Lives of the Mind

Authors of Their Own Lives. Intellectual Autobiographies of Twenty American Sociologists. BENNETT M. BERGER, Ed. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1990. xxviii, 503 pp. $29.95.

Very few 500-page books by or about sociologists engender in their readers a desire for more. There are at least two reasons for this. First, the hoary question of readable prose. It has often been said, ever since the literati began their assault in the '50s, that sociologists do not "write well." If good writing means prose that resembles, say, Edmund Wilson's or Mark Twain's—in which conciseness, wit, creative word usage, and intriguing narratives figure heavily—then most sociologists do not stand up very well. Partly this reflects their graduate education, where little emphasis is put on lovely writing. Scholars who study people from within some sort of scientific regimen, who see themselves as objectively reporting carefully analyzed data, find few reasons to put their findings into stirring language. In fact, they are strongly encouraged to leave figurative and metaphorical phrases to their colleagues in the humanities, in the interest of accuracy and to set themselves off from these less "precise" disciplines.

But a second factor is that sociological writing represents general rather than unique knowledge. John Updike's *Couples*, had it been written by a sociologist, might have borne the title *Sexual Mores Among the Upper Middle Class: An Ethnographic Report.* And in the same way the Kinsey books are typically dull next to *Fanny Hill*, it is all a question of how much of the reader's self "resonates" with the material at hand: how much of Me is in the Text. *Self* and *Psychology Today* found ready markets for this reason, pitched as they were directly at one's most vulnerable points, those most in need of validation, correction, or "uplift." Sociologists, in sharp contrast, write mostly about what they call social "forces," the larger, aggregated, often imperceptible elements of social life that have tremendous impact on people's lives but not necessarily in some personalized way. Most middle-class magazine readers do not "feel" homelessness, drug cultures, or the imminent collapse of economic institutions in the same way they respond to depression, exhilaration, and other psychological states. It is not that we are a civilization of narcissists, though some of this quality certainly helps egocentric publications stay in business. Rather, it's the problem any author faces when writing persuasively about the bloodless abstractions that tend to fill social science. They connect badly with the privatized, modern soul.

I have taken this route to Berger's collection of autobiographies because the book will prove remarkably interesting, I think, even for readers far beyond the membership of the American Sociological Association. Not only do the autobiographers he has chosen write engagingly—some contributions verge on the stylistically striking—but they have composed believable, unpostured, and very "American" stories full of useful information about how young people became scholars some time ago, before the onset of hyperplanning in the academic world. They do not sensationalize the trivial or scientize the obvious, thus escaping the evils often associated with the work of their colleagues. But what gives the book its special flavor is that all of the contributors are quite consciously carrying out a forbidden act: writing about the self after spending entire lifetimes avoiding this murky realm. To be a sociologist who turns autobiographer—a few recent exceptions notwithstanding, such as Charles H. Page, George Homans, and Reinhard Bendix—is a bit discordant, like Father Greeley's lusty novels. As Greeley explains in his chapter in the present book, the Catholic establishment cannot reconcile a God-fearing priest with one who writes spicy novels for the masses, any more than sociologists can give much credence, for "scientific" purposes, to the individual life story. It is odd but true that our educational system over the last 40 years or so has created a new species of intellectual who is motivated initially to study people out of typical human concern but who finally speaks about research as if it had been carried out by robots and soul-less computers. The extraordinary virtue of the Berger collection is that it allows for the first time a number of important, very different types of sociologists to remove their lab coats and speak from the heart. They tell why they went into the field, how they became writers, the way their lives informed their work or how they tried to keep the two in separate zones. And in so doing they unintentionally provide a window into the current intellectual dilemma surrounding all social science: hoping to speak persuasively about the human condition, but from an inhuman remove.

Some "data" about the book's contributors: Of the 20 writers, five are women; two were deceased when the book finally appeared; none (despite Berger's vigorous attempts to recruit some) are persons of color; all are well known; all have held good jobs at important universities; fully half were born into Jewish homes (though often secularized), with one other claiming almost exclusive Jewish affiliations among his intimate circle; most went to elite doctoral institutions; and all seem at the time of writing to have been financially well enough off to write from a distance about times when poverty spurred them into academic hyperactivity. The oldest is Jessie Bernard (born 1903), the youngest Pepper Schwartz (born 1945), and the average age in 1986, when most of the chapters seem to have been composed, was 59. In fact, half of the authors were 60 or more when they wrote, and another six were over 53. These are the senior scholars from whom my generation learned what sociology meant, some 20 years ago, when they were coming into their prime and we were dodging the draft. It is hardly remarkable that I had read work by 19 of the 20 writers before beginning the book, and many of them influenced my understanding of their areas of the discipline. And even though I have quarreled in print with more than one of these elders, none is an intimate friend or a sponsor. I came to this work as a student who wonders what his teachers' lives had been like in the old days, what forces in their private–public continua had led them to "do" sociology in the ways they have. Their answers to these questions are frank, fascinating, and often touching. They come off just as compelling personally as professionally—perhaps even more so.

Whereas it might be sociologically satisfying to analyze their self-portraits collectively, this would do an injustice to the book, for despite the contributors' repeated warnings that biography must be taken as an index of larger goings-on, it is the minutiae of their lives that make the text hum, and not how these illustrate social reality writ large. Besides Greeley, Bernard, and Schwartz, the other dramatis personae are Reinhard Bendix, Bennett Berger, James S. Coleman, Donald R. Cressey, Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, John Gagnon, Herbert J. Gans, Nathan Glazer, Joseph Gusfield, Dean MacCannell, Gary T. Marx, David Riesman, Barbara Rosenblum, Alice S. Rossi, Guenther Roth, Pierre L. van den Berghe, and Dennis Wrong. Aside from numerous connections to the Jewish intellectual tradition, the only broad commonality among these scholars is

a tendency to feel more at home in the library than on the playing field. Many recall physical incompetence as a childhood condition, though one or two deviated from this norm by succeeding at sports and gaining confidence in their bodies that seems to have carried over into their research style and substantive interests. Most were more poor than rich as youths, though several enjoyed privileged upbringings and turned their backs on their birthright, as it were, by pursuing a discipline that has little good to say about the upper classes. Nearly all fell into a situation of intense readership, most at the instigation of parents or teachers, others during enforced idleness, some very early and others almost too late, toward the end of adolescence. But the overriding appeal of these stories is that all of them occurred prior to the video-cretinization that has swept away American literacy like a typhoon hitting a dinghy. In every chapter are passages fondly relating the intense importance of a given text at a special moment—James Coleman discovering Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* during graduate school when already 27, Reinhard Bendix reading Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* aloud to his myopic father at 15—tales that, read now, seem as unlikely as "Ninja Turtles Learn Greek." For each of these young readers (often during the '30s), there was a sensual pleasure in book culture, which brought relief from tedious existences, passports to the unfamiliar, and a chance to accumulate the sort of "cultural capital" that public school teachers have always rewarded. Reading and writing became tickets out of poverty or simply to other, more congenial environments where strength of mind could triumph over the animal powers of the street.

Naturally, there is more to these life histories than reading lists, though dedicated literacy did form the basis not only of professional success but of the inclination to reflect on lives that, in most instances, have had more to do with words and "data" than with social or political action. And it is in these special uniquenesses, somewhere between texts and motion, that sociology has little to offer by way of analysis. There is the stark image of Guenther Roth racing from the countryside into Darmstadt on 12 September 1944 after a fire-bombing had wrecked 80 percent of the city, a 13-year-old, quickly aged, looking for his mother among the corpses—now noting, "To this day I do not like to look at crowds of dozing sunbathers around swimming pools or on the greens of college campuses because they remind me of the bodies I saw that morning." David Riesman's account, by contrast, is written with patrician restraint and grace, his problems having revolved around whether to work at Harvard, Yale, or Chicago, whether or not to summer in Europe, whether to compare notes about his analysis, under Erich Fromm, with his mother, Karen Horney's analysand. A list of the famous intellectuals and politicos with whom Riesman was somehow or other affiliated would fill a page, from Irving Babbitt to Alfred North Whitehead, Carl Friedrich to Roscoe Pound, Louis Brandeis, Fritz Machlup, Harold Lasswell, and McGeorge Bundy, to select at random. His writing reveals a man at peace with his work, his place in the world: a modern Jamesian character of high station and rectitude. He was given much and he gave much in return. Not so for John Gagnon, who descended from normal poverty to "raggedy-ass poor" during the pits of the Depression, when still a little boy. This adolescent thought that higher education meant Long Beach City College until a recruiting scout from the University of Chicago—are there still such persons?—visited his high school and redirected, presumably for the better, the life of a fellow who had "never known anyone who had gone to college" until he got there himself.

Other strange and ungeneralizable bits fix in memory. Bennett Berger, a strapping athlete with "almost no books in our home," becomes a Marine camp librarian on Guam by sheer accident, reads to fill up the days, and discovers that his mind works almost as well as his crooner's voice and muscular body. The late Donald Cressey, noted criminologist, recalls that "I felt like a beggar" in 1933 when living off the dole following the break-up of his nuclear family, then seven times writes "I made it" in recounting events that slowly paved his way toward fame and security. He strikes one theme that crops up repeatedly in the pre-SAT world: "In a short V-mail letter to Sutherland I said little except that I would like to do graduate work with him at Indiana. . . . I enclosed no transcript of grades, no letters of recommendation, no GRE scores. Sutherland fired a note back to Tinian [the Pacific island]. He said that he would be delighted to have me. . . . It was that simple." This theme, that pure chance, the thinnest line of good luck, plus at times the unexpected good will of a stranger, set up a chain of events that formed everything significant thereafter, sounds throughout the book.

Not all the other writers wear Depression scars or were otherwise underprivileged. Gary T. Marx, for instance, writes as a surfer turned intellectual, whose "Making it, forsaking it, reshaping it" is kin to Norman Podhoretz's *Making It* of an earlier day. He explains that by being the right age and studying suitable topics, he rose to early celebrity in the late '60s but within a few years was a relic whose intellectual agenda had become politically unpalatable and who had to face the prospect of losing status in his discipline before reaching middle age. He writes wisely of how impersonal forces created his rise and fall and recovery called for a more autonomous approach to academic work.

Every chapter in this book is worthwhile, and most would merit expansion. There are lessons in them about intergenerational relations, intellectual discovery, academic politics, "the world we have lost," and, most important, the wide gulf separating today's apprentice teachers and researchers from the conditions that inspired, corrupted, demoralized, or sharpened their famous predecessors. It is not simply that then was great and now is awful. It is more that these people seldom dreamed of possessing knowledge, fame, authority, or honor. That these came their way reflected extraordinary effort, luck, the right external conditions, all put together in some unformulaic combination that defies sociological analysis. This is the magic of the private life in the midst of one's community, and it pervades this fine book from beginning to end.

ALAN SICA
Department of Sociology,
University of Kansas,
Lawrence, KS 66045–2172

Other Landscapes

Australian Ecosystems. 200 Years of Utilization, Degradation and Reconstruction. D. A. SAUNDERS, A. J. M. HOPKINS, and R. A. HOW, Eds. Surrey Beatty, Chipping Norton, NSW, Australia, 1990. viii, 602 pp., illus. Paper, $130. Proceedings of the Ecological Society of Australia, vol. 16. From a symposium, Geraldton, West Australia, Aug. 1988.

Just as Crocodile Dundee and Paul Hogan made Australia "the flavor of the month" for American tourists, several biological issues—namely eucalypt dieback, coral reef management, and tropical rain forest destruction—have heightened awareness of its ecosystems and scientific research. *Australian Ecosystems: 200 Years of Utilization, Degradation and Reconstruction* is a comprehensive synthesis of many scientific projects under way or recently completed relating specifically to human alteration of the country's natural resources. The volume represents the proceedings of the Australian Ecological Society's conference in honor of the Australian bicentennial. Consequently, some papers are reviews of aspects of ecology, rather than new work. The book is an excellent summary of some (but not all) aspects of Australian ecological research,