



BOOK REVIEW

The Palgrave Handbook of Sociology in Britain Australian Sociology Sociology in Ireland

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John Holmwood and John Scott (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Sociology in Britain*

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2014

Hardcover, 631 pp.

ISBN 978-0-230-29981-8

Price: € 234,33

Kirsten Harley and Gary Wickham, *Australian Sociology: Fragility, Survival, Rivalry*

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2014 (Sociology Transformed)

Hardcover, 123 pp.

ISBN 978-1-137-37974-0

Price: € 69,54

Bryan Fanning and Andreas Hess, *Sociology in Ireland: A Short History*

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2015 (Sociology Transformed)

Hardcover, 89 pp.

ISBN 978-1-137-45035-7

Price: € 69,54

1 Introduction

Placing together reviews of these three is useful since they are linked: whereas the UK volume copiously describes the sociology of the ‘mother country’, the Irish and Australian volumes report on the sociologies of two ex-colonial offshoots, and as a result instructive similarities and differences in their sociologies are highlighted. This then facilitates work on historical/comparative sociology of sociologies which is sorely lacking in this field of specialisation. The three are also linked in that the first is a ‘mother volume’ from which the series encompassing the other two has spun off. The Palgrave series notes that “the field of sociology has changed rapidly over the last few

decades ... and the series ... seeks to map these changes on a country-by-country basis and to contribute to the discussion of the future of the subject". The series is concerned "with [sociology's] many variant forms across the globe". A big difference is that the series is apparently aimed only at post-1945 putative national sociologies. The trio also sit under the shadow of the earlier US volume on Sociology, and Turner's polemic which is the first volume in the Palgrave series (see also the symposium discussing this in the pages of *The American Sociologist*.)

The sociology of sociology faces some particular difficulties. Just as sociology produces social knowledge usually together with some hope of supporting social betterment, the sociology of sociology produces knowledge about sociology as a knowledge production system usually with some hope of supporting future improvement. However, the mix of description and prescription can be dangerous or at least difficult. The former driver can lead to such plunging into the depths of historical detail with little or no relevance to the present that it may become Antiquarianism which can undoubtedly be the antithesis of presentism or even futurism which is the end-point of the second thrust. The format of the series encourages polemic, which is useful since the UK volume flounders under a considerable weight of historical material. Another crucial test of the quality of works in the history of sociology is Robert Merton's concern about amateur history being conducted by sociologists: do these volumes pass this test or any other that is self-imposed?

A synoptic rubric of the questions posed in sociology of sociology might be posed as "Who (from what social backgrounds) with what resources and organised in which institutional and organisational frameworks produces what outputs (teaching, research, scholarship, services) to what audiences with what intended/actual effects and with which allies/enemies?" This framework is broadly used to guide the following discussion.

Each volume is also focused on a putative 'national sociology' (rather than fields of specialisation) if only given that this an assumed field behind each volume (see Fanning and Hess pp. 4-5 for a brief discussion of these points). Issues concerning boundary maintenance between sociology and other knowledge structures are also pertinent and will be featured when found.

2 UK

This massive 600 pp. collection of 26 chapters is modelled on Calhoun's US collection, with one of editors' aims being an "emphasis on multiple histories and discontinuities". Alternative theories of disciplinary development are mentioned - that sociology emerged from social work/ social policy or that sociology is an extension of 'political arithmetic' compared to being able to provide more deep-seated analyses - but these are not replaced by newer analytical frameworks for understanding disciplinary trajectories. This volume should reveal the scholarly effect of being able (to some extent) to draw on a dedicated cadre of 'professional' historians of sociology - a luxury only afforded by few national sociologies. (Oddly enough, UK historians of sociology have paid much attention to American sociology, although this attention is not represented in the Calhoun volume.)

There are some minor irritations. The absurdly over-reaching title of 'Handbook of UK Sociology' is clearly misnamed and 'historical development' or words to that effect were required in the title to avoid misrepresentation. Savage's chapter is incredibly important and yet through some editorial oversight is rather intensely written (mainly being concerned with refuting criticisms of his book in this area) and addressed to some unnamed workshop.

The editors begin (p. 1) with noting the fascination of (UK?) sociologists with their history, although they suggest that there has been little consideration of British sociologists and their work which hardly seems correct and is possibly misleading as they do not attempt to engage systematically with this legacy (e.g. by providing a literature review of studies in this area).

The arc of chapters is firmly anchored in a magnificently sociological study of the Scottish Enlightenment, and then gets somewhat bogged down with coverage of many aspects of UK Sociology in the late 19th and earlier parts of the 20th century, before slicing the breakfast sausage in a different angle by looking at a few key fields. Nine fields are covered: community, race, methods, religion, criminology, work, cultural studies, class, and body - before suddenly arriving in its concluding chapters at the present and near future. The otherwise all-UK writing crew is supplemented by 2 American and an Anglo-French writer.

Analytical frameworks are provided only by the first and last chapters. Brewer (p. 19) discusses the differences between spaces of writing and reading and supplies an alliterative framework of serendipity, space and social structure as drivers of disciplinary development. Holmwood's concluding chapter plunges into several pertinent frameworks for discussing Sociology's social characteristics compared to other disciplines and to drive 'policy recommendations'. There is little development of systematic data apart from Platt's chapter.

The organisational setting is nowhere drawn out (cf. Platt on a key publisher) yet UK sociology is nested in what seems to be a user-friendly set of institutions, ESRC funding seems considerable, and there are a host of supportive institutions such as academy of social sciences etc. Gaps include lack of discussion of organisational apparatus including the BSA and its sections, journals, research units, research funding, international benchmark reporting all of which might have provided a firmer systematic description.

The historical chapters have great stuff:

- In the US the connection between religion and sociology has long been recognised and here discussion of this connection is extended to the UK;
- Evidence is produced that Interwar sociology was stronger than usually realised;
- An interesting portrait is drawn of the small influx of Continental sociologists around WW2 (which argues that they had a more complex effect than some received accounts that they were conservative and more British than the British, and reinforced empiricist trends);
- The amazing book production of the ILSSR is documented;
- The development of an interwar textbook tradition is specified;
- The role of 'colonial sociologists' in the imperial rebound of immediate post WW2 years is examined;
- A useful discussion is presented of how sociology fits into the Snow/Leavis debate as part of a 'third culture' (although this chapter then diverts into far broader consideration of sociology's humanistic side).

However, there seem to be gaps in what might otherwise be a definitive coverage. Spencer and Marx/Engels not adequately covered and nor is the recrudescence of the 1970s when British sociologies with Giddens in particular updated theory and the UK in general became an [entrepôt](#) between Continent and USA, supported by a strong publishing infrastructure. Historical sociology was a particularly important development that is here missing in action.

The volume exhibits renunciation of empiricist sociology and theory of the drivers of disciplinary developments (apart from the opening and closing chapters). There is an 'historical fade' which fails to engage with the most recent periods, perhaps because appropriate data is not developed.

Some passages in the volume rise to providing broad characterisations. Savage is most upbeat: suggesting that leading UK sociologists were mobilising around histories of discipline and that there was also interest in rethinking earlier sociologies – as in restudies. However he also relates that (p. 361):

In recent years, British sociology has been convulsed by a major identity crisis, driven by increasing anxiety about its academic standing and further prospects. ... even in the changed climate of the 1980s the discipline dealt apparently easily with the Thatcherite challenge through significant intellectual contributions to debates about class and state, gender, race and ethnicity, and cultural change associated with post-modernity. Into the early 2000s student demand was strong, leading sociologists such as Giddens and Bauman became prominent on the public stage and the remarkable rise of sociologists to Vice Chancellorships around the UK was a striking demonstration of their managerial skills. Sociological ideas were widely influential across the health sciences, development studies, education studies and business schools.

However, fewer enrolments, declining RAE scores and few RAE submissions together with high profile department closures (although more often of teaching departments) have tarnished this hopeful future although there has also been investment in sociology amongst higher status universities, and invigorations with cultural class analysis. Drop-outs of some significant subfields from the discipline include science studies and sociologies of health and organisations. Methodologically a fundamental issue has been posed if research tools remain adequate in emerging era of 'big data'. This all cumulates in Holmwood's mournful (but arguably realistic) assessment that: "I characterise it as a discipline that is potentially 'fading' from the scientific field in the UK, to be replaced by a variety of applied social studies" (p. 602).

3 Australian Sociology

Kirsten Harley (more recently cruelly afflicted with motor neuron disease) and Gary Wickham (2014) have produced a workpersonlike and meticulously organised text which summarises and extends (largely drawing on Kirsten's own previous research) the considerable effort which went into recalling the history and current condition of Australian sociology in the late 2000s, particularly under the leadership of John Gemov. The book is laced together by attention to three themes that the authors suggest characterise Australian sociology: fragility, survival and rivalry (although the first two are opposites, so the themes in effect come down to 2). The substantial chapters cover the earlier period up to 1959, descriptions of teaching, research and important books published during the main period under review – most of the tabulated material relates to the present (or more precisely the recent past). Data illustrate staff and student numbers over time. That 29 introductory texts are noted suggests a major investment in this genre and hints at the size of the sociological teaching establishment over the period. To inject more in-depth insight, a resume is given of two debates that point to contention within the discipline: Bryson's 1970s account of generational conflict with Australian sociology and Bryan Turner's sermon of the late 1980s about the endless need of sociological theory to continuously innovate new waves of theory. A further chapter investigates theory use in Australian sociology while the final substantive chapter provides a case study of the development of sociology at the University of Sydney. However, such

attention to theory really needs to be balanced by similar attention to empirical work and the links between the two.

Flowing from this analysis they argue that currently Australian sociology is in reasonably good shape (with some signs of cracks appearing) but its potential is held back by rivalries concerning content (seen in terms of fields) in various ways in the discipline as a whole and that it has spread its wings too widely: thus undermining disciplinary cohesiveness and thus impact. The authors argue that Australian sociology needs the reflexivity which would be injected by a higher historical consciousness.

Much is made of pre-1960 history of Australian sociology which is characterised as arrogant and ineffective, but above all as barely visible. A wonderful collection of early-period snobbish comments on sociology from other academics have been collected, although the authors suggest this was somewhat in retaliation for the arrogance of sociologists of the day. However, I'm not convinced that this early prehistory was anything other than a long-forgotten early skirmish which involved very little activity (a few courses, mainly taught under the auspices of the Workers Educational Association, WEA). So it really did not cast the pall over subsequent developments suggested. Moreover, there are interesting early episodes which could have been mentioned which would have spiced up the tale: e.g. the later-important UK economist Jevons who was in Sydney in the early 1850s and carried out a survey.

The treatment is resolutely internalist, but the volume makes a good attempt to cover the bases: staff and student numbers (seen as the main resource base) are tabulated and outputs classified by sociological field. An important, but quickly covered, feature is the spirited passage which enunciates Australian sociology's international stature, with 17 contributors being noted together with explicit mention of the international stature of Raewyn Connell, Peter Beilharz, Bryan Turner and Robert von Kreiken (who spent some time as a professor in Ireland). There is also quick discussion of the extent to which an Australian national sociology has developed (with the collective rating of 'Most Important Australian' books being seen as a good indicator of some consensus around this). Skrbis and Germov's claim is cited (p. 57) that this consensus constitutes a particular brand of critical sociology that inherently strives to relate social issues to power, public policy, and social reconstruction – although to be frank this seems a rather bland characterisation. There is also rather too much of an assumption of a collective solidarity and stronger external boundaries behind the discipline than seems warranted.

Some numbers are interesting: Sociology is taught in 35 of 37 universities – although not always directly as 'sociology'; TASA has 620 online directory members; coverage of courses taught reveal that treatment of Australian society constitutes 12% compared to the 5% for methodology. For articles, quantitative methodology ran at 28% in the 2000s compared to 54% in the 1960s, while qualitative articles rated at 36% from a 1960s base of 0%. There is a recent decline in non-empirical articles now standing at c30% compared to 40% across whole period. Amongst fields to decline is the study of stratification.

A few other stories about Australian sociology of course might've been told that space limitations prohibited (although perhaps hints could have been dropped) – many of which parallel some of the UK developments: the Exodus overseas of scholars in the '20s, the small post-war group of émigré Continental sociologists, secret police surveillance of some early research; the Sydney/Paris axis of translations with the advent of post-structuralism/post-modernism and indeed the breakaway of the pomos from the sociology department at UNSW (unity has since been restored), the shameful

(?) neglect of sociology on indigenous issues, the associational and journal structure and role of Allen & Unwin publishing (later Cengage etc.). The volume misses discussion of the interaction between national sociologies, which is problematic since Australian universities have been well populated with UK refugees.

I find some difficulty with the thematic interpretations. Australian sociology seems quite robust to me, and certainly TASA's own propaganda is that the discipline is 'robust'. No particular evidence is offered that departments escalate their offerings for competitive reasons. Differentiation is more likely to have arisen through internal pushes by staff to accommodate diversity. Anyway, how might the diversity be cut back? Abandonment of core because of competitive pressures from other disciplines (e.g. criminology) is more likely an issue.

4 Irish Sociology

The study of Irish sociology is well structured and well delivered. It is organised in three tranches:

- The earlier development of sociological writing on Ireland over several centuries;
- A tour of key events, writers and units since sociology in Ireland 'took off' stretching into the beginning of the concluding chapter;
- A proposed agenda for the future of sociology.

Early statistical work set off a tradition beginning with William Petty's account and included many studies from the 1830s onwards, many sponsored by the Dublin Statistical Society and the Belfast Social Inquiry Society. Other writers on Ireland included Malthus, Martineau, Beaumont and others are covered in a particularly interesting discussion. This tradition tended to be English and framed by a 'liberal' political economic approach. There was also stream of academic visitors concerned particularly with preservation of the Gaelic language. It is claimed (p. 5) that earlier discursive sociology framed later debates, but it is not shown how.

From the turn of the 20th century a more indigenous but strongly delimited Catholic sociology subsumed the earlier writing as part of a wider Catholic development of social thinking that sought to address social concerns while carefully segregating itself from secular sociology and in opposition to Marxism in particular. This highly religiously-circumscribed tradition was able to meld with state-building ideology and eventually spawned some empirical work. It was supported by a society and journal. At the end of this era a more sophisticated but still religiously orientated journal was established but this was over-taken by the establishment of secular sociology from the 1970s.

There was a parallel research trajectory from the 1930s when the (US) Rockefeller Foundation funded American anthropologists who studied rural communities in Ireland - drawing international attention to their studies of Irish communities - and set in motion a continuing but small sequence of similar studies. The studies (carried out by ethnographers Kimball and Arensberg) were spin-offs from the Yankee city studies. (Interestingly, the Yankee studies had an Australian connection from ex-pat Elton Mayo and Lloyd Warner who had previously researched in Australia.)

Over the period between the late 1960s and 1970s a more academic sociology became established, becoming more open to world-wide sociological content and involving the importation of some international scholars. An association and journal were established and cumulative development

since has ensued, although with all the vagaries attendant on a small sale enterprise. The trajectory of growth to the current Ireland-wide deployment of sociology with perhaps 200 professional sociologists is a blurry story: the speed of growth is undocumented although some more contemporary numbers are provided (in a footnote). There was something of a quantitative/qualitative split between the ISER (run particularly by economists although becoming less important as it necessarily became market-orientated) and the more divergent university departments. This account of social research is not updated with attention to more recent developments such as the Irish Platform for Social Research and related infrastructure initiatives. The more significant outcomes of Irish sociology (in terms of wider recognition) are claimed as the Famines and their effects and the Northern Ireland 'troubles', although we are given scant detail of what these studies involve or the social circumstances of their production.

The book's final agenda-setting thrust engages with international ideas concerning the possibilities for sociology. The authors want to see more consciousness amongst Irish sociologists and for them to frame their work as part of world sociology wherein they may have particular contributions to make. They wish to foster more conceptual and interpretative work (although no strong arguments advanced as to why this modality of sociology needs boosting; it doesn't seem in any danger within the sociology so comfortably bedded-in within Irish academic sociology departments). I'm afraid that that their study is only partially self-exemplifying given the authors' posited standards for good sociology: Irish sociology isn't depicted in comparative perspective (beyond a rather distant comparison with Vienna's rather more advantageous position in the Germanic sphere and the asymmetric domination of Dublin by London). The authors suggest both clinging to the deep problems of core sociology and reaching out to the various peripheral sociologies (e.g. sociology of education). And they also call for rapprochement with the powerful tradition of mainly literature-orientated 'Irish Studies' through more cultural sociology.

The two difficulties I found with the account are that the organisational underpinnings aren't adequately handled despite invocation (although then largely untreated) of Baehr's distinction between discursive and institutional leaders in sociology: for example consideration of the historical development of Irish universities is provided only in a brief footnote. And the Northern Ireland/South Ireland nexus is not deftly handled as it is covered at some points but leaves the reader often wondering what was happening north of the border. An island divided into two states (with the North problematically still connected with UK) offers some enticing 'research design' opportunities: have different institutional developments (including different research assessment arrangements) north and south of the border led to different effects?

The volume insinuates but does not explicitly confront a continuing domination by UK sociology. Its broader geo-intellectual setting is not further elucidated. However, it might be interesting in this respect for readers to contemplate the early-Medieval situation where Irish monasteries protected the heritage of Western civilisation during a widespread cultural desert not only keeping the flame of civilisation alive (Cahill, 1996), but then replanting it throughout Europe. Perhaps Irish sociology should consider a similar role!

5 Comparisons/Similarities

All three volumes share similarly guarded views of future: there is little in the way of brimming hope for future sociology. None examine (other than fleetingly) a possible national sociology or its interrelations with other national sociologies. The Australian case study does at least boast briefly

about international theoretical accomplishments, and the Irish volume does so even more briefly, but the UK one is strangely silent on this point despite recent official reviews being upbeat on accomplishments. Such official accounts are not referred to apart from slight attention in the closing UK chapter – odd given the considerable involvement of both editors of that volume in these exercises. This suggests a major boundary-fence lies between academic sociology and non-academic sociology.

Another question lurking behind the volumes is the extent to which sociology is a working class discipline. The UK volume (p. 591) fleeting but obliquely refers to this point in noting that “during its expansion phases sociology was attractive to students and faculty alike who were first in their families to attend university and were orientated towards the new opportunities afforded”.

The present stage of development of historical sociologies of national sociologies, then, is that it is still in data assemblage mode: finding out what happened. And the tools used are scholarly: archival and administrative residues are mined with possibly some drawing on (auto) biographies but without recourse to oral histories or systematic data collection (e.g. collective biography, or even surveys: apparently only Australia has carried out surveys of sociologists amongst this trio of cases and this was not referred to). Recourse to conceptual frameworks is also needed to develop further. And the comparative aspect needs to be systematically built up.

In terms of being a midwife to further development, sociology of sociology needs to attend more to disciplinary ideologies which involve the ‘higher goals’ of a sociological community: especially what they hope to achieve and how this might be accomplished. Then an analysis can be made of how these yearnings interrelate to envioning social conditions it is interfacing with. This needs ongoing discussion and also raising of the capacity of that community to deliver.

Some lessons from the three volumes are possible, although it may be unfair to place burden on such short books.

- There seems to be a reverse scale effect: the smaller the country the more relatively intense the development of its sociology: at the social interaction (e.g. conference going) end if not in terms of the formally published research output. Similarly, in the historical trajectory of national sociology development there may be a critical mass threshold which in particular triggers an unleashing of publications which seemed to be reached quite early in Australian sociology.
- External influences on Sociology tend not to be adequately considered and boundaries other than those occurring in early history are unattended to.
- There are similar concerns across the three countries with the imposition of an ‘audit culture’ although the precise impacts of this seem nowhere spelled out.
- We (the historians of sociology) seem to excel at telling interesting stories concerning our past, although without drawing much in the way of lessons re the sociology of sociology or of its effects on later developments. But we falter when tasked with depicting current sociological scene and not utilising available information represent situation. The provision of advice in these volumes is limited by personal predilections, or certainly not explicitly argued.

Hopefully, further country case studies in this series will provide further grist to the mill but also generate further data and ideas.



6 References

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