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Wandering the Sociological Imagination
Canadian Sociologists in the First Person

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Canadian Sociologists in the First Person
Edited by Stephen Harold Riggins and Neil McLaughlin
McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021, 592 pages
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This collection of first-person professional accounts across the major fields of sociology aims to "document the Canadian "sociological imagination" through personal recollections of a lifetime of experiences" (R&M, 2021, p. 3). To accomplish this, *Canadian Sociologists in the First Person* moves through twenty "guided autobiographies" (R&M, 2021, p. 5) written by scholars chosen for their expertise in Canadian sociology or their long and storied careers in sociology departments across the country. Consistent with the distanced, objective stance common to the natural sciences, these autobiographical adventures mostly take the form of *realist stories*: "a documentary style of writing that presents apparent facts and interpretations in a no-nonsense manner" with "the presence of the author as observer" (R&M, 2021, p. 20). For novice and experienced scholars alike, the questions become what lessons can be learned from this wide-ranging, longitudinal look at sociologists whose works span from the 1970s to the present, and more importantly, can autobiographical reflections, "frowned upon by the discipline" (R&M, 2021, p. 3) for conventions that "distort reality" (R&M, 2021, p. 22), properly capture the Canadian sociological imagination?

The overall structure of the book illustrates an interconnectedness indicative of the 'small worlds' that comprise such academic fields. Throughout the chapters, readers are continually exposed to the same cast of contributing characters who refer to each other in influence or in collaboration; William Carroll (Ch. 11) finds inspiration and a point of divergence from the works of Wallace Clement (Ch. 9), Stephen Harold Riggins (Ch. 19) is assigned as a TA for Metta Spencer (Ch. 14), Mark C.J. Stoddart (Ch. 8) refers to projects undertaken by David B. Tindall (Ch. 7), etc., However, interconnectedness, or rather the often lack there of, suggests a critique still required of the academy today. These same continually mentioned mentors, PhD committee members and colleagues are noticeably absent from the entries by indigenous scholar Cora J. Voyageur and black scholar Carl E. James, who present their own, seemingly less mainstream supporting cast. The sociological lesson? Sometimes it's what you don't see that is most important.

Regardless of milieu, this social interconnectedness is seen as key to the professional practice throughout. Amongst many excellent insights and tips for budding social scientists (e.g., William Carroll's examples of "power-infused, institutional barriers to creating change" (R&M, 2021, p. 276), Mark Stoddart's advice that "it is worth giving a research idea three tries before giving up on it" (R&M, 2021, p. 210), Daniel Béland's tip to monitor citations of your work "to find out what academic readers are interested in what they do with [your] work once it is published" (R&M, 2021, p. 167)), Daniel Béland offers that success in academia is "largely about collaboration and personal relationships" (R&M, 2021, p. 165). Yet, this volume starkly illustrates how difficult this can be. The book gives innumerable examples of interdepartmental conflict and strife in "a world divided into sectarian and personal fiefdoms" (R&M, 2021, p. 56). The tales are often harrowing. Scott Davies describes being hung out to dry by an associate chair: "Three of four people in the department are really out to get you. I won't do anything about that. You'll have to deal with them on your own" (R&M, 2021, p. 89). Wallace Clement shares a story of a dean's attempt to overturn a tribunal's decision to uphold a junior faculty member's tenure review (R&M, 2021, p. 236). David Tindall exposes private-sector financial influence over public-sector interests (R&M, 2021, p. 194). Ralph Matthews recalls departmental factions blockading each other's access to stairwells and elevators by (R&M, 2021, p. 145), and the amount of sexism and harassment described by Susan McDaniel and Meg Luxton is shocking (R&M, 2021, pp. 103/256). Metta Spencer claims these conflicts "are probably matters of wounded pride" (R&M, 2021, p. 373). Although she locates these wounds more

in the "loss of group prestige than conflicts over material resources," (R&M, 2021, p. 373) it is hard to not to read the two elements as intertwined in the often-mentioned waning of tenure and funding opportunities. Sociology has not been at the forefront of the restructuring of the academy because "the production of knowledge in the social sciences is not very profitable" (R&M, 2021, p. 12). This ongoing institutional transition into an "entrepreneurial mentality" means that "curiosity-driven research has become the preserve of those who are not vitally interested in securing grants" (R&M, 2021, p. 456). The lesson learned? How one positions themselves as colleague and researcher will largely impact their professional success as they define it.

Despite these harrowing tales, it is clear that the saving grace that makes these troubles worthwhile is an inspired relationship to the field's ideas and concepts that are often admittedly that which drew the contributors to their chosen profession. Here, the book is at its best and the novice scholar is invited to glean many cursory but effectively contextualized introductions to key thinkers and their sociological concepts. These include Weber's ideas/interests distinction (R&M, 2021, p. 165), Castell's project identity (R&M, 2021, p. 204), Howard Becker's labelling theory, Pierre Bourdieu's cultural and social capital concepts (R&M, 2021, p. 379), Foucault's genealogical method (R&M, 2021, p. 405), Du Bois' concept of double consciousness (R&M, 2021, p. 419), and Dumont's divided culture theory (R&M, 2021, p. 493) to name only a few. We are invited to see how commitment or rejection of these ideas yield certain outcomes in the contributor's career. The authors' relationships to these ideas frames their opinion as to what sociology should be and the axioms it should practice. This is best summarized by Jean-Philippe Warren who, parsing the contributions along tensions within the discipline, see the practice as "essentially torn between those who advocate keeping society at a distance and those who plea for a certain complicity with it" (R&M, 2021, p. 489). This lesson about the field is invaluable. But the question remains, do these reflections capture the Canadian social imagination?

Meg Luxton provides us with a defined sense of C. Wright Mills' "social imagination" and its function: to better our "understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities" (R&M, p. 249). And yet throughout the ample opportunities presented throughout these realist accounts, I did not find a single author who exercised better understanding of themselves in connection to that often "frowned upon" (R&M, 2021, p. 3) autobiographical practice in the resulting life stories

that undeniably structure their and our own larger social realities. One has to ask, why did none of the authors reflectively address the implications of the social imagination as necessarily involved in the imaginative process they were embarking on, even if that simply meant outlining the possibilities and limitations to the exercise at hand? There are glimpses of hope that are lost. Ralph Matthews speaks accurately of his excellence in sociology "because I can think in grey" (R&M, 2021, p. 128). Yet, he proceeds to tell us that this refers "to the fact that much of social science reasoning is relativistic rather than reductionist" (R&M, 2021, p. 128). Wouldn't the social imagination within some cultural bounds, even at least in an entertained structural thought-exercise, transcend this relativism? Why subjugate sociology and denigrate its truth value to a framework that denies the truth of imagination and the storytelling itself? Other entries even appear stunted in their storytelling, opening the account like a journal article, telling the reader what will be addressed, in what order, and what they can expect in subsequent sections of the reading. To be fair, the contributors were invited for their reputation in sociology, not their reputation in storytelling. But given the sociological implications, why give us realist stories when we could be taken on sociological, dialectical adventures of the sociological mind in its field? Overall, even with this longing for more, this small fault doesn't detract from the value of this volume. The lesson learned? The problematization in how something was made suggests how it might be remade: Where can we take reflections on the Canadian sociological imagination from here?