

Mathieu Deflem (ed.)

### Sociologists in a Global Age. Biographical Perspectives

Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007, 288 pp.

It has become quite popular to approach different occupational or ethnic groups via life stories. Everybody likes to discuss their own biographies, which are often interesting, or at the least informative in different ways. Sociologists are in a problematic category: neither necessarily interesting nor good subjects for biographies, they are eager to write them, although a diligent sociologist who has remained for the most part within the discipline does not normally mean an interesting biography. Even famous sociologists will find it difficult to 'sell' their autobiographies after they have retired, when they have time to reflect on their lives. Anthony Giddens might be a good subject, but only if he tells 'all' about Blair and/or opens up about his love life, which he probably does not want to do.

An alternative to full autobiographies has been collections of shorter biographies. Mathieu Deflem had a good idea when he used the metaphor of globalization and travels in this work on the lives of sociologists. This is certainly an interesting perspective: nowadays, sociologists travel a lot, although those of my generation (born directly after the war) seldom have itineraries similar to sociologists of the previous generation; those who had to flee from Nazi Germany, for example. Our travels are much more benign and mainly voluntary. In Deflem's collection, the majority of authors were originally European. Some have moved to the United States, others have been there many times and been influenced by American sociology. A few are Americans. Some writers come from Asia: one Japanese, one Chinese, one South Korean. They have all travelled extensively during their lives. The important difference, pointed out by Eiko Ikegami in the book, is that nowadays sociology travellers can maintain contact with their country of origin and have genuinely different identities – in her case a Japanese identity when she is in Kyoto and an American sociological scientific identity in New York. This is a valuable point. Those who have spent their time regularly between two places (e.g. Derrida, Foucault, Beck, and others) are certainly more likely to emphasize that they can have different identities, at will, than those who stay put.

The editor has divided the stories into three groups: first, sociologists whose career has been especially marked by travel; second, those whose career has had a theoretical linkage (although they certainly did travel a lot, too); and third, those in whom the connecting link is known as sociological identity. What this third category means is not quite clear to me, although it is different from the travelling identity mentioned above. The title of the book is apt and all of the contributing sociologists discuss globalization from different vantage points.

However, it is a bit strange that the book has so little to say about the personal lives of the sociologists. Typical formulations are 'my then husband' or 'my first wife'. No personal conflicts, difficult divorce proceedings or fights over children are reported (very few children are mentioned at all, although Ruut Veenhoven does mention abortion and voluntary childlessness, connecting this with his sociological activity) even though one might think that a difficult divorce or battle for custody (or simply change of spouse) would affect one's sociological perspective significantly.

To mention some of the individual stories, Saskia Sassen writes in a highly abstract way and includes very little personal stuff. She mentions only the interesting fact that when she arrived in the United States she was accepted by the university without formal papers or a degree. This wouldn't be possible today! Interestingly, she does not mention her famous present partner (Richard Sennett), which would probably be considered politically incorrect had the author been male. There are some minor but irritating recurring errors throughout her text, e.g. *poesis* vs. *poiesis* and *Hypolitte* vs. *Hyppolite*.

There are many texts with very little personal content. Richard Munch presents a completely impossible, megalomaniac research programme (p. 108), but does not specify who should do it. Pierpaolo Donati gives a spirited defence of relational sociology with which I sympathize, but it is far from the subject of the book . . . and there is almost nothing about his academic life story. Ewa Morawska is very sympathetic and modest in a story that could have been presented much more dramatically.

Piotr Sztompka gives us an extremely interesting and open-hearted account of an ambitious, careerist sociologist for whom excellent research is a means to an end, in this case to the academic top. Not everybody will want or will be able to follow Sztompka's recommendations, but it is clear that he has arrived. Perhaps the funniest detail is his satisfaction in hearing that one of his books is obligatory reading for students in Azerbaijan as a replacement for Lenin. His contrasts between Polish and American university culture are illuminating.

Edward Tiryakian rounds up the whole thing in presenting a very good example of all the themes, globalization, multiculturalism, internationalism, the role of important mentors, theoretical developments and changes. He is clearly of an older generation than the others. Born in 1929 in the United States, Tiryakian and his family moved to France soon after his birth, before returning to the States in 1939. He made his career after the war at Harvard, under Parsons, Kluckhohn and Sorokin (who was a total failure at Harvard, having quarrelled with everybody and been relegated to giving introductory courses!).

One conclusion: sociology needs international contacts, but they should be more many-sided. All of the authors have spent an important period of their work or studies in the United States, which is almost the only country that offers really good competitive study scholarship possibilities and important environments with both international and good local students. No similar experience is described relative to Europe and European studies. Even European post-modernism seems to find its way to Europe via United States secondary reactions. In Europe, it seems rather that retired professors have a good chance of starting a new career (Martin Albrow). Perhaps the latest generation of sociologists might have different stories, but certainly not the kind where one immediately meets the most famous sociologists in very small seminars.

To get Europe really moving, we need to have well-funded institutions that can provide opportunities for graduate students to mix with the great names of European sociology. Potentially, there are some, but nothing really so obvious as the Harvards, Berkeleys or New Yorks of this book, and I doubt there ever will be. For instance, the European University Institute in Florence is potentially such a place, but it is too disparate and all its present fellows are more or less lone wolves unable to create sufficient momentum. Thus, the present situation will unfortunately continue. *Sociologists in a Global Age* is an excellent document about this.

J. P. Roos  
University of Helsinki, Finland