

Book Review

Metaphysical Sociology: On the Work of John Carroll

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For those with worries that sociological theory has become a sort of leisure activity, an illegitimate break from undertaking 'respectable' research, this well edited collection of essays on a highly idiosyncratic Australian sociologist will supply some much needed relief. It off-sets an increasingly depressing situation where main-line Anglo-American sociology is overly preoccupied with identity politics. Working from another end, guardians of methodological purity control indices of academic productivity whose financial basis is regulated by research funding authorities. The outcome of these two forces is to narrow the exercise of the sociological imagination thus contributing to the present conceptual famine in the discipline. New forms of sociological theory that break sociological conventions are rare, hence interest in this collection.

Within Anglo-American sociology Australian contributions are often overlooked. Carroll can make some claims, however to reverse this situation. Even though not a sociologist with breadth and depth equivalent to say Bauman or Bourdieu, Carroll, nevertheless has carved out a distinctive position within sociological theory which this collection brings into focus. In it, he emerges as a quirky, questioning critic called to deal with the unsettled questions facing sociology. He confronts these as a neo-Calvinist, that is one for whom God is dead. Coping with this demise of the deity has left uncomfortable legacies, notably over how to cope with stories of ultimate significance. While apparitions of the Divine are deemed 'evaporated', they have been replaced by visions of Weber's ghost which stalks the battlements of sociology. Even though the collection does not acknowledge this bleak turn of events, reflections on these by Carroll place him in the centre of unfolding debates on post-secularism.

There is much in Carroll's notion of a metaphysical sociology to recommend further exploration which this collection well supplies. To be found are stimulating essays, original and hard-nosed in analyses, all of which force sociology out into new territories. The collection contains thirteen essays, commencing with a helpful introduction by James (chapter 1) and ending in chapter 13 with Carroll's responses to these. In chapter 2, he further explores his notion of metaphysical sociology. Five of these contributions are devoted to reflections on his own controversial study *The Existential Jesus* (2007). The remaining five essays in the collection explore and expand other themes in Carroll's work, dealing with 'the eclipse of metaphysics', 'digital Western dreaming', 'ego-terrorism', mortality and 'modern metaphysical romance', their titles signifying their originality. These essays utilise film to good sociological effect. By marking the influence of Poussin's *Testament of Eudamidas* in framing his sociological thought Carroll provides a useful endorsement of the value of the visual in shaping sociological theory. To a large degree, a painting can be the image of a book, so well justifying Routledge's policy to place a copy of it on the cover.

The originality of Carroll's metaphysical sociology lies in its emphasis on narrative, on the origins and purpose of the human condition and on the implications of death. If Bourdieu's sociology is denoted by reference to

resentment, Carroll's version deals in reminders which revitalise the discipline's obligations to the humanities. Dealing with these challenges so generated means, as Carroll suggests, that 'such a sociology needs to be brave, even wild in what it takes on' (p. 22). Carroll pays his dues to these virtues, drawing heavily on Weber, especially his essay 'science as a vocation', Bauman, Nietzsche, Reiff and, unexpectedly, Tolstoy. He asserts that 'without metaphysics we wither. We lose the sense to our lives that we only gain through stories' (p. 13). But the story Carroll concentrates on, notably in *The Existential Jesus*, will surprise and disconcert.

Taken with his adulation of Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the source of his interest in Calvinism, Carroll might be charged with propelling sociology, not so much into metaphysics, as into that forbidden territory: theology. Carroll's interest centres on passages pertaining to the identity of Jesus as in verses in the Gospel of Mark. Treated as the pinnacle of Western literature, in the transcript of an interview (chapter 3) Carroll claims that 'Mark's Jesus is the great Western teacher on the nature of Being; and that his real tragedy is that he ends up as his only student' (p. 25). It is the story of this tragedy, as conceived by Carroll that fascinates and grips him. His interest lies in the insecurity of Christ around the statement 'I am'. But this concern misses the point of Christ's perplexity. It is less about human identity more about its Divine form, for the query makes no sense without reference to the statement made by God to Moses: 'I AM THAT I AM' (Exodus 3: 14). Although interesting, if not limited as a reading of this Gospel, the sociological resources deployed for its construction are not discernible in the collection. The four other essays, however, responding to this study are really stimulating.

Whilst Scruton's essay (chapter 4) is useful as a reading of the work on Jesus, he hits on a vital objection: the absence of reference to the issue of the resurrection (p. 40), a point Dickson also picks up on (pp. 54-55). In response, Carroll resorts to his interest in the tragedy of the tale (p. 158). But in his chapter 5, dealing with the definition of culture and Carroll, Dickson hits a good point. He suggests that Carroll needs this omission of the resurrection to illustrate the dark side of cultural humanism and the tragedy of its collapse which binds religion to culture (pp. 44-47). Even if the resurrection is disregarded, Carroll's Jesus presents a story to be told, as is well illustrated in Sheen's eloquent essay 'The Passion in Port Talbot' (chapter 6). No less interesting is Murphy's essay (chapter 7) which reflects on Carroll's neo-Calvinism which so generates his 'remarkable' sociology (p. 66). It is curious the way Calvinism, at times, seems the implicit theology of sociology, notably in Weber but also in Simmel's interest in Rembrandt. Murphy suggests that this neo-Calvinism, all the more gloomy with God supposedly dead, leads to a state where religion has become entwined with culture, yet in this re-constitution of everyday life, great themes of destiny and fate still haunt the individual. As with other essays in the collection, much ground is covered with considerable and impressive economy.

Equally stimulating fare can be found in the five essays which follow. Tester's essay (chapter 8) on the eclipse of metaphysics expresses well its gloomy outcome: the realisation that the 'I is *not* the self-sufficient maker of itself' (p. 80). Death looms in this essay, Tester taking his cue from Adorno. In a subtle appraisal of Antonioni's film *L'eclisse*, Tester illustrates the way turmoil ruptures the placid. Its characters live in a world of too much light which exposes the isolation of individuals but also a denial of their uniqueness. An equally creative essay (chapter 9) on digital culture follows. By using four digital video games, Maloney creatively illustrates the way new narratives are developed which involve the working of old stories. These illustrate many of the themes of tale and tragedy to be found in Carroll's metaphysical sociology. Issues of self-justification and isolation in revolt against conventional social orders are to be found in Bradshaw's exploration of ego-terrorism (chapter 10). It is a subtle, insightful essay. The 'existential fragility of life' (p. 127) is well illustrated in Gibson's essay (chapter 11) where efforts to impose will on social reality encounter distinctive pitfalls in late modernity. Her film is Michael Haneke's *Amour*, where contrasting responses to death are explored. Again, the art of story telling is brought to the fore and, as with Tester, a subtle reading of a film is put to insightful sociological analysis.

Perhaps it is invidious to suggest, but the most creative (and amusing) essay (chapter 12) comes from Sara James, the collection's editor. Like others much influenced by Carroll, her choice of film to explore love is brilliant. Referring to Carroll's interest in 'soul-mate love' (found in his *The Western Dreaming* (2001) she links her themes well to those of Bauman's liquid love and to online romance (pp. 144-46). By selecting Spike Jonze's film *Her* (2013) she gives a creative twist to what can be derived from Carroll. The film concerns a divorced man who falls in love with his operating system named Samantha and who becomes dependent on her. Unfortunately, he finds out that 641 others are also in love with her (p. 150). The dangers and fallacies of digital 'spiritual communion' (p. 152) are admirably explored.

In his response at the end of the collection, and far from being patronising, Carroll indicates that it gels far more than expected. 'Ground-breaking' is a term too often bandied about for feeble sociological works. With this collection, this is not so. It is doubtful if a better collection of essays on sociological theory will emerge in 2018. It works on the edge of sociological conventions creatively, offering many innovations and new territories to explore. The only caveat relates to the absence of a contribution that would have compared Bauman with Carroll.