

John Porter. *A Life in Sociology*

Rick Helmes-Hayes. *Measuring the Mosaic: An Intellectual Biography of John Porter.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010, 592 pp. \$35.00 paper (978-0-8020-9648-7), \$85.00 hardcover (978-0-8020-9703-3)

It took Rick Helmes-Hayes about twenty years to write the biography of English Canada's most distinguished sociologist of his time, John Porter (1921–1979). Porter greatly influenced Canadian sociology by his scholarly publications, and his teaching contributed to the training of a whole generation of sociologists. Helmes-Hayes has written a remarkable intellectual biography of this most important scholar, while outlining the social context of his era, placing Porter's work in a broader perspective. In doing so he has succeeded in producing an excellent book that is the deserving winner of Canadian Sociological Association's John Porter Tradition of Excellence Book Award for 2011.

The author characterizes John Porter as “a new liberal practical intellectual” who, after his return from the London School of Economics (LSE) in the 1950s, showed remarkable interest in the analysis of social class. According to the biographer “The study of class was central to the entire intellectual ambiance of LSE.” However, even before leaving the LSE, Porter had rejected Marxism as a theoretical perspective and was suspicious of Soviet communism. After his return to Canada, he found work in Ottawa as a sociology professor at Carleton University, which had just opened and was developing rapidly. Early in his career he drew up a research project that looked at social stratification and the structure of power in Canada.

THE CANADIAN MOSAIC

Influenced by his years in London, John Porter questioned the idea — very popular in the 1950s according to him — that Canada was a democratic, “classless society.” Helmes-Hayes reminds the reader that many

historians and essayists had already studied the inequalities in Canadian society, noting as well that, in *The Vertical Mosaic* (1965), Porter hardly discussed any of the most important works published on these questions in Canada. Helmes-Hayes himself has reviewed all the major works published at that time. Yet neither Porter — nor his biographer — mention the work of any of Quebec's major sociologists of that period, such as Fernand Dumont, Jean-Charles Falardeau, Gérald Fortin, and Marcel Rioux, neglecting even Jacques Dofny and Marcel Rioux's development of the original concept of *classe ethnique* in «Les classes sociales au Canada français» (*Revue française de Sociologie*, 3, 3 (1962):290–300). These works were contemporary to the writing of *The Vertical Mosaic*, but Porter ignored them there and in later writings, as does his biographer now.

Helmes-Hayes emphasizes the genesis of *The Vertical Mosaic*, a work that became a classic in Canadian sociology and gave its author international recognition, including an award from The American Sociological Association. “His orientation to the data on class, power and education in *The Vertical Mosaic* reflects the spirit of the times” writes the author. There were major changes relevant to Canadian stratification at this time: an increase in the size of the middle class, an expansion of tertiary education, and suburbanization. The reforms of the educational system were one of the most important social issues being discussed in the public arena as well as in universities. If *The Vertical Mosaic* was an inspiration for all Canadian sociologists during the twenty years that followed its publication, today it is mainly of historical interest, according to Helmes-Hayes: “Clearly, the book no longer sets the agenda or style of Canadian sociology.” How does the author come to this conclusion? Certainly, many Canadian sociologists continue to work on social stratification and refer to Porter's works, and Helmes-Hayes does write that it is still appropriate to describe Canada in the image of the vertical mosaic, “an iconic metaphor to which current Canadian social scientists turn in their attempts to understand changes in the character and quality of their national life.” He further notes that the striking image of the mosaic rapidly replaced the thesis of two founding peoples (Henri Bourassa, André Laurendeau, Davidson Dunton); of Canada as a “British fragment” (Louis Hartz); and of Canada as a society of hewers of wood and drawers of water, or a staples economy based on the exploitation of natural resources as studied by Albert Faucher and Harrold Innis.

Helmes-Hayes minimizes the contemporary relevance of *The Vertical Mosaic*. Yet, even today, it remains a source of inspiration for contemporary research, on the condition that — as for all the classic works of sociology — scholars accept Porter's intentions, and do not linger

over the parts of it that have manifestly aged. The greatest merit of Porter's work is to have linked studies of class structure and power in Canada. Many of his empirical observations highlight the postwar period that he studied most intensively and help understand the genesis of the contemporary situation. Helmes-Hayes's judgment on the relevance of his work to contemporary issues is highly debatable because the study of the concentration of economic power in Canada, as proposed by Porter, is still relevant. Moreover, works that scrutinize elites in so many different fields at the same time remain rare. Porter described and analyzed the leadership of large firms, organized labour, politicians, federal bureaucrats, the mass media, higher education, and the clergy, and examined the relations between these elites. No doubt the relative importance of different elite components changes over time. But a good case can be made that elite complexity is persistent and requires study. For instance, his analysis of the media and of the federal bureaucracy remain relevant today.

Helmes-Hayes summarizes and quotes the reviews of *The Vertical Mosaic* published in Canada, the United States, and England, as well those published in French in Quebec. There is a long excerpt from an interesting letter written by Guy Rocher, who was at Harvard University at the time. Helmes-Hayes does more than a historian or biographer would normally do. He puts on his sociologist's cap and evaluates Porter's work based on the most important critiques of it, discussing theoretical inaccuracies, problems concerning the reliability of his data, and methodological problems. Still, the biographer makes clear that he recognizes that Porter was working in uncertain territory, with limited data and limited financial and human resources, all of which would affect the quality of what could be produced from such an ambitious research program.

The Vertical Mosaic was innovative but open to criticism on many levels. It did not take into consideration the status of women, the marginalization of First Nations, or Quebec's place as a *global society* within Canada, to use a concept from the French sociological school. While, as Helmes-Hayes points out, *The Vertical Mosaic* had little to say about the place of women in the Canadian social structure as well as their near-absence from positions of power, it is worth pointing out that Porter contributed to the training of several young English-speaking female sociologists who would eventually fill this gap. Subsequently, gender analysis developed considerably, often influenced by Porter's methodology. He rarely, if ever, touched on Native issues, problems that would become very important a few decades later. At the time, few intellectuals or Canadian scholars took any interest in the material conditions of existence or the serious social problems — extreme poverty, alcoholism,

and violence — that wreaked havoc within Aboriginal communities; nor did they question the absence of representatives of First Nations in the Canadian structure of power. Here too, Aboriginal studies would have to wait a few years.

A MAJOR OVERSIGHT : NATIONAL DUALITY

The inequality between Francophones and Anglophones and the relative absence from power of French-Canadians are more present in *The Vertical Mosaic* than are gender inequalities; yet Helmes-Hayes does not really highlight the specificity of Porter's way of addressing these questions. According to his biographer, Porter did not really understand the scope of changes taking place in Quebec, and he did not understand the impact of the Quiet Revolution that was in full swing at the time. Yet Helmes-Hayes also has little to say about these questions and it would have been interesting to know more by delving into Porter's archives. He does mention — but only in a footnote! — the content of a letter that Porter sent to Christopher Beattie, who had criticized the weakness of his analysis of Quebec's rapidly changing situation. According to Helmes-Hayes,

[Porter] claimed that in 1963, when he submitted the manuscript for review, events had not unfolded in a way that would allow him to comment authoritatively on developments in Quebec. Even as late as 1967, he was not sure how to read the data about Quebec.

What exactly did Porter write about social class and power in French-Canada, and in what way is Helmes-Hayes's discussion of what he wrote incomplete? I would like to insist on this because Quebec's place in Canada was a major issue in the 1960s and 1970s; and because Porter's analysis offered an original way of seeing Quebec society within Canada that, unfortunately, was neither developed in *The Vertical Mosaic* nor in the end sufficiently taken into account by his biographer.

Ethnicity has two distinct meanings in *The Vertical Mosaic*. The first refers to the national or cultural origin of international immigrants (Poles, Italians, Greeks, Lithuanians, etc.) as recorded in censuses of the period. The second refers to the British and French "charter groups." Porter often used this second concept — now obsolete in history and the social sciences and vanished from public discourse¹ — throughout his book and in the index as well. In the index, the concept is also secondarily

1. The words charter groups have now a completely different meaning in contemporary discourses, as they characterize different groups after the adoption of the Charter of Rights: Aboriginals, immigrants, etc.

applied to the words “British” and “French Canadian” with the addition of “as a charter group.” He could not have been more explicit. The first time that Porter used the words “charter group,” he also linked the term to the word “ethnic” (“ethnic charter group,” *The Vertical Mosaic*:76). In various chapters, Porter at times considered the British and the French-Canadians differently from the international immigrants and their descendants; at other times he saw the British and the French-Canadians as belonging to mere ethnic groups amongst others in the Canadian mosaic. Helmes-Hayes does not highlight this discrepancy. This is unfortunate because its implications for the macrosociological interpretation of Canadian society are profound.

The expression “charter group” means more than ethnic belonging in the contemporary sense of the word. It means belonging to one of the two then so-called founding peoples of Canada (Aboriginals being entirely overlooked). The expression has a connotation of national belonging and refers to a global society. In other words, the two charter groups have their own institutions (political, economic, religious, media, trade unions, etc.) and, in various narratives, define themselves symbolically. Porter clearly demonstrated how the two groups sometimes interacted in the same spheres (in the economy for example, where the French-Canadians were mainly at the bottom of the scale and were barely present at the higher levels of economic power), but were very much differentiated in others.

In *The Vertical Mosaic*, Porter began by analyzing the link between ethnic affiliation and occupational class. To him it seemed necessary to isolate the two national or charter groups in a section entitled evocatively “British and French: Higher and lower charter groups.” Porter described the two systems of social class, emphasizing that French-Canadians had their own elite and middle class (bourgeoisie). “The French have their own professional class which has been educated within the refined traditions of the classical college” (*The Vertical Mosaic*:92). He then added that in the first half of the twentieth century a majority of them were concentrated at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, economically dominated, with little schooling, and underrepresented within the political, business, and bureaucratic elites.

Both French and British have their old aristocratic families as well as their lower classes. However, these two class systems while operating side by side are also firmly interlocked in the economic system. But these economic relations are not ones of equality, by and large the British run the industrial life in Quebec” (*The Vertical Mosaic*:92).

This economic inferiority of French-Canadians was one of the main questions being debated in Quebec when Porter wrote his masterpiece. Porter often reminded readers that French-Canadians claimed that the “*Anglais*” were responsible for their economic inferiority. But, he argued, Quebec’s education system was underdeveloped and its higher education ill-suited to a modern industrial economy. Porter thus offered an endogenous explanation for the economic inferiority of the French-Canadian. In the words of his time, he favoured a social explanation over a national one. He also clearly stated that the French-Canadians wished to free themselves of this underdeveloped condition. “The French, like all other Canadians, have acquired a set of expectations about a high standard of living in a modern industrial society” (*The Vertical Mosaic*:144).

In his analysis of elites and power Porter saw French-Canadians as a totality.

Although our concern at this point is with the broad structure of class rather than power it has been necessary to point out the role of French-Canadians elite because the relative positions of the two groups in the class structure may lead to fallacious conclusions about the exercise of power. (*The Vertical Mosaic*:92).

When he examined the political elite, the bureaucratic elite within the federal state apparatus, the religious elite, and the economic elite, Porter saw French-Canadians as belonging to a collective body, a global society, a nation.

In Porter’s book, Quebec was first considered as a *distinct society* within the political sphere (a term that first appeared in the B&B report, long before the Meech Lake Accord). “Thus at the level of national politics, although under-represented, the French have retained something of a co-charter group status with the British” (*The Vertical Mosaic*:389), thereby neutralizing the possibility of a strong central government according to Porter. Second, Porter observed that French-Canadians were underrepresented within the economic elite and he stated that French-Canadians had their own institutions in various spheres of activity. “Unionization of the French-Canadian worker has taken place in a social milieu which, as we have seen, has viewed industrialization as inimical to the interests of French Canada” (*The Vertical Mosaic*:364). “The French-Canadian syndicates have had an intellectual link which, as pointed out earlier, has been absent in the main body of Canadian unionism” (*The Vertical Mosaic*:365). Finally, Porter recognized the particularity of French-Canadian culture: “Quebec without doubt is a special case where there is validity in the notion of cultural particularism...” (*The Vertical Mosaic*:383). Towards the end of his book, Porter anticipated with much

foresight the implications of his analysis of French-Canadian economic inferiority.

Speculatively it might be said that the dilemma posed for French-Canadian intellectuals is that, by articulating economic deprivation in ethnic rather than class terms, they will succeed only in strengthening the divided character of Canadian society.... In time such an ideological position can only perpetuate the fragmentation of political structure and the consolidation of power within provincial structures. (*The Vertical Mosaic*:490)

The prescience of this comment is noteworthy. But Porter did not take it into account in his macrosociological interpretation of Canada; neither does his biographer.

THE B&B COMMISSION UNDERESTIMATED

Another weakness of this biography is that in the portrait that Helmes-Hayes draws of Canada he pays little attention to the research of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (Laurendeau-Dunton Commission) and to the heated debates on the future of Canadian society that took place during hearings across the country between 1963–1970. He mentions the B&B Commission only in passing, underestimating its importance. This is difficult to understand as he reminds us that Davidson Dunton was the president of Carleton University at the time and that John Porter knew him well. Did they discuss the so-called “Canadian crisis”? We do know that Porter had a research contract from the B&B Commission and that a number of young graduates from Canadian social science faculties did research for it based on his research questions and perspectives.

In his preface to *The Vertical Mosaic*, John Meisel explicitly mentions the research reports of the B&B Commission, referring to the Canadian crisis that inspired the well-known “blue pages” of the Commission’s preliminary report. Meisel, a colleague and friend of Léon Dion, the codirector of research within the Commission, was well informed of on-going debates in Canada. Meisel rightly observed in 1965 that the publication of Porter’s work would allow the Commission to go beyond the problem of ethnicity (in the two meanings mentioned above), while reminding the reader that ethnic realities were linked to social class.

Porter himself mentioned the existence of the B&B Commission at least twice in *The Vertical Mosaic*, but one cannot blame him for not saying more because the Commission was, at the time of the writing of the book, just beginning. Sadly, a whole part of Canadian history rel-

evant to the understanding of Porter's work is ignored in the biography. Its addition would have been of utmost importance because it is within the context of the B&B Commission that the question of recognizing Canadian multiculturalism was first brought up. Later, this notion would replace biculturalism, which had dominated the intellectual landscape up until the time when Porter was pursuing his research on social stratification in Canada. The Laurendeau-Dunton Commission was created by the government of Lester B. Pearson to examine the crisis brought on by the question of the "Canadian duality," as it was phrased in the mandate. In their *Report*, the commissioners recommended the recognition of the bilingual character of Canadian institutions and the creation of bilingual districts. The Commission's main legacy, however, was to change the country's perception of itself: from the turn of the 1970s Canada saw itself as a multicultural society, a new concept at the time. It is a pity that Helmes-Hayes did not pay enough attention to this important moment in Canadian history nor to a change that marked the coming of a new era. John Porter's work was indeed of major importance in understanding the "refounding" — in the sense that Fernand Dumont gave to the word — of the Canadian Nation. As Charles Taylor noted, societies must once in a while recognize the contribution of forgotten and new pillars, for example immigrants to Canada at that time, and later in the 1980s, Aborigines. All of this has implications for the understanding of contemporary Canadian federalism.

EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

Following the publication of *The Vertical Mosaic*, Porter continued research on social stratification and, more specifically, on the role of education in achieving a just and democratic society. "His answer was essentially a meritocratic liberal one." He directed an important study on disparities in access to higher education in Ontario and, as shown by his participation in the think tank that published *Toward 2000*, he managed to keep in mind both the sociological research and the study of public policies that would take shape in light of the results of this work. This preoccupation seemed even more evident in the publication, in 1973, of *Does Money Matter?* John Porter's wife Marion was an important contributor to this book — she even appears as the main author — a matter which provoked some conflicts with colleagues who had participated in the project.

If John Porter is seen as the major intellectual figure of English-Canadian sociology of his time, he was also, according to his biog-

rapher, strongly influenced by American sociology at a time when the Canadianization of university faculty preoccupied English Canada because of the presence of a high number of scholars from the United States. His research on disparities in access to education confirms two important features of Porter's career: his lack of interest in sociological theory — notably “the one that is identified with purely speculative and abstract argument” — and the influence of American sociology. “[Porter] had come to see American mainstream sociology as a point of reference.” Porter was inspired by methods of data analysis which were then current in the United States, but also by dominant theoretical frameworks. This influence is more clearly seen in the third period of Porter's active life, when he undertook the first major Canadian study of social mobility, using an approach inspired by Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan's *The American Occupational Structure* (1967), and David L. Featherman and Robert M. Hauser's *Opportunity and Change* (1978), two major works of sociology and amongst the most cited in the years that followed their publication.

The study of social mobility aroused much interest in the 1960s and 1970s because it served as an indicator of the degree of openness of the class system. Porter and other sociologists of the period argued that knowledge of the amount and kinds of social mobility was instructive for the design of public policies aiming to reduce socioeconomic inequalities and to improve the education system. The final results of the Canadian research were published with much delay and the report on this major (and expensive) research project — *Ascription and Achievement: Studies in Mobility and Status Achievement in Canada* (1985) — is unfortunately a collection of fragmented contributions, instead of being a coherent publication like its American predecessors. Helmes-Hayes explains this as a result of conflicts between different generations of sociologists and opposing paradigms, something not exceptional during that period.

PORTER, THE FRIEND AND MENTOR

Helmes-Hayes recalls at length the relationship between John Porter and the generation of leftist colleagues who, largely inspired by their reading of *The Vertical Mosaic*, later got involved in the new political economy:

it is clear that Porter never became a part of the political economy network and never identified himself as a political economist. Nonetheless, he was very interested in it and, in my view, had much to do with its development — in both a general and specific sense.

The conceptual framework and the issues raised in *The Vertical Mosaic* — relations between social classes, concentration of power, inequalities, Canadian companies in foreign hands, ethnic cleavages — inspired the research of young left-wing intellectuals. But Porter's influence was also felt through his input in the training of the most eminent representatives of the new generation of sociologists. Helmes-Hayes states that the *maître à penser* was himself influenced by his students and by their common readings of Marxist authors and critiques that were at the forefront in the 1970s. Although Porter was very much interested in the research and ideas of his young students or colleagues, but he chose to remain faithful to the Weberian liberal-progressive analyses of inequality, class, and power rather than adopting a paradigm inspired by Marx. This choice placed him in a difficult position. His first scientific research gave him the reputation of having opened a new and controversial perspective on the existing order, but he was later considered by a few young radicals as a politically conservative sociologist (which he was not).

This put him in an ambiguous position. He was famous, a living legend almost, and influential in some circles, but somewhat out of fashion among those on the cutting edge of the discipline. This sea change, which saw his visibility and status erode somewhat, took place at a critical juncture in Porter's life course as a scholar.

At the very beginning of the book, the biographer recalls an interesting anecdote that illustrates the views of graduate students of the time. Helmes-Hayes had never met Porter. Then in 1977, as a young doctoral student at the University of Waterloo (two years before Porter's passing), he made the mistake of refusing an invitation made by the much missed Jim Curtis to meet Porter. Porter had just been awarded an honorary degree by the University of Waterloo, and the Sociology Department organized a reception in his honour, but Helmes-Hayes refused to attend because he considered Porter "a liberal apologist for the system." An idiotic refusal, in his own words, that he later regretted.

Porter was in favour of a strong federal government, capable of implementing the policies of the new liberal left wing, stemming from the ideas of the New Liberalism (not to be confused with the neoliberalism of today). Porter thought that the rapidly developing welfare state would be a major factor in reducing social inequalities, thus favouring a real meritocratic liberal democracy, and he believed that a fully developed educational system — one of the major preoccupations of his career — had the potential to change the class system by permitting greater social mobility. He also insisted that such an education system would be the main solution to the economic inferiority of French-Canadians. His indi-

vidualistic and meritocratic vision is also seen in the introduction to *Ascription and Achievement*. However other works, published at the same time — such as the *McInnis Lectures* — indicate that he was gravitating back to his LSE “liberal socialist roots.”

John Porter’s last publication was *The Measure of Canadian Society: Education, Equality, and Opportunity*, a collection of previously published articles and essays. In it, he examined what Fernand Dumont called the relevance of sociology (in French, *pertinence*) which should not be limited to a description nor to factual analysis. For Porter, “The major task of social science is to abstract from the confused flow of events perspectives which clarify and which permit some judgment about society in the light of moral principles.” According to his biographer, Porter knew how to combine the methodology and theory of American sociology with the New British Liberalism of his younger years at the LSE.²

PORTER, THE MAN AND THE HUSBAND

Helmes-Hayes’ brief comments on John Porter’s private life help to understand the man and his research work: his disillusion during a brief “interlude” at the University of Toronto in 1968–69, his satisfaction at being invited to Harvard University in 1973–74; his health problems, notably his heart attacks, the last one causing his premature death in 1979. The author also recalls the last years of Porter’s career as vice-president of Carleton University and the great disappointment he experienced when his candidacy for the presidency was not accepted. Helmes-Hayes wonders if he was looking for power, social status, and recognition, subjects that he had studied all his life? Various testimonies and accounts give different pictures of the man, but a fact remains: Porter was very disappointed when he was not nominated president of Carleton University and he became somewhat bitter.

Appropriately, the biographer devotes a chapter to Marion Porter, John’s wife and his “intellectual partner.” He explains that the word “partner” had a different signification for each of them. For Porter, according to Helmes-Hayes, Marion was literally the homemaker, the soft place to fall. But it was with her that he discussed his ideas; she was also involved in editing his texts and even coauthored some of his later publications. The biographer considers that her input was much more

2. In a very long epilogue, Helmes-Hayes revisits Porter’s political orientations, rearticulating the analysis presented throughout the book. He once again explains New British Liberalism, despite having previously given a definition that was both very clear and very complete. This long appendix adds nothing new to the biography and should have been published elsewhere.

than what Porter himself acknowledged: her definition of “intellectual partner” was more comprehensive, more egalitarian even. In support of this understanding of Marion Porter’s role, Helmes-Hayes discovered that the manuscript of *The Vertical Mosaic* contains a good number of her comments, and he recalls that she had edited and corrected a number of texts that Porter did not have the time to complete.

For Helmes-Hayes, the relationship and the division of labour between Marion and John were typical of the period. Like many wives in academic couples, Marion prioritized her role in the home. Not having had much university training (although she later successfully completed a Master’s degree at Carleton University), living with a sociologist husband, she was given, according to the author, the opportunity to participate in major intellectual projects. The *sociological* analysis of the Porter couple — in the contemporary meaning of a case analysis — is interesting as it illustrates the fate of many wives of university professors of the first professional academic generation.

In short, this biography eloquently highlights the career of a remarkable social scientist and a committed intellectual; it is also a living testimony to the institutionalization of Canadian sociology. The portrait of Porter’s Canada in the biography is, however, incomplete and it does not allow one to fully evaluate the implications of his macrosociological interpretation of the country.

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