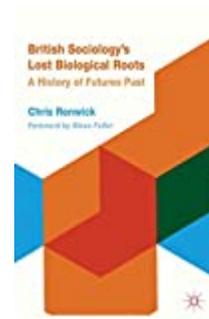




Chris Renwick. *British Sociology's Lost Biological Roots: A History of Futures Past.* Foreword by Steve Fuller. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 240 S. ISBN 978-0-230-35616-0.



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C. Renwick: British Sociology's Lost Biological Roots

It is a trope to state or lament the absent of conceptually driven sociological endeavours in the United Kingdom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Compared to France, where Durkheim and his school advanced sociological thinking, and to Germany, where Simmel and Weber developed complex ideas about the differentiation of modern society, sociology as an academic discipline did not exist in the UK, and thinking about society was a mere extension of philanthropy and social work. However, between 1903 and 1907, the first major steps towards an institutional core of sociology as a discipline were taken. In late 1903, the Sociological Society was inaugurated, which devoted itself to the advance of sociological thinking, and started to publish a series of academic papers on its proceedings. And in December 1907, L.T. Hobhouse delivered his inaugural lecture as Martin White professor of sociology at the London School of Economics, the first university appointment that was specifically designed to the study of this discipline.

While these key dates in the emergence of British sociology have been known for a long time, the develop-

ments and strands of debate that led to this appointment have not yet been properly scrutinised. In this challenging, thought-provoking and intriguing book, Chris Renwick charts the developments that led to the hegemony of a philosophical approach to sociology, that combined ethics and the reform of society, as it was represented by Hobhouse. The key argument of this book is that the dominance of this approach, which firmly embedded sociology in the realm of the humanities, was anything but a given against the backdrop of late nineteenth century British attempts to conceptualise sociability or, to use a clunky term based on Weber's notion of *Vergesellschaftung*, 'societalization'. As Renwick explains in a series of densely argued and thoroughly researched chapters, the appointment of Hobhouse was a late victory for those who wanted to separate sociology from biological and particularly evolutionary thinking, which had dominated British debates on society in the decades prior to 1900. It was only after the conceptual potential of biological thinking had been exhausted and its key proponents were in a dead alley that Hobhouse could steer British sociology away from the sciences and consider human society as distinctive from biological evolution.

This argument is presented in six chapters. In the first, Renwick suggests that the demise of classical political economy was an important backdrop for the intensive debates about sociology that took place during the final two decades of the nineteenth century. Economist J.K. Ingram used a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1878 to launch a full-fledged attack on classical liberal political economy, because of its deductive character and its tendency to study issues of wealth in isolation from their social contexts. Only a political economy that was embedded in sociology as a science of society, Ingram concluded, could remedy these problems. The next chapter charts the work of Francis Galton and his attempts to turn eugenics into a science that could contribute towards social reform. Here, Renwick emphasizes the predominantly statistical underpinnings of Galton's work, in particular the way in which he used the "normal distribution" that could be found in biological phenomena for an anthropometric calculation of the distribution of physical qualities in society. The following chapter elaborates on the work of Patrick Geddes (1854-1932), a lesser known but nevertheless crucial figure in late nineteenth century British sociology. Geddes drew heavily on Herbert Spencer's evolutionary philosophy and theory of differentiation, employed organicist metaphors and developed evolutionary ideas that linked biology and sociology in a "biosocial synthesis" (pp. 86ff.). Geddes was able to gather some practical support for his ideas of a sociology based on biological ideas, a programme he later called "civics", and established the "Outlook Tower", a museum and events venue in Edinburgh opened in 1892 that served as a platform for the promotion of Geddes's ideas on sociology. Chapter four charts how Hobhouse started to develop a programme of sociological inquiry that, while initially also drawing on Spencer's notion of evolutionary differentiation, ultimately arrived at the conclusion that sociology had to free itself from biological underpinnings and to emphasize human agency.

In the final section of his book, Renwick traces the decision-making processes within the Sociological Society and the University of London between 1903 and 1907 that led to the appointment of Hobhouse as the first chair in sociology. He reveals how Victor Branford, initially a student of Geddes who established himself as a successful

businessman, managed to acquire a key role in the Sociological Society. While he had initially championed Geddes's approach with its biological underpinnings, Branford later dropped his attempts to streamline the society along those lines when he failed to convince the majority of its members of the advantages of a sociology based on biology. Undercutting Geddes, Branford was then instrumental in appointing Hobhouse to the post of the first British sociology professor.

Particularly in these final two chapters, one would have wished for a better signposting of key turning points in the narrative, which is densely populated by a large cast of nowadays largely forgotten amateurs and semi-professionals who championed sociological thinking. This should, however, not distract from the major accomplishments of this book. Chris Renwick has written a fascinating study that convincingly corrects established scholarly opinions about the lack of sociological discourse in late nineteenth century Britain. He also makes an important point about the prevalence of biological thinking in these debates, and about the need for contemporary actors to cut off these connections in order to establish sociology as an independent, professional discipline. Ultimately, these findings invite comparative reflections with regard to the situation on the continent. As Peter Weingart has convincingly argued, German turn-of-the-century sociology, too, had to disentangle itself from biology before it could gain intellectual and institutional independence. Peter Weingart, *Biologie als Gesellschaftstheorie*, in: Achim Barsch / Peter M. Hejl (eds.), *Menschenbilder. Zur Pluralisierung der Vorstellung von der menschlichen Natur (1850-1914)*, Frankfurt am Main 2000, pp. 146-166. In his conclusion, Renwick invokes recent debates in sociobiology to point out the ongoing significance of those early encounters with biology for sociological thinking. Perhaps a much better reference point for such a reflection would be the return of evolutionary thinking about societal development in post-1945 sociological systems theory, notably in Niklas Luhmann's theory of evolutionary differentiation. On these debates, see for instance Rudolf Stichweh, *Evolutionary Theory and the Theory of World Society*, in: *Soziale Systeme* 13 (2007), pp. 528-542. The conceptual contact between biology and sociology is certainly more than only a fading historical reminiscence.

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