

Jensen Sass

Geoff Cooper, Andrew King, and Ruth Rettie
(eds.) **Sociological Objects: Reconfigurations of Social Theory.** Surrey: Ashgate. ix + 206 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/32066)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2010

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Geoff Cooper, Andrew King, and Ruth Rettie (eds.) *Sociological Objects: Reconfigurations of Social Theory*. Surrey: Ashgate. ix + 206 pp.

doi: 10.2383/32066

Sociological Objects is the product of the “Sociology After Durkheim” conference, held at the University of Surrey in June 2006. The Surrey conference was one of a chain of recent conferences focusing on Durkheim, a thinker whose questions have retained their central place in sociological theory and whose late work has inspired a new generation of sociologists. After a period of exile late Durkheimian sociology returned to the discipline’s center by way of a “religious revival” which took place a decade or so ago. Since then Durkheimian inquiry has tended in the direction of routinization, but on occasion there are local revivals and traces of these appear in the volume under review.

The title of this book might suggest that it is about “material culture” – a blooming field of inquiry of considerable interest to Durkheimians but spanning the full breadth of the social sciences. Surprisingly enough, questions concerning material culture do not feature prominently here (Olli Pyyhtinen’s chapter on Simmel being the exception). The “sociological objects” to which the title refers are more broadly conceived. They include both the objects (i.e., subjects) that sociological inquiries should be directed towards, and the objects (i.e., objectives) that should orient such inquiry. Since this expansive title is coupled with a somewhat ambiguous subtitle it should be clear that the scope of this volume is very broad indeed, for the questions it addresses are in fact the boundary questions of the discipline itself. But between these distant boundaries are contained a number of enlightening, challenging and sometimes surprising essays concerning many of the questions around which contemporary social theory is organized. Of these, the relevance of the classics, the constitution of the social, and the “looping effects” that concepts and categories produced within academia can have on the social world stand out as noteworthy. These three themes represent a partial selection from volume whose contents are highly varied and could not be summarized in so limited a space.

A number of chapters in this volume advocate a return to the classics (chapters two, three, and six especially) and so they are compelled to address one of sociology’s perduring questions, namely, why the dead should not be left to rest. One rather obvious reason to return to the classics is that they can shed light on current questions. This is the premise guiding Inglis and Robertson’s search for the origins of “globality” in Durkheim’s early and late work (chapter two). Inglis and Robertson’s first contribution is to deflate the claim (famously voiced by Ulrich Beck) that classical sociology is blinkered by “methodological nationalism.” They achieve this by drawing attention to Durkheim’s early writings on the transnationalization of economic production as well as his late writings on the way ostensibly discrete Aboriginal groups came to share common gods. The latter of these inquiries may seem remote to contemporary sociology but concerns of an analogous kind are in fact central to recent work in cultural sociology which aims, among other things, to explain the transnationalization of icons. While certain parts of Inglis and Robertson’s analysis suffer from what historical contextualists dub “presentism,” cultural sociologists would be well advised to return to the classics Inglis and Robertson nominate, and perhaps for methodological as well as theoretical reasons.

A second set of questions which inspire a number of contributions to *Sociological Objects* could loosely be grouped around the problem of social ontology (chapters four, five, and seven). Due to the influence of John Searle and a number of other prominent realist philosophers, social ontology has become a topic of lively discussion in economics, philosophy and anthropology, so it is good to see it addressed in a volume of this kind. Noteworthy in this respect is Irene Rafanell's chapter "Durkheim's Social Facts and the Performative Model" which builds bridges between three apparently discontinuous bodies of work. To link Durkheim's account of social facts (often criticized for being objectivistic) with Butler's performance theory (often criticized for being subjectivistic) Rafanell presents us with Barry Barnes' performative theory of social institutions. Barnes' work is significant because it challenges the dichotomy routinely drawn between objectivist and subjectivist traditions of social inquiry. In a nutshell, Barnes argues that social facts are constructed and sustained discursively. This proposition shares similarities with the social ontology proposed by Searle who argues that while social facts are constituted subjectively they enjoy an epistemically objective status; that is to say, social facts are discursive artifacts. Also of note in Rafanell's chapter are a pair of psychological mechanisms which she suggests help preserve social order at the interpersonal level. This suggestion is exploratory in nature but it draws our attention to the important work to be done in the space which separates the interpretivist and realist traditions of social theory. The final theme of note here concerns the attempt to think sociologically about social theory itself. While work of this sort might smack of narcissism it should rightly be seen as a proxy for a much broader set of inquiries. Recent work in this genre is represented in the otherwise very different studies undertaken by the philosopher Ian Hacking and the political anthropologist James C. Scott. However divergent their aims, they each examine how categories produced by elites – most famously multiple personality disorder and the Normalbaum – transform the reality they were intended to describe. Of particular interest in this regard is the proposal by Anna Tsatsaroni and Geoff Cooper (chapter nine) to examine how 'audit culture' has transformed the practice and content of social scientific inquiry. While many social scientists have a practical understanding of the perverse incentives generated by auditing, systematic studies of this practice and its effects are in dire need.

Although this volume is broadly Durkheimian in orientation and occasionally revivalist in inspiration, the lively and diverse collection of essays it contains address debates span the horizon of contemporary theory. In addition to those mentioned prominent names include Bloor, Hunter, Goffman, Garfinkel, Latour, Power, and Wittgenstein. For readers in search of a systematic appraisal of contemporary social theory, Bryan S. Turner's edited collection, *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, might well be the more obvious option, if at twice the cost. But in terms of its scope and eclecticism *Sociological Objects* is unique and should be of interest to advanced students, instructors, and researchers alike.

Jensen Sass
Yale University