

development of an epistemology of contemporary research. The authors successfully take up the challenge of tackling this topic and offer the public a text that can usher in a fruitful trend of philosophical–scientific investigations. Precisely because of its deliberately introductory nature to the question of the epistemology of science, this volume is recommended both to students of philosophy or non-experts and to all those who, working in the fields of science, are interested in approaching and deepening the fundamental debates on scientific knowledge.

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Philippe Fontaine and Jefferson D. Pooley, *Society on the Edge: Social Science and Public Policy in the Postwar United States*

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Society on the Edge offers historians of social science and public policy a valuable ‘bird’s-eye view’ of research into ‘social problems’ in the US since 1945 (p. 57). The volume features nine chapters written by historians of US social science, each focusing on a different area of research on ‘social problems’: Savina Balasubramanian and Charles Camic contribute a chapter on the family, Andrew Jewett on education, Alice O’Connor on poverty, Leah N. Gordon on discrimination, George C. Galster on ‘the Black ghetto’, Jean-Baptiste Fleury on crime, Nancy Campbell on addiction, Andrew Scull on mental illness and Joy Rohde on war. These chapters are introduced by a thought-provoking chapter by the volume’s editors, Phillippe Fontaine and Jefferson D. Pooley.

Each chapter addresses three central themes. First, they chart how the very ‘problem status’ of different social problems has changed over the course of the twentieth century and the role that social scientists have played in this process. Second, they map the shifting jurisdictions of the different social-science disciplines that have laid claim – sometimes in collaboration, sometimes in competition – to different social problems since 1945. Third, they explore the changing fates of the different explanations and solutions that have emerged from this jurisdictional jockeying and from federal politics, policy making and public debate.

Within the kaleidoscopic landscape of the political, cultural, economic and disciplinary transformations documented by the volume’s contributors, the role of social scientists in defining social problems emerges as a co-productive one. Fontaine and Pooley argue convincingly that we should see social scientists as neither the prime drivers nor the passive bystanders of political change, but rather as participants in a process of ‘mutual shaping that enmeshes social scientists in the politics of American social problems’ (p. 57). The subsequent chapters illustrate the multiple ways this co-productive process has played out in each of the social-problem areas covered.

The volume paints a vivid picture of the shifting fates of different social-scientific disciplines as their authority over certain social problems waxed and waned during the course of the twentieth century. Fontaine and Pooley advise against us seeing this process of as one of simple succession. Instead, they frame it as the result of a 'lopsided resonance' between certain facets of an always plural academic sphere and the always shifting tides of politics and public attitudes (p. 57). Certain forms of disciplinary expertise become dominant thanks to 'an elective affinity' between the kinds of explanation they proffer and the wider state of 'public imagination' at any given time (p. 12). From the panoramic perspective of the volume, the abstract language of 'resonance' and 'affinity' works. The reader interested in gaining a more granular understanding of the specific processes that have underpinned such 'resonances' and 'affinities' will appreciate the extensive bibliographies that accompany each chapter.

Generalizing across the volume's nine chapters, Fontaine and Pooley argue that, since the 1960s, there has been 'an attenuation of social ways of seeing society's problems, and their replacement, to some extent, by economic and psychological framings' (p. 42). Problems that were viewed as primarily social in nature at mid-century were, by the 1980s, viewed in a more individualistic light. Due to 'its political freight' and lack of definitional clarity the editors shy away from naming this shift 'neoliberalism', preferring to see it as a process of 'economisation' and 'psychologisation' instead (p. 42). Regardless, *Society on Edge* will likely be of interest to historians of neoliberalism. To the extent that it subjects familiar, 'big-N' accounts of 'Neoliberalism' to a finer-grained historical analysis, the volume brings to mind Jamie Peck's approach to the history of the 'neoliberalization' of economics. The extension of this line scholarship into other domains of social-scientific research is a welcome addition to the literature.

Taken as a whole, the chapters of *Society on Edge* paint a complex picture of the changes that social-problem research has undergone since 1945. Certain chapters (for example Nancy Campbell's on addiction or Andrew Jewett's on education) do seem to confirm the chronology of the 'overall drift' from the structural to individualistic explanations and from sociological to psychological or economic expertise that Fontaine and Pooley describe in their introduction (p. 42). Other chapters, however, push against this timeline. In her chapter on poverty, for example, Alice O'Connor invites readers to consider the continuities that link the individualizing logic of much recent social-scientific research to older individualizing tendencies at the heart of American liberalism that have shaped the development of the social sciences in the US since their inception. Likewise, in her chapter on discrimination, Leah Gordon shows how more structurally and systemically oriented approaches to discrimination in fact experienced a resurgence from the mid-1990s in fields such as 'history, sociology, anthropology, legal studies (in critical race theory), black studies, ethnic studies and urban studies' (p. 213).

Such incongruities offer historians of the recent social sciences fruitful springboards for thinking about where standard narratives break down and where new periodizations and thematizations may be warranted. It is here that the value of the 'bird's-eye view' afforded by *Society on the Edge* becomes apparent. To my knowledge, this is one of the first volumes to draw together historians of the recent social sciences in the US and to offer such a synoptic perspective. Without such a view, discerning such tensions and opportunities for new research is difficult.

Despite claiming to avoid any ontological claim about 'what the real stuff of society is', Fontaine, Pooley and many of the volume's contributors often seem to tacitly treat 'the social' as the legitimate domain of sociologists who have offered structural, systemic and/or relational diagnoses of social problems (p. 43). It is this understanding that allows them to claim that 'social problems have lost some of their social character' over the course of the twentieth century as structurally minded sociologists have lost their edge

as the leading experts on such issues. In my eyes, this framing casts the shadow of an unspoken (and perhaps inadvertent) nostalgia over many of the chapters of *Society on the Edge*. While some readers might share this nostalgia, Alice O'Connor reminds us of its potential pitfalls. In her chapter on poverty, she highlights how even the ostensibly more 'social' outlook of the sociologists and social workers of the past was in fact 'steeped in and, in important ways, reinforced the very ideas and ideologies that were used to justify, obscure, or otherwise explain away the structures of inequality that made women and nonwhite minorities disproportionately vulnerable to poverty' (p.147).

Historians wary of romanticizing such an exclusionary past might instead explore a more Latourian approach to the recent history of the social sciences. Rather than fixing our understanding of what 'the social' is to the practices and conceptions of sociologists past, we could attend to how the very make-up of 'the social' has always been contested and constructed by those who invoke it. Seen in this light, the last half-century of social-problem research might emerge less as a tale of what has been lost, and more as a lesson on the malleability of 'the social'. Such an approach could still capture and critique important shifts in how social scientists have assembled 'the social' since 1945 while mobilizing a more inclusive understanding of what it could be moving forward.

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