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Joel Isaac, "Working Knowledge. Making the Human Sciences from Parsons to Kuhn". Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012, 314 pp.

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Book reviews

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Initially, the history of a scientific discipline or an intellectual movement is usually written by the practitioners of that discipline, with a polemical intent – that is, as a weapon in the internal struggle for the appropriation of symbolic and institutional capital. The extensive use of documents and archival data is often a good sign of the emergence of a second wave of “true” historical scholarship, one which challenges received views and brings about a more nuanced and complex narrative of the rise (and often the fall) of disciplines and movements. Joel Isaac’s *Working Knowledge* is a fine example of this new, documented and non partisan scholarship in the history of post-World War II human and social sciences – one which, however, has wider and deeper implications for an understanding of theoretical and philosophical debates.

Isaac’s volume explores the hidden realms of that Harvardian “interstitial academy” (clubs, societies, seminars) in which, between 1930 and 1960, a diverse group of practitioners from established and less well-established disciplines created a dynamic and ever-changing synthesis of epistemology, theory and pedagogy [p. 5]. Focusing on the towering figure of the polymath L. J. Henderson, the chapters reconstruct the emergence of what Isaac calls “scientific philosophy” through a survey of informal and institutional venues (the Harvard Pareto Circle, the Society of Fellows, the Harvard Business School, the Department of Social Relations) and scientific and philosophical endeavors (operationism, Quine’s translation of logical empiricism, and the first steps of Thomas Kuhn’s account of scientific revolutions). Isaac’s aim, however, is not merely historical: he shows how a detailed and sociologically informed history of the emergence and evolution of the “Harvard complex” – and of Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, the real point of arrival of the whole book – may save us from thinking of epistemological debates as unembodied struggles between abstract ideas, a view which tends to present discussions as epic zero-sum games in which reciprocal accommodations between positions and their convergence are impossible [p. 12 ff.]. In Isaac’s account, the confrontation between rival epistemologies is seen more as the very stuff of which a structured field of disagreement is made, than as the juxtaposition of irredeemable distinctions.

Working Knowledge presents a convincing description of the ties and interactions between the protagonists of the human and social sciences at Harvard between 1930 and 1960, but Isaac’s interest lies more in showing the evolution of ideas than in describing their consistency over time: there is a clear-cut difference between the Hendersonian starting point and the “revolutionary” configuration of epistemology, pedagogy and theory which we find in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Isaac’s great accomplishment lies in narrating the story of an unfolding set of reciprocal influences explaining the development of ideas which, at face value, may seem very different and even antithetical.

However, from the viewpoint of the sociologist, the work has some limitations, which I would like to mention, in order to further the common research project which stands at the crossroads between the sociology of knowledge and the history of ideas. First, Isaac's book is without doubt highly sensitive to social theory and employs a robust – although not unreflective [see p. 27 ff.] – sociological scheme which closely relates ideas to practices and calls on scholars to focus attention on the informal and institutional settings in which ideas are thought out, elaborated, discussed and diffused [p. 6]. At the same time, Isaac's early essays on these topics, especially "Tangled Loops" [Isaac 2009], were much more theoretically informed and, in the end, more palatable for historically oriented sociologists.

Second, Isaac's history of the Department of Social Relations correctly revamps the main theme of his 2010 essay "Theorist at Work" [Isaac 2010a], a fine piece of work which contested the idea of theory as disembodied thinking and explained it as a practice provided with specific and technical conceptual and graphic tools. At the same time, Isaac pays little attention to the Department's two major research *cum* pedagogic venues – the Ramah and the Boston Mobility projects [see p. 178]. In view of his focus on training practices and the relationship between education, theory construction and epistemology, this decision is inexplicable – in fact, all first-person accounts of the life and spirit of the Department of Social Relations in the 1940s and 1950s emphasize the centrality of both projects as pedagogical devices of consensus *and* theory building.

Last but not least, the story of the Department of Social Relations ends too early and too abruptly. What about Talcott Parsons in the 1960s? And what about the "products" of the Department of Social Relations, that is, its graduates? And what about the destiny of Parsons's most beloved students? Clifford Geertz is cited as the "avatar of laissez-faire literary postmodernism" [p. 233], but other names come to mind: Neil Smelser, Robert Bellah and David Schneider. And what about Robert K. Merton, that most illustrious Harvard graduate, who took a different path to the integration of pedagogy, theory and empirical research? In Isaac's "Tool Shock" [Isaac 2010b], the differences between Parsons, Merton and George C. Homans had been finely assessed and explained, but unfortunately that subject did not make its way into the book. In particular, Merton's role as the one link between the original Hendersonian cadre, Sarton's history of ideas, the development of the sociology of science and Kuhn's training is left in shadow.

In spite of these limitations, Isaac's depiction of the Harvard complex and its protagonists is so powerful that readers would not only like to know more about their personal and professional relationships, but are driven to fantasize about a whole series of "what if's?" In particular, one wonders what would have happened to sociological functionalism, and American sociology in general, if Parsons had incorporated Kuhn's shift from a concept of normal science based on consensus to a more ambivalent idea of science built on "non-disagreement" [p. 221 ff.] at the core of his theory of social and cultural systems in the early 1960s – that is, before the tide of anti-Parsonianism reduced his standing and influence on the profession. One suspects that the answer is to be found precisely in the work of those, among Parsons's students, who led the "interpretive turn" in social theory and were all too quickly labeled as "post-modernists" – that is, Schneider, Bellah and Geertz.

References

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