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Le Play, Warner, and the Sociology of Fieldwork

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SEVERAL AMERICAN SOCIOLOGISTS have earlier noted, albeit briefly, Frédéric Le Play’s contributions to sociology, for example: Amos Warner (1886), George E. Howard (1904, III: 378), Elsie Clews Parsons (1906: 305, 337), Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (1921: 215), Emory S. Bogardus (1928: 615-16), Charles H. Cooley (Cooley, Angell and Carr 1933: 479), Floyd House (1936), and Lewis Mumford (1948: 678, 683). To this list, Luigi Tomasi (below) adds the names of Merle Frampton, Walter Goldfrank, Robert Nisbet, Catherine Silver, Albion Small, Pitirim Sorokin, and Carle Zimmerman. E.R.A. Seligman and Alvin Johnson included a short biography of Le Play in their Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences (Salomon 1933). Two British writers, Higgs (1890) and Herbertson (1920-21), also provided early summaries of Le Play’s work. Many of these names are well known, and a few are of more recent vintage than others, but the names “Frédéric Le Play” and “Amos Griswold Warner” are not frequently linked in sociological accounts of the discipline today. Warner, the author of American Charities, a foundational work in American sociology (Howard 1908; Deegan 1989), not only wrote about Le Play (below), but also published in the journal founded by Le Play, La Réforme sociale (Warner 1888). The “symposium” presented in this issue of Sociological Origins celebrates Warner’s early openness to European ideas and the largely unacknowledged role of Le Play’s ideas in American sociology.

Le Play was a staunch advocate of sociological fieldwork. His insights into the strengths and pitfalls of methodological techniques in the social sciences are still sufficiently barbed to give pointed discomfort to those who rely entirely—or primarily—on survey questionnaires for their empirical data. Along with Harriet Martineau’s (1838) How to Observe Morals and Manners (Hill 1989; Hoecker-Drysdale 1992), Le Play’s (1879) La Méthode d’observation stands early and high on any list of major methodological treatises in sociology. Aside from Le Play’s troublesome critique for practitioners of survey questionnaire research, there are additional reasons why Le Play’s work is rarely mentioned in sociology today. For starters, Tomasi points to Albion Small’s deep embrace of German, rather than French, sociology; and, within France, there was Émile Durkheim’s dominance of the discipline. Further, Amos Warner died in 1900, as George Howard notes in his biographical sketch of Warner (below), and thus American sociology was too soon deprived of one of Le Play’s genuine admirers. Had Warner lived and his colleagues, Edward A. Ross and
George E. Howard, not been fired from Stanford University in 1900 and 1901, respectively, surely Palo Alto would have become a sociological center sympathetic, at least in part, to Le Play’s work. To this litany may be added the exclusion of the female school of applied sociology from the American academy after the 1920s (Deegan 1988). Further, Le Play’s concerted Catholicism undoubtedly chafed on many American protestant sociologists, and many feminists today would understandably contest Le Play’s analysis of the patriarchal family. Finally, inasmuch as Le Play’s writings have not been generally translated, the fact that many American students today do not read French is also problematic. It is now time, however, to reassess our treatment of Le Play. We open this symposium by joining Luigi Tomasí’s call to reconsider and re-evaluate the relevance of Frédéric Le Play for sociology today.

REFERENCES


