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BOOK REVIEW

Philippe Fontaine and Jefferson D. Pooley (ed): Society on the Edge. Social Science and Public Policy in the Postwar United States

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Fontaine, Philippe, and Jefferson D. Pooley (2020): *Society on the Edge: Social Science and Public Policy in the Postwar United States*. Cambridge: University Press.
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Philippe Fontaine and Jefferson Pooley present an anthology that addresses the sociological study of "social problems" in two ways: on the one hand, the editors themselves have made a selection of nine such problems, which are dealt with in individual contributions by experts in the respective field of research. On the other hand, it is not the aim of these contributions to investigate these problems empirically. The concern of the volume is instead a historiographical one, in that the concept of "social problems" itself becomes a historical object and the history of research on the selected problems is analyzed.

In a long introduction, the editors provide an interpretative framework and some guiding questions and also outline some general developments that can be observed repeatedly in the individual contributions to the volume. Fontaine and Pooley locate thinking in terms of "social problems" in the older tradition of American sociology of the first half of the 20th century, which assumed that scientists should contribute to a better society through their work. Numerous publications from this period present and analyze various "social problems", implicating that these could be tackled and finally solved. In the post-war period, on which the volume lays its focus, this social-problems-tradition was largely discredited, although the topics and subjects it dealt with remained on the agenda of the social sciences without always being explicitly named as a "problem".

The editors develop three key questions, which the chapters take up in examining their research field: Firstly, they ask about the status of the respective problem in social science, but also in public perception and in politics. The implications of this question are far-reaching and also affect the approach of the volume itself: the very acceptance of the fact that such thing as a "social problem" exists at all springs from a certain kind of thinking. For

interwar sociology, the guiding model was a social order that could be disturbed or unbalanced by problems and difficulties of adaptation, which could be remedied with the help of social scientists. In this view, problems were objectively there, sometimes unrecognized or underestimated by contemporaries. This changed in the post-war period, when social scientists became more sensitive to the social process of definition and made it their own subject. All the contributions in this volume therefore pursue the question of when, by whom and for what reasons a phenomenon was understood as a "social problem". In their own selection of problems for the volume, the editors were not guided by the "objective" relevance of these issues, however this might be measured, but rather by the internal discourse of the social sciences: they chose those problems that sociology, psychology and economics "took to be the most trenchant over the postwar decades" (21). In the course of the 20th century, there were major divergences between the social sciences and politics in the definition and perception of social problems. However, the editors insist that the social sciences by no means simply emulated political conjunctures, but always retained a decisive role in the conceptualization of social issues.

The second central question of the volume focuses on the intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary division of labor in the treatment of social problems, which concerns the issue of "problem ownership". Roughly speaking, the development has been such that since the 1960s sociology has increasingly lost its sovereignty over most formerly exclusively "social" problems, mainly because the disciplines of psychology and economics discovered them for themselves and successfully expanded their territory. The third key question concerns the scientific explanation for the problems dealt with. Here, too, there is a general tendency to increasingly strip social problems of their social dimension and to understand them more as individual problems, with structural explanations being replaced by individualistic ones. Economics and psychology made a decisive contribution to this development.

The individual articles not only cover the post-war period, but often also devote much attention to the first half of the 20th century. In contrast, the more recent past since the 1980s is often only discussed very briefly. While the other contributions are strictly nationally in focus, the chapter on the "Family" (Savina Balasubramanian and Charles Camic) has an international dimension: in the discussion on modernization and development since the 1950s, the crucial connection between average family size and economic development on a global scale became an important topic. In later times and to this day, the American family has tended to be seen as an institution for the transmission of social inequality.

The chapter on "Education" (Andrew Jewett) traces how the link between education and social inequality was transformed in an ambivalent way with the emergence of the "human capital" approach in the 1960s: on the one hand, this approach was meritocratic because it saw all individuals as fundamentally equal rational actors; on the other hand, it could provide education policy with incentives to focus educational investments more on better-off individuals, as the outcomes were greater.

The chapter on "Poverty" (Alice O'Connor) makes the tension between systemic and individualistic understandings of a social problem particularly clear: poverty has never been understood as a problem that touches the foundations of American society. Even the war on poverty proclaimed by Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1960s assumed that the difficulties could be solved within the existing economic and distributional structures. The conservative turn in social policy was associated with scientific efforts to make poverty disappear statistically as far as possible. The neoliberal social reforms of the 1990s clearly understood poverty as a problem of individual attitudes and psychology.

The chapter on "Discrimination" (Leah N. Gordon) also describes the gap between "dispositional approaches" and "systemic approaches", which was linked to the question of whether sociology should rather investigate the causes or the consequences and manifestations of discrimination. Since the end of legal segregation in 1964, the systemic dimensions of discrimination were more difficult to grasp empirically, and with the rise of the politics of colorblindness in the 1980s, the research field itself was in a precarious situation. The following chapter on the "Black Ghetto" (George C. Galster) has some overlaps in terms of content but focuses more on the connection between social science and social policy, for example the efforts to foster spatial desegregation in American cities since the 1960s, which were not very successful in the long term.

The chapters on "Crime" (Jean-Baptiste Fleury) and "Addiction" (Nancy D. Campbell) deal with fields of research that were never entirely under the jurisdiction of the social sciences in the first place, partly because they are prominent and controversial policy areas. In the 1970s, criminology as a discipline separated from sociology, and in the 1980s and 1990s, neuroscience largely prevailed in research into drugs and addiction. Political and economic factors also play a major role in the development of the field of "Mental Illness" (Andrew Scull). The Second World War had an important impact by making the psychological trauma of veterans an urgent matter for the state to deal with. The pharmaceutical industry also had a significant influence, contributing to a "psychopharmacological revolution" that saw psychoanalytic psychiatry largely replaced by clinical psychology.

The final chapter deals with "War" (Joy Rohde), a topic that not many would have seen as a "social" problem. In fact, it shows that war was only briefly treated as such a problem by sociology. Dominated since the 1970s by political science and the sub-discipline of international relations, in the Cold War era, war was increasingly understood as a threat to national security and, above all, as a means of statecraft that, with the help of science, could be used in a rational and efficient way. The disastrous experiences of the Vietnam War did not lead to this view being completely abandoned.

The volume follows a complex concept and accomplishes two things: it introduces the history of US social science research into some of the most important sociological topics in the 20th century, and also provides a comprehensive picture of the changing societal position of the social science disciplines, their relation to neighboring disciplines and their connections to social policy in America. Perhaps unintentionally, the contributions demonstrate the extent to which the American social sciences are a closed national shop –

transnational influences or exchanges are barely mentioned in any of the chapters. The choice of topics means that almost all the contributions tell a story of decline: the social problems dealt with were increasingly stripped of their social character and sociology was more or less displaced or marginalized by other disciplines. Recently emerging topics, new challenges and new departures in the social sciences in the second half of the 20th century are thus not valued. Nevertheless, the volume is a must-read for anyone interested in the history of the American social sciences.