

# MOVEMENTS, SECTS AND LETTING GO OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

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**I**n this issue of *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, Rick Helmes-Hayes and Emily Milne have made an important contribution to the sociology and history of Canadian sociology, with an eye towards larger theoretical and methodological questions of concern to social scientists. Combining the framework of Harry Hiller (who is, along with Helmes-Hayes himself, an active historian of the English language sociological field in Canada) along with Nicholas Mullins' influential analysis of "theory and theory groups" rooted in the American case, Helmes-Hayes and Milne synthesize theory, develop useful and reasonable measures, and tell an important and interesting story of the "rise and fall" of the symbolic interactionist (SI) tradition in Canada.

It is not really a fall, of course, and Helmes-Hayes and Milne argue that symbolic interactionism in Canada has de-institutionalized, as it moved from a smaller and coherent theory group to a more diffuse and looser social structure, while retaining a broad influence in the field. While this is a controversial view from the perspective of some of the older and more established scholars, the younger sociologists interviewed by Helmes-Hayes seem to be comfortable with seeing SI as a rich tradition they draw on and are rooted in, without feeling the need to be part of a "pure" tradition, set off in some major way, from either mainstream American sociology or the various competing loyal and disloyal alternative traditions such as ethnomethodology, various post-modern theories or the political economy and feminist traditions that have been influential in the Canadian discipline. In an increasingly global world, where dialogue with non-English language traditions is essential, and in a context where both French language Quebec sociology and indigenous perspectives must surely be an important element of a viable national or set of national sociologies, the younger generation's flexibility and open vision of what a qualitative sociology might look like makes good sense.

Helmes-Hayes and Milne, however, do not offer us the conceptual tools to fully understand a core tension in their paper. This is the op-

position to the very project of measuring the institutionalization of the theory cleared expressed by some core members of the SI tradition (including at least one reviewer for the journal) alongside the relative openness to this kind of sociology expressed by younger scholars they talked to. How would Hiller, or Mullins, or a perspective that highlights the dependency of Canadian sociology on the American or British version of the discipline, explain the opposition to what seems, in my view, to be a reasonable attempt to do the sociology of sociology while respecting the views of research participants?

While applauding the contribution of this important paper, I would like to raise two major conceptual limitations of the study that are rooted in its ignoring of one major recent development in the sociology of ideas, as well as a classic theoretical angle on these questions from the 1970s that is often forgotten. Neither Mullins' theory group perspective or the Hiller typology on the history of sociology in Canada fully theorizes the passionate emotions and value commitments of participants who created various theory groups, or Canadian sociology, something that is better done in Frickel and Gross's "scientific intellectual movement" perspective (2005), and Lewis Coser writing on what he calls "intellectual sects" (1965). This comment will elucidate both concepts and apply them to the cases Helmes-Hayes and Milne discuss.

Let us start with Frickel and Gross's concept of an "Scientific Intellectual Movement" (SIM). The problem with Mullins' approach to theory groups, according to the Frickel and Gross perspective, is that it fails to adequately capture and theorize the resemblance between the tactics, culture and rhetorical framing of insurgent theory groups and social movements outside the university (Frickel and Gross 2005). Synthesizing the sociology of sociology literature that Helmes-Hayes and Milne draw on with the most recent developments in social movement theory, Frickel and Gross suggest that we can best understand certain types of theory groups using the analytic lens of "movements", not just networks, clusters, or specializations. Clearly SIMs are *academic* movements, concerned with publishing, tenure stream jobs, and status in the field, and are oriented towards producing ideas that are institutionalized in universities; they are not the same kind of animals that are movements concerned with gaining state power, shaping economic or social policy, or opposing political regimes they view as unjust. At the same time, it is hard to deny that the rhetoric and behavior of certain insurgent social movements, such as "critical race theory," "post-modernism," "socialist-feminism," or even, (in a less explicit political way) "rational choice theory" and "behaviorism," operate in a way that goes beyond the "ideal type" set of assumptions about motivations that operate behind both Mullins' model and Helmes-Hayes/Milne's application. In comparison

to normal science, SIMs make a clearer appeal to moral goods, a sharper critique of wrongs (even evils), an open attempt to mobilize loyalties, and motivate sacrifice and sharp intellectual commitments to their theory group, something SIM theory helps explain.

In some ways the SIM model is concerned not with institutionalized theory groups like structural-functionalism or conflict theory, which represent the “normal science” Helmes-Hayes/Milne assume in their very language of “de-institutionalization”, but in theorizing the marginalized movements often led by disaffected members of the disciplinary elite. From this perspective, SI is a scientific intellectual movement led by dissident elites such as Herbert Blumer in the original American case, or, in the Canadian case, William Shaffir, Dorothy Pawluck and Robert Prus in the imported contemporary version. It is true, of course, that both the original SI in the United States, and the more recent Canadian version that flowed from Dawson and then Everett Hughes at McGill, were concerned with training young PhD scholars, shaping curriculum and graduate school comprehensive lists, establishing academic conferences and journals, publishing major scholarly works and dominating departments and disciplines. The Mullins’ model Helmes-Hayes/Milne use is appropriate and works, but there is something missing. Unlike the standard institutionalized theory groups that dominate disciplines and scholarly discourse, the SI tradition is a hybrid of academic and movement cultures and practices. In a post-Merton sociology of science/ science studies world, it would be an error to polarize this in ways that suggest that institutionalized theories are truly objective, scientific, and value free, while SIMs are partisan activists engaging in something not fully scientific, something Frickel and Gross do not do, as evidenced by their terminology of “*Scientific* intellectual movements”. One could, in fact, question the terminology they use for the assumptions built into it, as is the case with all conceptual models, but they are not suggesting that SIMs like symbolic interactionism are value laden and illegitimate, unlike established and dominant theory schools. Following Bourdieu, who sees the academic field as a “field of power,” we surely must see both institutionalized theories and scientific social movements as both involved in politicized intellectual activities, albeit framed and practiced in different ways. The issue is, however, that SIMs are openly framed in ways that encourage loyalty to the cause, something that surely one sees in clear ways in the symbolic interactionist tradition in Canada, and elsewhere.

Symbolic interactionists tend to frame what Neil Gross calls their “intellectual self concept” in openly partisan ways (Gross 2009), identifying themselves as SI partisans. And flowing from this, they tend to be emotionally and rhetorically committed to drawing boundaries between

core and loyal members, something we see evidence for in the review comments to the Helmes-Hayes/ Milne piece unused in the published article itself. From the perspective of social science, the methods that Helmes-Hayes used to determine what is and what is not SI, are reasonable and defensible, but hardly the final word. However, the reaction to this project by some of the more established proponents of symbolic interactionism betrays the attitude that the question of who is a symbolic interactionist is something that is to be determined not by social scientists but by the members of the position itself, something common among social movements, where feminists, say, argue endlessly, it sometimes seems, as to who is really a feminist, who has betrayed the cause, and what the boundaries of the perspective are. It is only the younger members of the symbolic interactionist camp, as evidenced by the interviews in this article, who are less interested in establishing the boundaries of SI in a process that is clearly emotional and value laden. Helmes-Hayes/ Milne would see this as evidence for de-institutionalization but another way to look at it is, this is what happens when the social movement element of symbolic interactionism gets diluted when it becomes institutionalized inside an established social science discipline such as sociology in an advanced industrial society, in particular, one that has established research universities with money to hire and tenure faculty through a competition oriented around the academic publishing field and a professionalized habitus.

The point here is not to delegitimize only symbolic interactionism as a social movement instead of a theory; it is clear that the field Helmes-Hayes and Milne look at in Canadian sociology is populated by a series of untheorized examples of scientific intellectual movements. One of Helmes-Hayes' important contributions to the sociology of sociology is his analysis presented here, and elsewhere, of the social gospel roots of Canadian sociology, a challenge to the previously dominant model Hiller had outlined of the history of the discipline in Canada. But what is the social gospel perspective? Is it but a social movement/ theory/ professional project hybrid, as scholars, rooted in religious conceptions of the good, migrated from religion to social science and helped create academic social science in Canada by using the moral appeals and tactics that movements use, but here oriented to creating a new academic discipline? Moreover, while in the United States, symbolic interactionism was engaged in a social movement struggle against structural functionalism in the 1950s and mainstream quantitative sociology after the 1960s, in Canada symbolic interactionists were operating in a context where the intellectual environment was shaped in substantial ways by the Marxist tradition, modified by feminism to create social-feminists and refined by Innis with Porter as a foil in ways that gave rise to Canadian political

economy. But what was Canadian political economy but an institutionalized version of the scientific intellectual movement of Marxism and New Left radicalism that swept through the Canadian intellectual environment in both English Canada and Quebec (there in dialogue with a scientific intellectual movement in French represented by the sovereigntist movement itself)? The analysis offered by Helmes-Hayes/ Milne could be refined and improved on by taking more account of the social movement nature of the various competing academic schools than they did in the article.

The issue goes even deeper, however. We should not assume that the most recent scholarship in the form of Frickel and Gross is necessarily the most insightful; the SIM perspective has, in fact, helped further bury the insights of Lewis Coser and his analysis of the sect-like quality of intellectual and sociological movements, a perspective we would do well to recover. Coser's analysis is a sensitive topic for symbolic interactionism, since they have been called sect-like in the past, and it is understandable that they would not appreciate this. But the reality is this is both true, and from the perspective of the Coser argument, not wholly unflattering. We will get to the objections to this analysis at the end of this comment, but first let's talk about who Coser was, and what his sociology of ideas offers that has been ignored or forgotten in the both the Mullins tradition, standard intellectual history and the Frickel and Gross SIM perspective.

Coser was a German Jewish Marxist-left social democrat who studied with Robert Merton at Columbia and who, along with his similarly brilliant wife Rose Coser, produced an important body of research and theorizing that combined a left-critical perspective, with sociological rigor, historical-comparative range and an openness to qualitative micro-sociology rooted in Simmel's social theory. Coser is controversial among many symbolic interactionists, however, because of his well known and intensely polemical 1975 American Sociological Association Presidential address entitled "Two Methods in Search of Substance" (Coser 1975), which was a blistering attack on both high level statistical analysis, and ethnomethodology in contemporary sociology, both of which, he argued, were sect-like academic movements, not serious intellectual traditions that dealt with substance and not just methods for methods sake. Ethnomethodologists were particularly enraged at Coser, both because he focused on them as a serious problem in contemporary sociology and, I would argue, because his critique of them rang true to the vast majority of sociologists. The complexities of his argument cannot be understood, however, without looking back to his important 1965 book *Men of Ideas* which, despite the gender blind title, was a brilliant sociological analysis of the roots of much intellectual creativity in

sect- like groups such as Marxism, Freudianism, and Positivism (Coser 1965). Coser was ambivalent about intellectual sects, having come out of Trotskyist tradition himself, and his perspective allows us to be both critical and appreciative of sect-like networks such as the symbolic interactionist tradition.

For Coser, Marxists, Freudians and positivists had created the three most important intellectual movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; Coser was clear on their insights as well as their limitations and dogmatism (Coser 1965). His position on the greatness and limitations of intellectual sects is nuanced. He was critical of the dogmatic nature of orthodox Marxism (he wrote an important sociological history of the American Communist Party and was a militant opponent of political Stalinism), was not a fan of orthodox Freudian theory (being sceptical of its excessively biological and patriarchal theory that downplayed history and sociological dynamics) and he built his scholarly career arguing for interpretive and historical sociologies in a discipline that was increasingly coming to be dominated in the 1960s and 1970s by statistical methods and a positivistic epistemology. Yet, Coser appreciated the intellectual ambition, insistence on intellectual consistency and theory, world-transforming ideas and the passion for spreading them that came out of sects like Marxism, Freudianism, and positivism. The power of the ideas, ironically, is linked to the dogmatism of the sect.

In what ways then, can symbolic interactionism be understood as sect-like? Just as Marxism, and psychoanalysis, in particular, were created by networks of thinkers who were intensely loyal to the founder of the tradition (Marx and Freud), symbolic interactionism was created around intense and dogmatic loyalty to George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer. The bizarre, almost cult-like, worship of Mead is just one example that can serve to point the way to an analysis of the larger issue. Daniel Huebner's important book *Becoming Mead: The Social Process of Academic Knowledge* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014) tells the history of how Mead became a hero in a discipline he never was trained in or taught in (sociology) because of a book he never wrote (*Mind, Self and Society* was assembled from student notes and published in 1934 by his loyal followers, after his death). This is a social process that can best be understood as the early formation of an intellectual sect that went on to colonize sociology with a theoretical system that, they argued, could explain everything. If you think about SI through Coser's lens, you will understand far more about the internal intellectual battles within the school and its spread through the discipline, than if you just think about it as a standard academic school of thought, the model Mullins leaves us and Helmes-Hayes/ Milne use.

In this spirit, we must recognize that symbolic interactionists have created a lastingly important set of analytic tools, methodological innovations, research programs, and classic texts, and it is essential that the Canadian version of symbolic interactionism be recognized and honoured as both a key element of our past and a vital ingredient for our future. Helmes-Hayes and Milne must be given credit for writing such an detailed and insightful sociological account of the tradition, even though the theoretical tools they used could have been sharpened, as I have argued here, by the use of the work of Frickel and Gross and especially Lewis Coser. For as valuable as symbolic interactionists have been in Canada, their sectarianism has been damaging, and the next step in their proud history is to listen to the voices of the new practioners of the tradition and drop the insistence on attempting to preserve a morally and intellectually pure version of the theory and school. Long live symbolic interactionism in history and memory, but good-bye to dogma and appeals to loyalty and purity. That is certainly what Coser would say, and I find difficult to disagree even while insisting on the great insights of the tradition that surely will live on in our contemporary theorizing and research.

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