

BOOK REVIEW

Sociologies of New Zealand

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One of the first things to notice about this book is that it is highly readable. Unlike many of the national histories of sociology produced over the years, this one is not dry, nor just a compilation of “facts,” but rather highly reflective and filled with stories – told with the unique humour for which Charles Crothers is well-known. My favourite sentence in the book is the following: “The earliest ‘social science’ in the Pacific was carried out mainly by male amateurs, of varying ability, who were in the Pacific in varying capacities, for varying durations, and who provided accounts, of varying value, of the Pacific societies they encountered” (p. 79).

The book offers a brief but useful conceptual framework, wherein sociology as a discipline is the product of forces operating within the international arena, and shaped in the national context by university structures, funding structures and other institutions. Attention is also paid to the relations between the discipline, other disciplines and networks of knowledge production – such as social theory and social theorists – with which sociology is closely entangled. The author considers local factors as well, stemming from the interaction between a discipline and the prevailing public notions the society holds about itself. In proposing this framework of disciplinary formation and production, Crothers demonstrates his extensive international experience within the discipline, offering insights into some of the differences between the practice and boundaries of sociology cross-culturally. The fact that his book locates New Zealand sociology explicitly within the world economy, and the global economy of knowledge, is refreshing: too often this more political aspect of sociology's context is neglected or under-researched in national histories.

Crothers provides a very helpful overview of institutional developments in New Zealand (NZ), such as the establishment of the NZ Council for Educational Research and various government departments, including the Science and Innovation unit, which among many others have assisted in providing a supportive infrastructure for social science research. Not only have they been supportive of social research generally, but such institutions have provided outlets for sociology, with regards to the employment of graduates and the sharing of sociological expertise and knowledge. Again, this is a somewhat unusual treatment of a national history of sociology, as evaluating the impact of sociology can be a difficult enterprise and hence not always taken into account. Some of the information offered by Crothers is anecdotal rather than evidence-based, but at least the effort is made to provoke reflection.

In this book, Crothers sets out NZ sociology's history with an examination of its pre-history (the pre-disciplinary phase), departments, interest areas, and relations with other disciplines, and concludes with an investigation of the production of sociology, which involves an assessment of the linkages with the global context as well as the various forms of sociological output. Each chapter begins with an abstract and a set of keywords, which are very informative and also highly accurate.

One of my favourite chapters is on the pre-history of sociology. I did not know, for instance, that a social sciences research bureau had been established by the Labour government in the late 1930s. Although it did not last for long – I can imagine the political hostility to such a development at that time – it shows something of the progressive nature of the Labour Party and the political Left, and would be a very welcome development in many countries today in our hostile neoliberal environments. My least favourite would probably be the chapter on departments. These are probably of most interest within the NZ academic community rather than a global audience, and they are uneven, with some discussions of departments mostly “facts and figures” rather than narratives or analysis. Despite this, Crothers should be commended for taking on the job of putting together an overview, which is difficult given the general paucity of knowledge about sociology departments, the difficulty of offering more than an insider's view, and the lack of consensus about what a departmental analysis should offer. The latter is currently being debated in international circles, specifically among members of the International Sociological Association's RCo8 History of Sociology group, so hopefully we will see some progress on this issue over the next few years.

From this book we get a rather interesting picture of the subject areas New Zealand sociologists have covered over past decades, including criminology, applied sociology, ethnic studies, area studies, gender, health, Pacific studies, rural studies, and of course, Māori issues. Again, the summations are somewhat uneven, but we certainly get a sense of who the major figures have been in each field as well as the impact the field has had within and beyond New Zealand. I found the section on Māori studies to be quite absorbing. It is not something non-New Zealanders are likely to have much knowledge of, and hence a very important addition to the field. The relations between New Zealanders and Australians with regard to their initial joint professional association (SAANZ), and the subsequent divorce, are of course dealt with briefly, again with some humour and personal insight.

The book closes with some views on New Zealand sociology's links across the Tasman and internationally, describing some of the notable visitors to New Zealand over the years, the contributions NZ sociologists have made in the global arena, and the exchange of sociological knowledge (both theories and methods). It is a timely reminder of how important such connections are, both for the locals and for sociologists in other countries. Altogether, the book is a good read.