

Political Sociology Is Dead. Long Live Political Sociology?

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POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY IS DEAD. The old kind, anyway. What counted as political sociology in the past just is not practiced anymore. Generalizing wildly, political sociology used to be the study of how voters, classes, movements, parties, and so on influenced *the state*—be it political leaders, policy, administration, and so forth. In Canada, this kind of political sociology was represented by both political economists—such as Wallace Clement, John Porter, Gordon Laxer, or William K. Carroll—and scholars measuring and assessing broad trends using survey data—for instance, Douglas Baer, Edward Grabb, or James Curtis. Today, no one analyzes the state-society relationship by treating “the state” and “society” monolithically. Now, each encompasses unlimited instances of “politics” that impact on the other in just as many ways.

This is certainly the message communicated by the contributors to this committing sociology section of the *Canadian Review of Sociology*. Included are Douglas Baer and William K. Carroll, who have produced some of the most highly cited and award-winning works in Canadian political sociology. Both draw attention to the decline in the use of old methods and perspectives by political sociologists. Baer (2016) does this by tracking

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English-language publications in this journal and in the *Canadian Journal of Sociology* and finds that political sociologists do not draw on surveys or employ quantitative methods as much as they used to. Political sociologists have also broadened the range of politics they examine, especially around extra-institutional forms of power. Carroll (2016) also highlights the move by political sociologists away from the narrow conceptualizations of power and politics once associated with the classic political economists, and notes how the area is increasingly interdisciplinary, even ambiguous, as a space. In this sense, Anglo-Canadian political sociology has come to resemble the field in Quebec in a number of ways. As Jean-Philippe Warren (2016) notes, political sociologists in that province have always understood politics in this broader sense, as encompassing the society, institutions, and context in which they work. Their participation on both sides of recent debates around the “reasonable accommodation” of cultural and ethnic difference, as well as the Quebec Students’ movement, reveals the ironies of how Quebec and its political sociologists can be found on the vanguard of ethnic-conservatism *and* politics against austerity.

If Baer, Carroll, and Warren highlight how Canadian political sociologists today hold a wider perspective on politics than in the past, our last two contributors exemplify this trend by urging political sociologists to expand their understandings of what they do and how they do it. Edwin Amenta (2016) takes social movement (SM) scholars to task for favoring a “movement-centered” approach to analyzing mobilization and its effects. He says that such a perspective is ultimately unhelpful unless political sociologists go beyond it and employ mediation models in which SMs play an important but partial role as instigators of change. In other words, SM scholars need to consider a *broader array* of forces in their analyses. Elke Winter (2016) joins Amenta in calling for political sociologists to expand their notions of what counts as political sociology. She says Canadian political sociologists should adopt “actor-centered” approaches to their analyses of citizenship. These would serve as correctives to state-centered research that deals with citizenship primarily as a formal/legal status by exposing how varied people’s experience of citizenship actually is. She uses the case of recent changes to citizenship laws in Canada to draw attention to these issues.

So a new kind of political sociology reigns. Is there anything, however, salvageable from the old? Yes, but it involves building upon rather than resurrecting their questions and methods. We agree with Carroll (2016) that the “ambiguity” by which political sociology is currently characterized has energized the field and permitted scholars to explore manifestations of “the political” in ways that were not possible before. Everyone has power and politics is everywhere, and political sociologists should continue to tease out the complex ways both play out in the everyday, especially as they relate to matters of social justice and economic inequality. We also share Baer’s (2016) concern that there is an “intellectual space” that has

been neglected as we have turned away from old approaches. Today, we are able to spot power differentials at increasingly finer levels and can trace how they condition state-related activities and outcomes. Unless this is accompanied by a “pulling back” to undertake careful investigation of the processes that create and sustain those power differentials, our capacity to understand and address current circumstances remains held up at the level of generalized critique. Critique is easy. What is hard is figuring out how to move beyond critique and do something about it in our role as academics.

So maybe it is time to revisit the work of people such as Seymour Lipset, Stein Rokkan, Andre Gunder Frank, or John Porter, not only to probe their treatments of “the state” and “society” but to remind ourselves there is value in asking similar sorts of questions in the current day. “Long live political sociology” to be sure, but let us not forget our legacy in the process.

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