

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

RANDLE W. NELSEN, *Fun and Games and Higher Education: The Lonely Crowd Revisited*, Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2007.

Fun and Games and Higher Education is an entertaining, interesting, provocative little book that also makes intellectual contributions while being idiosyncratic, even a little strange. Randle Nelsen is a senior and widely published scholar from the Sociology Department at Lakehead University, and his years of experience in the profession and in the classroom are evident in the broad historical perspective he brings to us on consumerism, mass culture and higher education. The book's title suggests a reconsideration of a sociological classic, David Riesman, Reuel Denney and Nathan Glazer's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), although in all honesty it is really an essay that builds on Denney's *The Astonished Muse* (1957). Nelsen contributes insights into the history of social and sociological thought while offering us his thoughts on a range of contemporary issues related to university and youth culture. This book is not for everyone given its idiosyncrasies and it is certainly not the kind of book one would recommend junior scholars writing – don't try this at home! But for scholars interested in the history of the sociology of culture/cultural studies and contemporary debates about the state of higher education, it is worth taking a look at.

Reuel Denney, known to historians of the social sciences as one of the co-authors of the best selling sociology book of all time, was a poet, high school teacher and sociology and social science professor at both the universities of Chicago and Hawaii in the 1950s and 1960s. Nelsen was Denney's graduate student, and *Fun and Games and Higher Education* provides an important corrective to the literature on *The Lonely Crowd*, where the role of Denney, a truly "forgotten intellectual," has been erased from our disciplinary memory. Denney, like Riesman himself, was a pioneer of the sociological study of popular culture. Like Riesman himself, Denney did not have a PhD in sociology, and thus represents the field's pre-professional history. As someone who has written about *The Lonely Crowd*, and interviewed Riesman himself in the early 1990s, I can speak from experience about the basic value of Nelsen's point. The literature on *The Lonely Crowd* (including my own small contribution) does indeed tend to ignore Denney, something that Riesman himself was not guilty of; I remember, to this day, Riesman's engaged and energetic reaction to a question I asked him about a piece that he had co-authored decades earlier with Denney on the cultural roots of the reception of American football in the United States. Nelsen offers the literature a valuable corrective. Both

Riesman and Glazer went on to fame, after writing *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman as the first sociologist on the cover of *Time* magazine and a major scholar of higher education, and Glazer as a prominent critic of affirmative action, multiculturalism and contemporary liberalism. Denney's later relative obscurity has meant that scholars have ignored his importance in the creation of one of classics of modern social science, and Nelsen makes a solid case that this matters at least a little.

Nelsen does an excellent job of telling the story of Denney's life, career and intellectual project as a tribute to his teacher, thus contributing to the history of 20th century sociology. Denney was born in 1913 in the Besonhurst area of Brooklyn. His grandmother's second husband was the co-inventor of the Denney price tag machine. Raised in a culture where books and ideas were valued, Denney's family moved to Buffalo when he was a young boy, and he went on to attend Dartmouth College, work in a factory, teach high school and publish his first book of poetry in 1939. He moved from Buffalo in 1941 to take a variety of fellowships and jobs, before teaching social science in the unique great books program at the University of Chicago beginning in 1947, sponsored into the academic profession by the lawyer and amateur (and soon to be famous) sociologist David Riesman whom he had meet in Buffalo while playing tennis. Denney, who gained a place in sociology's history by being a co-author of *The Lonely Crowd*, wrote his own book *The Astonished Muse* in 1957 and moved to the University of Hawaii in 1961, finishing his career teaching American Studies. Nelsen studied with Denney in Hawaii, and was impressed with his "inquisitiveness, his playful curiosity and his openness" as he taught his graduate students a broad general introduction to classical theorists, a love of great books and the study of popular culture.

Nelsen uses Denney's writings on American sports and popular culture as a foil for his own musings on Canadian universities and popular culture today – just the kind of sociological social criticism focused on conformity, youth and alienation made famous in *The Lonely Crowd* nearly 60 years ago. Nelsen successfully challenges standard disciplinary histories of contemporary cultural studies, highlighting the role played by Denney, a scholar marginal to professional sociology and ignored and unread by Marxist and post-modern oriented theorists of popular culture. Nelsen manages to show the similarities between Denney's writings and some of the work produced by contemporary academic celebrities such as Bourdieu and McLuhan without burdening us with arcane accounts of contemporary cultural studies and post-modern theory. Building on *The Lonely Crowd's* famous distinction between inner-directed and other-directed social characters, Nelsen argues that in higher education today, "both student and faculty 'consumers' are molded in a manner that emulates the edutainment culture of the mass media." In this brave new university world that Riesman and his co-authors predicted, critical thinking takes a back seat and "fun culture takes over" (3).

There is much that is compelling in Nelsen's analysis of the contemporary university dominated by sports, parties and the student as consumer. At the

same time, the idiosyncrasies of Nelsen's style detract from the power and insights of his argument. The strangeness of Nelsen's work flows from a number of obvious flaws in the book. While *Fun and Games* helps us understand the analysis of *The Lonely Crowd* in a new way by correcting for the relative neglect of Denney's role in its writing, Nelsen's scholarship is too dominated by his own memories of Denney as a person and too little engaged with the secondary literature on Riesman and the history of American sociology. Although the subtitle of the book is "*The Lonely Crowd Revisited*," Nelsen tells us only the basics about the argument of this classic text, does not really attempt to distinguish between the contributions of Denney versus Riesman and, most importantly, does not seriously revisit the book in light of contemporary research findings. There is a significant literature on *The Lonely Crowd*, including essays by Seymour Martin Lipset, Dennis Wrong, Wilfred McClay (Riesman's biographer), Todd Gitlin (in *The Intellectuals and the Flag*, 2006) and Douglas Kellner ("Education and the Academic Left" in *College Literature* 33/4: 2006). Nelsen's book suffers from the fact that he does not really consider the criticisms others articulated of the book he builds on.

The Lonely Crowd had provocative things to say about modern American culture, particularly with regards to the conformity the authors argued was a central component of life in the 1940s and 1950s. Nelsen finds the arguments in *The Lonely Crowd* compelling and uses them to ground his analysis and critique of life in Canadian universities, but he generally does not systematically engage empirical research to help us evaluate the evidence for either Riesman's or his own speculations. As a result, Nelsen's critique of the conformity, consumerism and lack of intellectual excitement in contemporary Canadian universities lacks the kind of empirical grounding one finds in other recent books on Canadian education, such as Anton L. Allahar and James E. Côté's *Ivory Tower Blues* (2007). Most professors whom I talk to are frustrated by the relative disinterest in books and ideas we see among our undergraduate students. At the same time, we must commit ourselves to debating these issues with data and evidence, not relying solely on our own experience and musings as Nelsen does, lest we risk offering a romantic critique of "young people today" rooted in little more than our own prejudices and (at least for some of us!) tenured security.

There are complicated trade-offs involved here, something that is partly rooted in the tension between the generally elitist but undoubtedly creative non-professionalized public intellectual type represented by David Riesman, Nathan Glazer (who today is a senior "neo-conservative" sociologist) and Denney. Canadian sociology is moving away from the kind of social criticism represented by Riesman, Glazer, Denney and Nelsen himself. Riesman and Denney were teachers, intellectuals and writers who made major contributions to modern sociology without training in the discipline. Professionalism and disciplinary boundaries are here to stay, and for good reasons; Nelsen's book is worth reading and talking about in classes with undergraduates but ultimately questions about higher education and modern culture will be illuminated more by sociological analysis based on empirical research than by these

speculative-style essays. At the same time, the progress represented by professional sociology can crowd out the insights of unorthodox thinkers, such as Riesman and Denney, and that would be a terrible shame. There is evidence, some of it admittedly anecdotal, that suggests the issues Nelsen raises are reaching crisis point – at my own university, for example, I have heard numerous complaints that our library is becoming practically an extension of the noisy and newly built student center, something very much at odds with the vision of an institution linked to a tradition of books and ideas, something Denney was exposed to as a young boy coming on 100 years ago at the great Brooklyn Public Library. Professional social science standards increase our ability to debate these issues with empirically grounded evidence, and there really is no way to turn back to the general intellectual Denney represented and Nelsen romanticizes. At the same time, professional social science can create a trained incapacity, so that sociologists of education, university professors and administrators often ignore the obvious dominance of fun and games in modern universities that are supposed to be oriented to ideas and critical thinking. So for this reason, more than anything else, Nelsen's little book is a valuable if flawed tribute to Denney's insights.

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