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Review of *Le Play, Engineer and Social Scientist*

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debatable. To be sure, it is a system of ethical principles by which people’s behavior is governed. In fact, Confucianism was always associated with the Chinese feudal authoritarian rule over the past 2000 years. Therefore, I have never taken seriously the thesis that Confucianism played a contributory role toward the Asian (now Chinese) economic miracle before the financial meltdown in 1997.

The East Asian economic miracle must be attributed to factors other than the cultural elements, such as diligent work ethics, the propensity to save, the emphasis on education, and the like. If this framework ever was credible in explaining the economic development of the little dragons, the Asian financial crisis totally eliminated such a myth. The crisis shows it is “global capital” that dominates the scene. The second set of factors includes government institutions and policies. The Chinese economic expansion during the reformist period, led by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, was due to the dramatic change of government policies, not the sudden infusion of Confucian spirit. In the discussion of the rise of capitalism, the appropriate ethos was only the necessary element, not the sufficient element.

One purpose of this volume seems to be to acknowledge Weber’s contribution and enduring legacy to the development of social sciences, but it also shows the severe limitations of Weberian sociology in explaining modern societal-political development.

The book’s imperfections are more glaring in the light of three decades of subsequent sociological scholarship, feminist criticism, and recent intellectual debate. This monograph derived from the author’s dissertation at Cambridge University and tends toward the selective encyclopedic didacticism that typically plagues doctoral theses. As a handy source list of Le Play’s writings, however, the bibliography performs a useful service.

The overall structure of the book chronicles Le Play’s life (1806–1882), focusing primarily on details of his professional activities, and presents summaries of his major ideas. The author’s assertion that Le Play was an important player in founding the social sciences remains cogent to the extent that—rather than with Le Play—“most modern teaching starts with some reference to the methods of Durkheim and the ideal types of Weber” (p. 140). Brooke would restore Le Play to the founding sociological pantheon, but in so doing succumbs to the narrow patriarchal practices of twentieth-century academics that led to the exclusionary focus on Durkheim and Weber in the first place.

Pointing to “the only English biography of Le Play,” by Dorothy [Fanny Louisa Dorothea Richardson] Herbertson, Brooke dismisses it as “slight and unreliable” (p. 1) largely because the work contains a few minor errors in dates (p. 165). But Herbertson’s The Life of Frédéric Le Play was a singular accomplishment and should be celebrated. Her manuscript, written in the 1890s, was first excerpted in three installments in the Sociological Review (Vol. 12, 1920, pp. 36–42, 108–10; Vol. 13, 1921, pp. 46–48); then posthumously published in whole (edited by no less than Victor Branford and Alexander Farquharson) in the Sociological Review (Vol. 38, 1946, pp. 89–204); and, finally, issued as a 120-page book (Le Play House Press, 1950). Denigrating Herbertson’s pioneering explication of the sociological currency of Le Play’s work, Brooke instead relies for inspiration (p. 2) on a fleeting reference to Le Play in Elton Mayo’s The Social Problems of Industrial Civilization.

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In The Shape of Actions: What Humans and Machines Can Do, Collins and Kusch discuss the boundaries between man and machine. They do this in a time when we experience a faster development of technological devices at our disposal than has been known before. It is therefore natural that we are eager to find out what tasks can be handed over to machines, and what task we humans should do.

To provide an answer, the authors examine some distinctions, of which the one between polymorphic action and mimeomorphic action is the most important. Collins and Kusch argue that mimeomorphic actions are those that a machine can mimic, which also means that it may be possible to hand over these tasks to machines. Polymorphic actions, in contrast, are actions such as writing a love letter, or the soccer goalkeeper’s forming a human wall against a free kick. These actions differ among social contexts, so they are not possible to mimic without detailed knowledge of the social conventions of that particular society. Consequently, polymorphic actions are based upon social knowledge, whereas the repetitive mimeomorphic actions can be repeated by many actors, even those coming from another culture.

It is obviously awkward to speak of machines as “acting.” But in fact the authors argue that machines mimic actions. They focus on actions and thus do not focus merely upon sociological theories of action. Instead, they relate their discussion to the philosophical debate on action. This action-oriented perspective is significant,