

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JEAN GRONDIN, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography* (translated by Joel Weinsheimer). New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. xiv + 472 p., notes, two appendices, index.

Hermeneutics as a philosophy, concept, method and, most importantly, as a critique of the limitations of a strict methodological approach to understanding, is indelibly associated with the name of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Before his magnum opus (*Truth and Method*) was published in 1960, the term hermeneutics was generally relegated to an older theological tradition or to an aspect of Heidegger's earlier philosophy that he left behind after his famous turn. When Gadamer "presented his ... thick manuscript ... bearing the title *Foundations of a Philosophical Hermeneutics*," he elicited the question from his publisher: "Hermeneutics ... what on earth is that?" The publisher then went on to suggest that this unknown word be "demoted to the subtitle." As Grondin (5) points out: "the fact that the word hermeneutics has since become familiar is due above all to Gadamer." An intellectual biography of Gadamer, such as this volume by Grondin, must also then be a social and cultural history of the emergence of that idea into prominence.

If hermeneutics is the art of interpretation, then Grondin is engaged in displaying this very art in his biography. Yet, hermeneutics has come to mean more than mere interpretation insofar as it points to the irremediable influence of history, culture and community on knowledge and understanding. The complexity of the issues surrounding the idea of hermeneutics is compounded when we recognize that "human beings are creatures who must continually interpret their world" (3). The world we sociologists seek to understand is constituted by the actions and interpretations of historical agents who, by virtue of human finitude, are unaware of the shaping influence of history, culture and community. This, of course, places the hermeneutic tradition in the social constructionist school (along with symbolic interactionism, certain Marxist orientations, etc). However, as Gadamer's work is at pains to emphasize, this influence also shapes the process and product of inquiry itself, meaning, at a fundamental level, that there is no "neutral" point outside of community or history as we go about adding to our understanding of the world.

It is precisely because of the complications of engaging this hermeneutic circle, alongside the apparent success of empirical methodology in the natural sciences, that make a research approach dominated by a fixed methodology and empirical epistemology especially attractive. However,

another element of Gadamer's hermeneutic intervention is that such a flight can blind inquirers to the recognition of fundamental truths that cannot be seen without a prudent engagement with the hermeneutic circle. All of these elements are bound up in writing a biography of one who exemplifies the call that, as much as possible we must be as self-consciously reflective as possible of the shaping influences on both the object of inquiry (in this case, Gadamer) and the subject who engages in the inquiry (Grondin). As always, the test of a good interpretation of a subject is that the interpretation disappears into or is embodied in the presentation of the subject matter. I found this to be the case in this book.

Gadamer has been called the philosopher of the century. There is one obvious way that this is true: his biological life spanned the twentieth century. Born on February 11, 1900, and despite some considerable health concerns in the first part of his life (e.g., he fell victim to polio in 1922), Gadamer lived to the ripe old age of 102. During that life he was a student of, a colleague of, engaged with, or taught some of the notable thinkers of the twentieth century. From the time of his encounter with Husserl's phenomenological revolution in 1922, to his becoming a student of Heidegger in 1923, his philosophical career is intertwined with others who attended Heidegger's classes and talks (Marcuse, Levinas, Strauss, Arendt, Habermas, and especially, Kruger, Lowith and Klein). Later, he went on to engage in well-known debates with the then young Habermas (1968), who was both a colleague and friend, and with Derrida (1981), whose work took Heidegger's influence in a different direction.

Any biography has to find a balance between the focus on the life versus the focus on the social and historical circumstances that provide a context for the life; an intellectual biography has the added concern of balancing the explanation of difficult and challenging ideas in the context of both an ongoing debate in the philosophical tradition and the story of a person. Grondin, who is eminently qualified to write such an intellectual biography, maintains a readable balance between these three elements, keeping in mind that, first and foremost, it is about the life of Gadamer. While acknowledging that every biography deserving of the name must deal with the personal details of a life, Grondin prudently deals with these matters only in so far as they throw light on the story of Gadamer and his intellectual and socio-historical context.

Perhaps it is for this reason that Grondin begins with a quotation from Arendt, another student of Heidegger, concerning the difference between knowing a person by what they have produced and the "who" or unique identity of the person. While the former focuses on the substance of a person's work and the contribution of such products to our sense of a world, the "who" reveals itself in the story about the hero (who is not the author of his or her fate) in the way that Achilles is revealed in the *Iliad*, Jesus in the four canonical scriptures, or, using Arendt's own example, Socrates in Plato's dialogues. Gadamer's life is not the life of a hero who exemplifies unexpected action (in this sense, Arendt better fits that bill); however, it is an example of the attempt to find a reasonable foothold in

the context of dangerous, trying, dramatic and extreme socio-historical circumstances.

Germany was the focal point of many decisive events of the twentieth century. Unlike Gadamer's fellow student Arendt – and as if to confirm her characterization of philosophers as beings with only one foot in this world – Gadamer emerges from Grondin's interpretation as an academic who is cautious and even naïve (as many were) about the dangerous forces shaping Germany. While he never joined the Nazi party (unlike his teacher Heidegger), he also sought to keep his head low (his “inner emigration” as he called it), carrying on his work in ancient philosophy on the assumption of *hic illud transit* (this too will pass). This approach led to positions in Marburg, the University of Leipzig – where he eventually became rector at the beginning of the rise of the “Iron Curtain” – and finally in Heidelberg. Throughout his life he was required to respond to various challenges posed by both Nazism and Stalinism as these impinged upon the academic environment. To some, like Richard Wolin, his responses were tame even conservative, while to others, including Grondin, his actions were those of a reasonable and conscientious man who had to respond to very trying circumstances. As I read it, Grondin deals with this complex, subtle and not altogether heroic position of Gadamer very fairly.

Gadamer's influence on sociology has been significant, though indirect and mediated through Habermas primarily, and Giddens secondarily. As a consequence, hermeneutics as a term, concept and orientation has become part of the contemporary sociological parlance. His work forms more than a background to contemporary sociological debates on positivism and interpretation, on epistemology, methodology, and so on. In this case, readers will be particularly interested in the ongoing discussions between Gadamer and Habermas over the question of the role of ideology critique in social inquiry. Of course, those interested in the phenomenological and ethnomethodological side of sociology will find Gadamer's hermeneutic transformation of phenomenology fascinating, a transformation that mirrors Blum and McHugh's transformation of that phenomenological project in sociology. Gadamer's hermeneutics have served as a guiding set of principles for my own research on methodology, power, parent-child relations, the urban-rural debate and the culture of cities, and I have found his work particularly useful as a touchstone for interdisciplinary projects that involve sociology in collaborative work with the humanities. Parenthetically, Canadian readers will also find the relationship he established as a visiting professor (1972-75) at McMaster University (including the fact that he donated his personal library to McMaster when he thought he was about to die) of interest.

On the whole, Grondin's biography will not disappoint scholars immersed in hermeneutic scholarship yet it is accessible to those more generally interested in the life of one of the twentieth century's most prominent philosophers. It has a very useful chronology as an appendix, if a less than useful index. Most of all, though, this biography is a fascinating look at the way world-shaking events (World War II, the “Iron Curtain,” the Berlin

Wall, even 9/11) and prominent thinkers appear through the prism of a great German academic whose life spanned the twentieth century.

Kieran Bonner, *St. Jerome's University, University of Waterloo.*

© Canadian Sociological Association/La Société canadienne de sociologie