It's just me in the US

Stephen Mennell writes in response to Ben Carrington’s recent BSA annual conference plenary criticising sociology in America

I very largely agree with Ben Carrington (“Mainstream US research is lacking in sociological imagination”, Network, Summer 2017). Cultural studies at its best – in the hands of Stuart Hall for example – is a worthy inheritor of C. Wright Mills’s ideals; cultural studies at its worst, like sociology at its worst, can also be pretty dreadful. While I think Ben is right about US sociology having become ‘too empirical’, I believe there are deeper sources of its weaknesses. Most of all, American sociology, like American politics and American culture in general, is profoundly individualistic.

America, said Alexis de Tocqueville (pictured) in 1840, was one country in the world where the precepts of Descartes were least studied and most followed. In their common assumptions Americans sought “to evade the bondage of system and habit, of family maxims, class opinions, and, in some degree, of national prejudices; to accept tradition only as a means of information, and... to seek the reason of things for oneself, and in oneself alone.”

In short, “each American appeals to the individual exercise of his own understanding alone”. This statement of Tocqueville’s elegantly captures an American proneness to what Norbert Elias later called the ‘homo clausus’ conception of human beings – a mode of self-experience as a ‘closed person’, as a single isolated individual separate from other individuals. More recently the writer Hari Kunzru remarked (in The Guardian, 14 November 2015) that “Americans are culturally averse to any explanation not based on the feelings and doings of the sovereign individual”. And I think this cultural trait can be seen in American sociology too; what Americans describe with pride as their national tradition of individualism provides a kind of epistemological blockage to their understanding of larger-scale and longers-term social processes and structures.

Few American sociologists seem able to escape the trap of the individual/society, agency/structure and macro/micro dichotomies (all nonsense with which we continue to befuddle our students, thanks to the lack of thoroughgoing processual conceptualisation – as Peter Emmerson pointed out in Network, Spring 2017).

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More specifically, most American sociologists think much more readily in terms of ‘interaction’ rather than ‘interdependence’. Few of them, in my experience, are easily able to distinguish between these two words: they may know that modern individuals belong to, and are constrained by, long chains and extensive webs of interdependence with millions of people whom they never meet face-to-face, yet they still tend to focus on each two-person link in a chain, and micro-sociological theorising still predominates.

The weaknesses of interactionism are well known: it remains firmly stuck at the level of face-to-face interaction, failing to deal with the ubiquitous social reality of interdependence. One is interdependent with infinitely more other people than those with whom one interacts face-to-face.

Interdependence always involves more or less unequal balances of power.

Where, as is usual, one person or group of people is more dependent on another person or group than the other party is on the first, there is an unequal power ratio. Power ratios change over time, whether over a lifetime – as in the case of parents and their children – or over the longer term through historical struggles.

Which brings us back to the legacy of C. Wright Mills. Power was something he certainly understood, yet since his day it has not been a central concern of American sociology: When I pointed this out in conversation with a past president of the ASA, the reply was, “Well, we study inequality a lot”; that isn’t quite the same thing. I wonder whether it is the USA’s superabundant power in international affairs, and its crude misuse of it, that makes American sociologists squeamish about power.

Ben Carrington is right about empiricism, but empiricism and individualism are of course linked: as members of the Frankfurt School reminded us, survey data is typically gathered from individual respondents amputated from their social networks, with little consideration of how they come to form the opinions and perceptions they profess. American ideological individualism makes it easier to ignore that point.

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