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Rosemary Crompton

Class and Stratification

This, the third edition of Rosemary Crompton's book, Class and Stratification, was released in 2008. Thoroughly revised from the second edition, much less attention is given to debates that seem to have come to an end, e.g. the one about which class schema is the best - Goldthorpe's or Wright's, while 'culturalist' accounts of class analyses are discussed more at length. All editions of this book have their strengths. First, Crompton is impressively wide in her scope, and considers different traditions of class research seriously: quantitative oriented research as well as qualitative, empirical research as well as more theoretical work. Admittedly, my own knowledge of stratification research largely started with the first edition of this book, where I learned a great deal about the early history of social stratification studies and read about classics such as the work of E. P. Thompson. Second, Crompton's book is strong when it comes to integrating more speculative theories about social transformation, e.g. post-modernist theories, with far less abstract empirical research. I myself am just as critical as Crompton is, perhaps even more so, of many of these theories, but I still find aspects of them worthy of empirical testing.

On the one hand, I am positively disposed to the broad scope of the book; I think we sometimes need to reflect more on what other sociologists are doing, and not just those with similar theoretical and methodological standpoints. On the other hand, the drawback is that some research is described very sparsely. Quantitatively and empirically oriented class research is one field within which the research front has moved forward considerably during the past 15 years - a development very much under-described in Crompton's book. I am left with the impression that Goldthorpe's earlier studies are what are most cited in the book as regards mobility, and I find no references to the edited volume of Richard Breen from 2004, i.e. Social Mobility in Europe, which I regard as the crucial reference besides Erikson's and Goldthorpe's The Constant Flux from 1992. The reader of Crompton's book will miss the following influential research findings on intergenerational mobility: Relative mobility chances are either stable or even changing towards more fluidity over time. Instead, Crompton jumps to fairly recent studies conducted by economists indicating that relative mobility is going towards more inequality, a claim grounded on one or perhaps two recent studies based on income data (p. 125). This gives a very misleading picture of the research findings of the past 15 years within the field of intergenerational class mobility. Moreover, perhaps after the recent changes were made in the book, more up-to-date research, using occupational class schemas (Goldthorpe and Jackson's (2007) 'Intergenerational Class Mobility in Contemporary Britain', British Journal of Sociology) or occupational scales (Lambert et al.'s (2007) 'By Slow Degrees: Two Centuries of Social Reproduction and Mobility in Britain', Sociological Research Online).

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Joachim Fischer


L et me state right away that this book by Joachim Fischer is a first-class scholarly achievement. The author, a sociologist at the Technical University in Dresden, has a superb mastery of this vast material, i.e. of the life and times of a movement of thought within German philosophy in the twentieth century that is not very well known outside Germany. So why should this book matter to sociologists of today? Before trying to answer this question, a few words must be said about the main topic of the book.

Fischer makes an important distinction between philosophical anthropology as a subdiscipline within philosophy, and Philosophical anthropology as a specific theoretical approach (Denkrichtung) to the question: What is man? Thus, Philosophical anthropology (with a capital P) far from comprises all kinds of reflection on man or the human condition. As key
representatives, Fischer singles out four philosophers and one biologist: Max Scheler (1874-1928), Helmuth Plessner (1892-1985), Arnold Gehlen (1904-76), Erich Rothacker (1888-1965) and Adolf Portmann (1897-1982).

The first and more voluminous part of the book narrates the history of Philosophical anthropology from 1919 to 1975; the second part puts the finger on what characterizes Philosophical anthropology as a distinct theoretical approach, its identity core, and how it differs from other approaches within twentieth-century philosophy (logical empiricism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical theory, etc.).

Philosophical anthropology integrates motives from German idealism and from the philosophy of life. The task it sets itself is to give an account of Gesit by starting out from Leben, from the living body. It thus favours an indirect approach to the question: What is man? The comparison between man and animal (and eventually plant) becomes of crucial importance, as well as the ambition to integrate the up-to-date results from biology and other relevant empirical sciences. A keen eye is kept on the different ways in which man and animal relate to their environment. By man a form of life is reached that not only exists as a living body, as a centre of activity, but that also essentially exists at a reflective distance from itself, as a form of life that has to form a conduct of life and which is distinguished by constitutional homelessness. In order to understand this specific form of life, Philosophical anthropology has to develop categories of its own, such as 'world openness' and 'excentric positionality'. According to Fischer, the latter category is at the centre of the specific approach, which characterizes Philosophical anthropology.

Now let me return to the question: Why does this book matter to sociologists of today? I think there are two answers. First, it is impossible to understand the development of West German sociology without at least some knowledge of Philosophical anthropology. Second, there is a specific theoretical approach in sociology that has its foundation in Philosophical anthropology.

The roads of Philosophical anthropology and German sociology in the twentieth century cross one another several times. Scheler was a pioneer not just of Philosophical anthropology, but also of the sociology of knowledge. Plessner and Gehlen after the Second World War switched disciplines, going from philosophy to sociology. A pupil of Gehlen from the 1930s, Helmut Schelsky (1912-84) became one of the most influential West German sociologists. Habermas was a pupil of Rothacker in Bonn in the early 1950s and in critical dialogue with for example Gehlen all through the 1950s and 1960s. Luhmann began his career in Speyer and Münster in close contact with Gehlen and Schelsky. The debate between Habermas and Luhmann in the early 1970s still echoes their background in Philosophical anthropology.

In an interesting section, Fischer draws attention to the dispute over the concept of social role that followed the publication of Ralf Dahrendorf's Home Socioeconomics in 1957. Plessner, Gehlen and Schelsky took part in the debate, just as did several younger sociologists, among them Heinrich Popitz (1925-2002), Hans Paul Bahrdt (1918-94) and Dieter Claessens (1921-97), who all shared an inspiration from Philosophical anthropology. For the development of West German sociology, Fischer concludes, this controversy was probably of more importance than the renowned positivism dispute.

Popitz and Bahrdt came under the influence of Plessner in Göttingen in the early 1950s. As Fischer shows, inspiration from Philosophical anthropology is manifest in the pioneering studies of working-class life in the Ruhr area which Popitz and Bahrdt conducted in the 1950s using observation, interviews and questionnaires. Later on in their careers they published important studies in which they, so to speak, tried to show the anthroposophy that is implicit in some of Max Weber's well-known ideal types: power, domination, the modern city. For example, Popitz distinguishes between four forms of power and their irreducible anthropological conditions: power based on the capacity of humans to hurt one another (physically, socially, economically); power based on the human capacity to imagine future events, and exercised by way of threats and promises; power based on the human need for orientation in life, i.e. the tendency to relate to role models and authorities; and power exercised through technical mastery of the world, a basic human capacity.

I hope that these few hints will do in order to indicate how much of interest a sociologist can find in Fischer's book; it is overwhelmingly rich on material. Sometimes it is a little difficult to navigate one's way in the book, mainly due to the wealth of material and the condensed presentation, but if as reader you take your time, you will be richly rewarded. This book deserves an English publisher. For all those who are not quite comfortable with German, an English translation would open up a new world of exciting thoughts and perspectives.

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Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst (eds)
Ways of Walking. Ethnography and Practice on Foot

On the first page of the Introduction, the co-editors of Ways of Walking. Ethnography and Practice on Foot, Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst, establish that 'Life is itself as much a long walk as it is a long conversation', a statement in which the general point of departure is clearly outlined. In 13 articles, scholars from disciplines such as anthropology, geography, architecture and education explore the diversity of walking practices and the methodological potential of walking, drawing on a phenomenological tradition that emphasizes how people experience the world around them in their day-to-day activities. In other words, they deal with how we make sense of our environment, through our bodies, in the move. The authors take us to the forests of Malaysia, a beach in the northwest of Canada, hillsides of Himalaya, a small Andalusian village, and then on to educational walks and slippery pavements in Aberdeen, industrial ruins in the United Kingdom, regulated walking routes in Geneva, subway stations in Tokyo and, finally, The Murros’ mountains in Scotland. The publication is the result of The Walking Seminar, a three-day conference at the University of Aberdeen in 2005, and it also constitutes the first volume in the series Anthropological Studies of Creativity and Perception. Summing up a book composed of such a wide range of detailed contributions is not the easiest thing to do, and I will not even give it a try. Instead, I will bring out two themes that I identified while reading and re-reading, and then conclude by reflecting on to whom I would recommend this book.

Naturally, there is not one main argument in Ways of Walking. However, trying to grasp what these scholars are telling us it seems to me that what, in very different ways, they are all claiming is that a focus on walking practices enables researchers to learn more about the embodied, multi-sensed way in which people experience their surroundings. For instance, take Kenneth R. Olwig, who points out that you can apprehend a landscape either by walking through it or by viewing it from a fixed location, or Jo Lee Vergunst, who focuses on how everyday spatial experiences are constituted as much by the relational texture between the walker and the ground as by the views from the top of the mountain. In this sense, by taking us to overgrown paths in the Malaysian Forest and industrial ruins in the United Kingdom, respectively, Lye Tuck-Po and Tim Edensor then show us that what it really means to experience things on the move becomes most evident while walking on broken