

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Sociology Department, Faculty Publications

Sociology, Department of

2000

Review of *Le Play, Engineer and Social Scientist*

Michael R. Hill

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, michaelhilltemporary1@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub>



Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#)

Hill, Michael R., "Review of *Le Play, Engineer and Social Scientist*" (2000). *Sociology Department, Faculty Publications*. 417.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub/417>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology Department, Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Hill, Michael R. 2000. Review of *Le Play, Engineer and Social Scientist*, by Michael Z. Brooke.
Contemporary Sociology 29 (May): 562-563.

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.

Le Play: Engineer and Social Scientist, by **Michael Z. Brooke**. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1998. 193 pp. \$22.95 paper. ISBN: 0-7658-0425-5.

MICHAEL R. HILL
University of Nebraska, Lincoln

This monograph, a biographical sketch of the early French sociologist, Pierre Guillaume Frédéric Le Play, is not a new book. Despite the crisp and attractive appearance of this handsome volume now offered by Transaction Publishers, it is a reprint of a work originally published in England in 1970 by Longmans (a fact noted only in the forematter on the copyright page). A book of this vintage deserves a new introduction and a bibliographic update. Further, unsettling my sensibilities as an academically trained geographer, Transaction did not reprint the fold-out,

multicolor exemplar of Le Play's cartography, located between pages 8 and 9 in the earlier edition. It is also a short book, the main text comprising a breezy 140 pages. The prodigious quantity and continuing potential sociological relevance of Le Play's work warrants far more comprehensive explication than Brooke provides.

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*

(Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University, 1945, pp. 5–6). Le Play was a patriarch who apparently did “not discuss his work or his researches with his wife” (p. 12). Likewise, Brooke eschews serious acknowledgment of disciplinary continuities rather than honor the intellectual priority of a woman’s substantive sociological labor.

Le Play’s work, Brooke notes, was frequently distorted by adherents of various political and religious causes to further their own ends. Ironically, the appearance of Brooke’s own book was similarly hijacked by Philippe Périer to advance the goals of *La Société d’Economie et de Science Sociale*. Périer wrote in the foreword, “Our society considers, in fact, that Le Play should justly be recognized as the first person to have developed a scientific method for the observation of social facts” (p. vii). In fact, this landmark laurel belongs to Harriet Martineau and her *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1838), a sophisticated and systematic methodological treatise predating not only Le Play but also Emile Durkheim.

Brooke’s slim volume whets the appetite but does not satisfy; much that he mentions requires amplification. The specifically sociological aspects of Le Play’s direction of several international expositions in France (Chapter 3), for example, merit elaboration. Brooke’s surprisingly brief section on Le Play’s intellectual influence (pp. 134–37) demands greater elucidation and critique. Le Play’s ideas concerning the family as a basal social institution can undoubtedly profit from feminist analyses. Readers will identify numerous additional points for clarification.

Brooke asserts, as did Herbertson before him, that Le Play was a prolific, interdisciplinary scholar who made significant contributions to our corporate sociological enterprise. Brooke, however, damns with faint praise, concluding that Le Play “was a craftsman of social science rather than a mastermind” (p. 140). Given Brooke’s less-than-rousing summation, readers may well want to dust their hands of Le Play and place Brooke’s book back on the shelf. But, taken together, Herbertson and Brooke have piqued my curiosity—I want to know more about this intriguing French sociologist, and I want to hear it at length from someone who takes advantage of the many years of scholarly hindsight that have accrued since Brooke’s volume was originally published. To start, let’s have an English translation of Luigi Tomasi’s

L’apporto de Frédéric Le Play all’elaborazione teorica ed all’investigazione empirica nella sociologia contemporanea (Trento, Italy: Reverdito, 1991). I would especially like to understand better the disciplinary mechanics of Le Play’s intellectual marginalization and his continuing academic obscurity in English-speaking countries, an obscurity that republication of Brooke’s biography unwittingly exacerbates and reinforces.

The Shape of Actions: What Humans and Machines Can Do, by **Harry Collins** and **Martin Kusch**. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 1998. 212 pp. \$25.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-262-03257-0.

PATRIK ASPERS
Stockholm University
aspers@sociology.su.se

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,