

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

PETER WORSLEY, *An Academic Skating on Thin Ice*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2008, 274 p. + notes and references.

This is a clearly written, delightfully funny, intellectually serious and insightful little autobiography of one of Britain's major living sociologists/anthropologists. Beginning with his youth in Liverpool, Worsley tells the story of how he studied at Cambridge, served in the British army during the end of the Second World War, traveled widely in Africa, India, Australia, and Latin America and found the time to raise a family, energetically support the Manchester United Football Club while carving out a highly successful career as a sociologist and left-wing public intellectual. He is an admirable man who lived an extraordinary life, and his memoirs are well worth reading for their entertainment value as well as for an illuminating glimpse into the backstage world of the British academic and intellectual elite.

The book is full of laughs, for Worsley is a world-class storyteller who manages to combine analytic rigor and purpose with a charming lack of pretension. My favorite in the book is the one about the time he met the famous Manchester United center forward and legendary goal scorer Denis Law in the washroom at a soccer stadium. Law referred to Worsley by his first name although they had never met and Peter was understandably taken aback. Worsley, it should be emphasized, is quite famous as academics go, having been widely credited with coining and popularizing the term the "Third World" as well as authoring the classic book *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of "Cargo" Cults in Melanesia* (1957). But being a "famous" academic is quite a different thing than being a famous soccer player or other real celebrity. One can almost feel Worsley's excitement at the prospect that one of his soccer playing heroes might be a closet intellectual familiar with his scholarly contributions, until the bubble is burst when Law answers the question "how did you know my name" by pointing out the conference nametag Worsley had forgotten to take off before going to the game. Worsley writes without pretension or self-absorption and *An Academic Skating on Thin Ice* is full of stories that make the reader laugh, while they bring the research enterprise to life.

Worsley's humor and likable good nature, however, does not get in the way of us getting a flavour for the serious intellectual insights and moral passion that ran through his long and productive career. At the core of his intellectual vision, at least from my perspective, is Worsley's profound opposition to and analysis of colonialism, imperialism and racism.

Learning Swahili as a British military officer during the war was Worsley's doorway to Africa, and his journeys as a young man would lay the foundation for a lifelong interest in development, anti-colonialism and the people and languages of the continent. After a brief time in India where he lived through the surrender of the Nazis and was expecting to be transferred to the fighting against the Japanese when the war ended, he soon found himself back at Cambridge where he became a committed left-wing intellectual, entered into a marriage engagement with his lifelong partner Sheila and embarked on a career as an anthropologist.

Worsley's left-wing politics played a fateful role in determining his research topics and travels. After writing an MA thesis on African languages, Worsley wanted to return to Africa for field research but had to convert himself into a student of the Pacific because of the political interference of Cold War era British Intelligence agents concerned about his Marxist political views and associations, preventing him from taking a research job he had been likely to get. Worsley ended up in Australia, his base for his famous work on the cargo cults of Melanesia. He was eventually forced out of anthropology into sociology back at Manchester University, again because of his political beliefs and activities. Anthropology's loss was sociology's gain, and Worsley went on to a long and productive career at Hull University and in the networks around the journal *New Left Review*.

Before coining the term the "Third World" in the context of the anti-colonial politics of the late New Left period of the 1960s, Worsley even had an extended Canadian interlude at the University of Saskatchewan where he spent the year 1960. Penning a piece on the history of the Métis for a Festschrift for C. Wright Mills and finding time to be active in the newly founded Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), he speaks warmly in his book of his time in Canada. He would return a number of times in later years – Worsley eventually taught briefly at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia) and visited Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, University of Alberta, University of British Columbia, the University of Western Ontario, Windsor, Guelph, the University of Toronto and my own McMaster University, among other institutions.

Returning to the United Kingdom, Worsley immersed himself in political writings and research on the developing world, leading to the 1970 publication of *The Third World*, an academic bestseller for the University of Chicago Press and Worsley's ultimate claim to fame and long-standing influence. Eventually trying his hand as Dean for a couple of years and always visible in British sociology, Worsley stayed on the move, continuing his interest in world languages and religion. He spent an extended time in Latin America near the end of his career, partly in order to update and expand his analysis of the underdeveloped world based on his travels and readings on Ecuador, Mexico and Brazil. Rewriting his classic *The Third World* based on his Latin American travels and new theories of globalization developed since the time he had helped pioneer an anti-colonial perspective within the Western academy showed Worsley to

be an academic who was always learning and growing. A failed attempt, relatively late in life, to produce films for a mass market that would deal responsibly with issues of development and culture for audiences outside the advanced industrial world both illustrate Worsley's moral commitments as a scholar and the difficulties of doing public sociology in a media saturated and corporate dominated context.

My only reservation about this book concerns a small matter of tone, linked to a subtle but important political point. What one gets from this book is a powerful reminder of the potential for good that sociologists and anthropologists are capable of when they are willing to break with colonial dogma and the interests of the powerful. Worsley's knowledge is a democratic social science, as he was clearly aware of the inequalities of power and resources that make our contemporary world a violent and conflictual place and was willing to listen to voices of the powerless and skeptical of knowledge claims produced by and for the benefit of the powerful. While Worsley is clearly part of the democratic left (he refused to go to Hungary, for example, in the wake of the Communist repression of 1956) and was active in the intellectual world of the British New Left, there is a disjuncture between the powerful tone and moral commitment he exhibits when critiquing right-wing forces throughout Latin America, Africa and the Cold War West, and the nature of his relatively subdued comments on the oppression experienced by the victims of 20th century communism.

The issues are complex, of course, and one can understand why a victim of decades of academic McCarthyism would not want to speak in language reminiscent of the petty and vindictive opponents of his egalitarian political commitments. Moreover, he is surely right that the democratic and just struggle against Apartheid in South Africa throughout the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and the early 1990s depended both on the brave efforts of domestic communists and the support of the Soviet Union. Worsley manages to make these points without slipping into any kind of apologies for Stalinism or Soviet communism. To be sure, from the perspective of so much of the Third World, a mass of humanity to which Worsley's academic career and political commitments were oriented, the sins of communism pail in comparison to the evils of colonial oppression, unjust wars such as the American invasion of Vietnam, Western racism and the gross inequalities of wealth and income that structure so much of the misery and violence of our contemporary world. It would have been nice, however, to have read more pointed criticisms of and critical reflections on the communist tradition, since their sins look rather more serious from the perspective of millions of people in Eastern and Central Europe, Cambodia and China as well as to those among us concerned with preserving the democratic soul of a socialist tradition.

My quibble aside, this is a fascinating memoir of an admirable scholar and gentleman, one of the very best of the sociological and anthropological traditions in Britain, or anywhere. It makes for an entertaining journey around the world, a valuable attempt to understand how one's research

looks from the perspective of one's own late life reflections, a contribution to reflexive literature on the ethnographic method, a provocative reminder of the value of a global research agenda focused on the people and cultures of the global south and a loving tribute to the friends, family, colleagues, soccer team, research subjects and political comrades that made a life worth living. I can only recommend this lovely memoir to all of you – Worsley is a first rate scholar who still has a lot to teach all of us, and his book is funny, entertaining and sure to inspire.

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