2015

Envisioning Sociology: Victor Branford, Patrick Geddes, and the Quest for Social Reconstruction by John Scott & Ray Bromley

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Scott, John, and Ray Bromley. *Envisioning Sociology: Victor Branford, Patrick Geddes, and the Quest for Social Reconstruction*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013. x + 288 pages. Hardcover, $90.00.

Sociologist John Scott and geographer Ray Bromley delve extensively into both the personal lives and academic influences of British sociologists Victor Branford and Patrick Geddes, whose work was notable for establishing a sociological framework drawn from multiple humanities disciplines. Theirs is an in-depth look at a once-veiled strategy through which Branford and Geddes sought to bring about contemporary social change.

By examining the juxtaposition of Branford and Geddes' work ethics, personalities, education, personal lives and families, religious beliefs, extensive international connections, leadership styles, and even physical statures, readers are able to spy on a relationship that is built on the thin line between symbiosis and codependency. In this reader's eyes, Branford and Geddes' working relationship and pursuit to get their ideas to the public is, in itself, an experiment in sociology. We are introduced to Branford and Geddes' creation of the so-called Sociological Society and their adaptation of four branches of class division in a society: chiefs, people, emotionals, and intellectuals. Inspired by Plato, Aristotle, H.G. Wells, and Arnold Bennett, the class divisions that Branford and Geddes defined depend heavily on one another so that each works in "mutually reinforcing ways" for the other (p. 88-9). "Chiefs" are the economic and political powers that direct and make decisions. The "people" perform the directives of the chiefs and operate in a subordinate capacity. These make up a society's "mechanical, vital and social crafts of engineering, manufacturing, mining, building, agriculture, forestry, fishing, medicine, legal, domestic and state work […] organized into commercial, scientific, administrative or financial sectors," and it is upon and through the "people" that constraints have an effect (p. 89). Branford and Geddes also say that every society has and needs gatekeepers of cultural development: "intellectuals," who develop and deliver philosophical and scientific concepts, and "emotionals," who develop and deliver cultural ideas and expression through "music, writing, praying, art and design, guidance and advising" (p. 89).

While respecting and understanding the need for rural communities, Branford and Geddes championed urban communities as the modern, progressive focus for "eutopian" (not utopian) societies rooted in modern sustainability (i.e. enabling future generations to reap the same benefits from the surroundings and way of life as the present generations), though their writings never actually specifically used the word "sustainability." Eutopian societies are carefully planned and cultivated in such a way that there are "evolutionary tendencies" in the society that lend to future predictions of negative consequences and beneficial successes. Understand what works, and those efforts can be duplicated; understand what fails, and those conditions can be altered to avoid negative consequences in the future. Their vision was for a public sociology, where the balance of power shifted from government exclusively to the communities, with sociologists acting as liaisons between communities and government.

Geddes had a striking plan, pragmatic ideas, and an extensive network of supporters and proselytizers from an array of social disciplines. Considering the fact that their ideas have been expanded upon by subsequent sociologists, the authors ask how the Sociological Society's project failed. Scott and Bromley point to Geddes' leadership, though the strength of the project was itself a major weakness. Geddes' charismatic leadership style called for blind loyalty, with no questioning of his concepts, no discussing how to improve his processes, and no attempting to persuade him to make adjustments to the plans. He led and others followed, encouraging still

others to follow as well. As a partner and primary supporter, Branford did not question Geddes' views, though he was evidently frustrated with Geddes' shortcomings in managing money and other matters. Perhaps for this reason, the Sociological Society became a remote, members-only island, which led members of the general sociological community to perceive Geddes and his followers as arrogant. Ultimately, this cost the Sociological Society much of its credibility. Equally, the fact that the Society never fully committed to one discipline and opted instead to explore multiple areas of study meant that they never fully gained traction in the field of sociology.

Clearly, Branford and Geddes' work and that of the Sociological Society deserves recognition and Scott and Bromley's research would be a great platform for introducing them in a freshman level sociology course.

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