations are built and defined as a national reference with the help of discourses: ideologies, literature, history, and language. Societies are then explained by interpreters, states Dumont. The concept of national refer-

ence defined by Dumont in his book — a concept he developed 20 years previously in various works — constitutes, without a doubt, an important contribution to sociology. Dumont has done a magnificent job at describing meticulously the birth and the transformation of French Canada, which eventually became the Quebec society. However, his book remains ambiguous because, in fact, Dumont analyses, in a sociological manner, the changes that have characterized all of the French Canadian nation, but the title refers only to the Quebec society. Originally, he had planned to write a sequel to this book, a study of the emergence of the contemporary Quebec society. Dumont refused the concept of a Quebec nation to describe the new normative unit which is, according to several analysts (sociologist, political analysts, philosophers), presently emerging and which is very much discussed as is witnessed by the great number of books published on this issue over the passed five years.

Generally, Quebec sociologists study Canada very little. I would therefore like to point out the important contribution made by Gilles Bourque et Jules Duchastel, *L'identité fragmentée* (1996), which analyses the way Canadian identities have been presented by various prime ministers in Constitutional Conference speeches since 1941. Their work clearly shows that, over the years, Canadian identity, more and more centered on a particular type of citizenship, has contributed to the fragmentation of Canadian society.

Gérard Bouchard's book, *Quelques arpents d'Amérique* (1996), is theoretically and empirically quite original and English Canadian sociologists would be well advised to read it. Bouchard puts forward a new vision of traditional French Canada and offers an outstanding socio-historical analysis, which presents an original method of linking micro and macrosociological perspectives. His book is both a work of history and of sociology, a vast fresco of a long historical period of a small society — the Saguenay area — and its relation to continental North America. The strategies of reproduction of the family group are seen as the social fact which explains all the others, hence the key to the comprehension of the birth and evolution of this specific society. His starting point is the Saguenay region from which Bouchard gradually builds a new interpretation of the Quiet Revolution. He strongly refutes the vision of a retarded, isolated, self-centred French Canada to which he opposes an original way of occupying its place in the New World, an exciting typically American enterprise which began in the sixteenth century. Is the colonisation of the Saguenay typical of the continental process which covers five centuries? Very much so concludes Bouchard. His 632-page book undoubtedly offers a renewed image of French Canada.

Studying consumption is now an important field in sociology, especially well developed in Great Britain. Canadian anthropologist, Grant McCracken, made an important contribution to this field by publishing *Culture and*

Consumption (1990). For McCracken, consumption is not only a mean to affirm one's distinctive status in the society — an affirmation in line with Bourdieu's approach —, it also defines new ways of behaving, a new culture. This book leads to a better understanding of how goods and services contribute to social change. The author shows how "goods are a way of devising a new concept of the group" and how they also have a genuinely innovative capacity, and, in this sense, they are powerful engines of social change in our societies. This work helps to build a new perspective to study not only consumption, but also contemporary culture in developed societies. This important essay, as well as Lamont's, will certainly contribute to a serious review of Bourdieu's theory of distinction.

I would like to mention the publication in 1999 of a very interesting book, *Domestic Goods. The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years*, by Joy Parr which studies the growth of consumption in the two decades following World War II. She focuses on economic policy, industrial design and household behaviours to explain the emergence of a new commodity culture, but she does not refer to the first important survey on household consumption behaviour and attitudes made, in 1959, by Gérald Fortin and Marc-Adélarde Temblay, and she also ignores many other good studies. In this sense, this book is a fine example of the "two solitudes" in Canadian sociology.

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