

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Renwick, Chris**, *British Sociology's Lost Biological Roots: A History of Futures Past*. 2012. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 264 pp. \$90.00 hardcover (978-0230356160)

On the surface, Chris Renwick's detailed study of the origins of sociology in Britain might appear as an arcane study of specialist interest for historians of Edwardian social science. However, as Renwick articulates in his introduction, the debates and concerns at stake during this lost period of British sociological history at the turn of the 20th century are directly relevant to contemporary developments in the social sciences. In particular, the author highlights the debate over the relationship between biology and sociology. The ontological and epistemological relationship connecting the natural and social sciences was at the heart of concerns motivating key actors, including Victor Branford, Lady Victoria Welby, and James Martin White, who helped establish the discipline's first foothold in Britain. Thus, in addition to the book's substantive intervention in the niche debate between Geddesian scholars over whether Geddes' biosocial science would or would not have led to Nazism in Britain, Renwick also challenges the all-too-commonplace assumption that Britain was without a proper sociological tradition until Anthony Giddens' ascendance in the 1970s.

Renwick frames his narrative across six chapters by noting a crisis within Section F of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS) which covered "Statistics and Economic Science." In 1878, the closet Comtean statistician, J.K. Ingram verbalized a view increasingly shared by scholars in the field — that classical political economy was intellectually bankrupt. Individualistic utilitarian economics' heyday receded as the Golden Age of British industrial capitalism in the 1850s and 60s gave way to the deflationary decades of the late 19th century. This legitimization crisis led to Ingram's clarion call for a proper science of society, namely sociology, which should be established to replace political economy.

Renwick describes three alternative paradigms which emerged as potential solutions to this disciplinary need. The three social scientific schools of eugenicist Francis Galton, Scottish biologist Patrick Geddes, and Oxford idealist philosopher L.T. Hobhouse are addressed in turn. While in the period immediately following Ingram's speech at the

BAAS, a synthesis between Galton's eugenics program and Geddes' civics school seemed imminent, Hobhouse's ethical sociology, which expressly denied a substantive relationship between biology and the human sciences, won out in the race for institutional resources including academic posts and journal editorships. The disciplinary resolution of Hobhouse at the head of the pack conditioned the subsequent development (or lack thereof) of British sociology.

As Renwick recounts, the eugenics program developed by Galton, would have been thoroughly assimilated into the field of "sociology" had not contingent influences led to the establishment of an independent science of "eugenics." Galton, who dedicated the second half of his life to the scientific grounding of his evolutionary ideas relating to inheritance, not only established advanced statistical methods for understanding the normal distribution of qualities amongst populations, but also invested heavily in primary data collection. By 1903, Galton had become a preeminent scholar, who was most recognizably "scientific" and influential among advanced mathematicians and statisticians including Karl Pearson, W.F.R. Weldon, and William Bateson.

While Galton's Darwinian approach might appear as the most "biological" sociology, Renwick effectively demonstrates that the biological aspects of eugenics were limited to a few assumptions. Rather, the sociology of Patrick Geddes, who had trained as laboratory demonstrator for T.H. Huxley, was perhaps the most "biological" in terms of theory and method. Despite Huxley's aversion to the sociology of Herbert Spencer, Geddes can be best understood as a Spencerian in practice. Understanding evolution as a universal process applicable to both natural and social phenomena, Geddes engaged in detailed surveys of regions and cities according to a theory in which organic wholes related to differentiated parts. Geddes' relationship to charitable social organizations in Edinburgh led to a practical emphasis asserting sociology's capacity to aid in diagnosis and treatment of social problems.

However, while the individuals driving the establishment of the Sociological Society from 1903–1907 were initially supportive of Geddes' civics program, the Scottish polymath failed to win broad acceptance of his way of thinking. Instead, idealist social philosopher L.T. Hobhouse gained the institutional spoils. Renwick's archival labour uncovers new material suggesting that Geddes' own student and protégé, Victor Branford, was, in fact, primarily responsible for Hobhouse's unsolicited appointment to the London School of Economics' first chair in sociology.

Renwick's recovery of the actual richness of sociology in this formative period compels us to abandon received interpretations of sociol-

ogy as a discipline that did not develop in Britain. At the same time, his navigation of archival sources related to, for example, Branford's role in undercutting Geddes, as well as his attention to Lady Victoria Webby's role as sociologist in her own right and as "king-maker" of sorts, represents a considerable contribution to the historiographical details within the niche of the history of early British sociology.

However, Renwick falls short of the broader agenda he rightly recommends: that contemporary sociology should draw important lessons from these crucial early debates. Although he frames his history in contrast to the "practice" focus of contemporary history of science — noting that ideas do matter — Renwick does not go far enough to describe the content of the ideas these early sociologists presented. Indeed, in previous articles, the author elaborates in greater detail on what Geddes meant by the "valley plan" or "thinking machines." The interested sociologist can, therefore, dig deeper into the Geddesian social thought by reading these articles, or by reviewing the original primary texts. However, the effect of this summarization in the book under review is an overemphasis on context rather than text. At the same time, focused attention to only these three authors — Galton, Geddes, and Hobhouse — misses the wider context of the ideas represented by, for example, Edvard Westermarck, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, Alfred Marshall, and others, who appear only as bit players on the margins of the action rather than as contributors to the crucial debates of the day.

Renwick also misses an opportunity to connect the recursive effect of Hobhouse on Talcott Parsons, who contributed so much in establishing the negative evaluation of sociology in Britain. Parsons, who studied under Hobhouse at the LSE in the 1920s, nearly included the British sociologist in his convergence thesis in the *Structure of Social Action*. Within a history of "futures past," how might counterfactual consideration of Hobhouse's inclusion within the sociological canon have affected the received evaluation of early British sociology?

Finally, with respect to contemporary sociology, I would suggest that the debates over sociobiology surrounding E.O. Wilson and W.G. Runciman, which Renwick, a trained historian of science, offers as a potential site of contemporary relevance, are not most significant to practicing sociologists today. Rather, Geddes' active, applied practice of sociology connects directly with emergent trends in "public sociology" initiated by Michael Burawoy in 2004. Additionally, the ontological and epistemological relationship between natural and social phenomena remains at the centre of debates within the increasingly influential social philosophy of critical realism.

Indeed, Renwick's recovery of the dynamic origins of British sociology represents a most welcome addition to contemporary social thought well beyond the historical details. The book will be of considerable interest for both historians of science and sociologists, especially those at the graduate level interested in the connection between biology and science.

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