Book Reviews

Fifty Years of the Southern Sociological Society: Change and Continuity in a Professional Society.

Reviewer: J. Milton Yinger, Oberlin College

Having spent most of my life in the North and having attended only one of the meetings of the Southern Sociological Society, I was hesitant about accepting the invitation to review Professor Simpson's book. But gentle urging by Social Forces reenforced my curiosity about the regional society. Perhaps an outsider with some familiarity with the region could read the book from a useful perspective. I had taken a master's degree at Louisiana State University near the beginning of its graduate program; and in the years since I have visited every state and a number of universities and colleges in the region.

I turned first to the Index to see how many of the dramatis personae I knew. Five had been my teachers, including three who had been president of the Southern Sociological Society. At least four were Oberlin graduates, which made me feel at home; and two of these had been presidents of the SSS. Several others listed in the Index were also good friends; and at least half of the people referred to were acquaintance. My feeling that I might know too little about the Society to review the book began to fade.

Professor Simpson has diligently and skillfully examined the source material for her story. She has not presented it as a case study, but those interested in the histories of other regional associations will find here a valuable and well-written model. Perhaps the book can best be described as an ethnography enriched by historical and sociological perspectives. Those perspectives have been focused not only on the SSS, but also on the ASA and sociology more generally, and on the larger societal context.

It is interesting both to compare and to contrast the SSS with the other regional sociological associations, most of which were also founded in the 1930s. Those acquainted with the early years of one of the other associations will nod in recognition as they read about the small group of founders who met to organize the SSS. Their purposes: to support research and teaching, to discuss relationships with the national association, to create a governing structure that was at the same time open and efficient. All of the regional societies grew rapidly, but perhaps the SSS grew to be the largest (from 152 members in 1936 to 1,969 members in 1983). All have seen their annual meetings become more complex (from 8 sessions to 116 in the case of the SSS). And all have seen their committee and leadership structures formalized.
There are ways, however, in which the SSS differed from the other regional associations, especially in the early years. It was more focused on regional issues. The South was the poorest and most rural region in the country. It contained the largest number of black colleges and universities, the highest proportion of black sociologists, and a majority of the nation's black population. Because the ASA never met in the South (until 1967?), the regional society took on added importance for its members. Social Forces, already established as a major journal, became "associated with the Southern Sociological Society" at the very beginning, to the benefit of all. Membership in the Society included, and still includes, a subscription to the journal.

Unlike other professional organizations in the South, the SSS, from the beginning, had a policy of racial integration. It was often difficult, however, before the 1964 civil rights legislation on public accommodations, to carry out this policy fully. Despite serious (if not always persistent or consistent) efforts to secure integrated meeting, housing, and eating arrangements, the policy was often frustrated by local customs. Nevertheless, I would judge that black participation and membership have been greater, at least until the last few years, in the SSS than in any other regional association. The percentage of black members has fallen from 9.2 (1936) to 3.7 (1982); but the number has gone up from 14 to 78. Three blacks have been among the 48 presidents listed in the book.

The southern setting for race relations in the years just before the founding of the SSS is suggested in a kind of parable told by Dean Fred Frey at the first meeting of his class at LSU in 1937. I was one of the few Yankees (to use the abbreviation) in the class; and having taken no previous course in race relations and having lived in the South, by that time, for a total of about four days, I was entirely innocent of any understanding of the depth of the race line. This is how Dean Frey started the class. He described the first class at the University of Chicago, where he was entering graduate school. Students were seated alphabetically:

—E. Franklin Frazier, Fred C. Frey. "I felt my body stiffen; I wondered what foolishness had brought me to Chicago; I cannot stay in this class." He managed to stay through the hour, comforted by the thought that he could drop the course, and went to the next class. It too was seated alphabetically: —E. Franklin Frazier, Fred C. Frey. "I felt something near panic, and spent the hour trying to decide what to do." The story, of course, has a happy ending. The classes did not meet again for two days, allowing Frey to realize that he really wanted to continue his studies at Chicago. "Within a week we were friends; within a month we were good friends."

By the time the SSS was formed, about a decade later, few southern sociologists felt such tensions as those described by Dean Frey. The Society has been a strong supporter of racial collegiality.

From the beginning, women made up a significant proportion of the membership of SSS, rising "from about a fifth in the founding years to nearly a third in the 1980s." They have not been so well represented, however, among officers (e.g., two presidents), or as participants on the programs of the annual conventions. In recent years there has been some improvement, reflecting the influence of Sociologists for Women in Society, the growing number of women in the SSS and on university faculties, and their shift toward specialties closer to the dominant ones in contemporary sociology.
What of the future for SSS? Projecting from the recent past, Professor Simpson sees several trends, many of which, in her judgment, will weaken the SSS. She sees a growing attachment to special-topic organizations. She sees continuing decline of small colleges, which have been important sources for sociologists. (Having recently seen Bill Cosby turn over a check for $20 million to Spelman College, I enter a small caveat.) She sees a shift of dominance from the “old core graduate departments,” to new city universities and technical colleges, with applied interests and less rigorous standards. “As a result we can expect increased apathy among members and tensions between general categories of members.” I wish she had spelled out this concern more fully. It is possible to make the case that further development of policy interests will help to invigorate sociology. She sees a further decline in black and student membership, but an increase in members from outside the region. “Decision making, including nomination and election of officers, will become more visibly political, more pluralistic, and less based on informal understandings and old school ties.” Programs will become more specialized and democratized. (Is it possible?) Professor Simpson sees the SSS becoming mainly an umbrella for diverse interests, lacking its earlier cohesion and vitality. Her concluding sentence is: “I think our golden days have passed.”

Well, perhaps. But projection is a hazardous activity. As the ASA and other national organizations grow in complexity, the regional societies may come to be seen as even more cohesive and gemeinschaftlich. Sociology, highly sensitive to the national climate, may one day find the country and the world becoming interested in larger structural concerns. (Are we ready?) Colleges and new urban universities are by no means static.

This is a fine book. It will stimulate your thought in a number of directions. In it is everything about the SSS you wanted to know but didn’t know how to find before. (Considering the variety of sources and the abundance of detail, a few factual errors may have crept in. Regional representation on the ASA Council was abolished by the 1966 Constitution, not in 1975. The graduate program at LSU could not have started in both 1932 and 1937. These typos or disagreements among sources are of no consequence. But since this very careful study is likely to be the book of record for the SSS, such items ought perhaps to be noted.) Some members of the Southern Sociological Society may want to rewrite Simpson’s final sentence, quoted above, or to redouble their efforts to make her appraisal of the future a self-defeating prophecy.

Social Structures: A Network Approach.
*Edited by Barry Wellman and S. D. Berkowitz. Cambridge University Press. 513 pp. Cloth, $65.00; paper, $22.95.*

*Reviewer: Peter V. Marsden, Harvard University*

One of the first two books to appear in a new series on Structural Analysis in the Social Sciences, this collection includes a broad variety of substantively focused work on social structure. It grows out of activity centered at the University of Toronto during the 1970s. Editors Wellman and Berkowitz are committed to concepts and methods of network analysis, and much of the orienting material reflects