

Book Review

Konecki, Krzysztof T. 2018. *Advances in Contemplative Social Research*.

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A kind warning to the reader: this is not a book of sociology of religion. Nevertheless, it must be added that it is about social practices that could be part of religious institutions, but were born before them and are possible beyond them. I hope that this short advice would help to suspend, as far as possible, any classification scheme and be ready to surf in uncertain waters.

The book represents a significant contribution to the emerging field of contemplative social research. To start with the right foot on such slippery ground, with some eyebrows already raised, it could be of help to cite the author's own complex definition of the phenomenon of contemplation:

Contemplation is a kind of activity that leads to a certain state of mind, and at the same time, it is a method of obtaining knowledge about some objects at the present time, and also about getting knowledge itself, here and now, by mindful insight into the perceived

(and also imagined) phenomena or objects, and also into the self. [p. 21]

To develop the above to its logical consequences means having the courage to question the foundations of the social sciences as we know them. And, act consequently, in research, in teaching, and in one's own life as well.

Krzysztof Konecki shows a sincere acknowledgment towards contemplative practices, a type of social practice invented in many places under different shades by many social innovators since the beginning of the adventure of human animals as sentient beings, a practice intended to deal with their inherent impermanence, to find a way to alleviate the discomfort caused by this existential discovery.

As the author underlines, the process of knowing developed through these practices is a pre-linguistic one (p. 42). This embodied foundation of knowledge gives room for a critique to the dominant representa-

tive model of cognitive theory and its reductionism, allowing us to go well beyond the constructionist approach. From his point of view, paying attention to the Buddhist epistemology is deeply helpful to understand the processual and relative character of thinking. This leads the researcher to ground their pathway on the humble acceptance of the creatively fruitful “not knowing” perspective.

While his direct experience is a guarantee for the reader, his attitude of open curiosity is deeply grounded in a rich cultural background, ingrained in the theoretical tradition of symbolic interactionism in sociology nested with philosophical and contemplative studies.

Consequently, the once accepted contemplative experience as a fully human enterprise is a natural consequence to integrate its methods in the sociological toolkit. And, where an opportunity arises, new problems and obstacles, real or presumed, find their way.

In the theoretical Part One of the book, the first initial chapter is focused on a sociological definition of the identity to prepare the dialogue with the contemplative perspective. This is followed by a chapter claiming that meditation can be of help for social scientists to understand social phenomena and society in general. At the center of his reflection is the de-reification process: a liberatory attempt to get rid of individual's separation from the world, or, as the author puts it, “to cease thinking of any human activity in terms of the manifestation of the force of nature...as it would be an isolate and independent element of its creator” (p. 40). Konecki sustains that in sociological literature are present concepts similar to those developed in Buddhism, but they are not carried to completion in their consequences.

The author's emphasis on the interdependence of human beings and empathy never leads him to an uncritical definition of the community, being clear in this regard his concern for the suffering caused by an oppressive community that reduces the individual to the Meadian “Me.” His short suggestions to revive and expand the sense of friendship are very interesting and call for specific research (p. 16).

Nevertheless, some ambivalence arises throughout the text regarding two specific points in his integration of sociology and Buddhist epistemology. The frequent use of terms such as “true self,” “deep self,” “true essence” (pp. 51, 55), or true reality seems in contrast with the initial statements of distance from any essentialism. Moreover, this way of posing the problem of the search for meaning can lead to a metaphysical view about social life.

The second point is a hint of determinism that hovers in the discussion about the process of identity as a product of interactions. The related narrative seems in contradiction with the author's ethical support for individual's responsibility. The assumption that the self is the outcome of a socially constructed process of identity opens also the room for a parallel moralistic approach, as shown when the author supports the existence of socially constructed “false desires and values” (p. 56).

Leaving the reader the opportunity for a systematic exploration of such a broad reinterpretation of what is taken for granted, I prefer to pick up only some key concepts that clearly bring all the difficulties still open to the translation of a religious knowledge into a contemplative sociological method.

Take first the concept of *karma* that Konecki interestingly defines as distinct from Bourdieu's habitus

(p. 45). It could be intended as a set of inner reactions to life conditions that very often amplify our suffering: it is the awareness of them—that we can acquire through contemplative practices—that allows us to overcome it. As for Bourdieu these dispositions are inscribed onto the individual by social location, in the case of karma, individuals, whatever their past, inner and outer conditions, can innovate in each moment of our life, freeing ourselves from patterns: society is not a given, it is a relational process.

A second reference concerns the author's effort to identify a red thread between various forms of wisdom traditions, all oriented towards a harmony between man and nature—"laws of nature"—a *file rouge* of Eastern and Western culture (p. 14) and welcome them into the emerging contemplative sociology. In the Anthropocene, this could sound romantic and ineffective as we have the ability not only to manipulate nature, but also to create forms of life from scratch: not by chance the Israeli historian Harari (2017) titled his bestseller *Homo Deus*; see also Rose (2007) about enhancement medicine and *The Politics of Life Itself*.

Next, in dealing with empathy, the author attributes to it a built-in compassionate structure. If empathy is a means to achieve the understanding of others, including the emotional and sensorial dimensions, it cannot be identified univocally with a benevolent disposition. For a trivial example, a detective can empathize with a suspected crime offender for the purpose of just trying to understand their *modus operandi* in order to neutralize them, not to support them. In short, it must be recognized that empathic behavior leaves room for manipulation (Zaki 2013).

But, what appears problematic lies in the reference to craving as the origin of human suffering, a con-

ception acquired by the author from the official Buddhist version (p. 72). This dominant version cannot be accepted as a matter of fact. An exegesis of original texts shows that human suffering is simply caused by the awareness of our impermanence, that is an existential condition and not a moral sin. Humans experienced suffering when they discovered the precariousness of existence, a truly human existential despair. So far, craving is a consequence and not a cause of suffering, as the Buddhist teacher and thinker Stephen Batchelor (2015) convincingly supports. If the craving as a cause dominates the religious narrative, it is because at a certain point in its historical development a group of practitioners found the social conditions for separating from the rest of the population and by taking on the monopoly of the interpretation of the texts, thus legitimizing their own separateness and the new power that derived from it.

In Chapter Three, the focus is on the effort to integrate a critical approach to the economy with Buddhist ethical principles. The latter are mainly interpreted by the lenses of the Buddhist philosopher David Loy (2003), who expresses the belief that the so-called three poisons—ill-will, greed, and delusion—are considered as fully engrained in capitalism (singular): a form of production that institutionally engineers them, like never before, due to its profit maximization-based working principle. Unfortunately, it is difficult to contrast the capital accumulation from Buddhist Ethics as we have a rich empirical documentation on this subject that seals a different narrative. The excellent study by Hubbard (2001) on the Chinese Hsing-Hsing's Buddhist sect during the 6th century contributes greatly to the understanding of this relationship. The *Inexhaustible Storehouse* is the most relevant initiative of this religious institution within that context created by this sect in the context of institutionalization

of *dana* practice—the virtue of cultivating generosity. It engineered material gifts from civil society to monasteries in order to support the poor, as a salvific agency, monasteries granted donors perpetual merits. The overall economic system worked in favor of capital accumulation. This gave rise to an elaborate accounting system of individual moral responsibilities with a meticulous detail of actions with relative economic value: something at odds with contemporary claims coming from Western *Engaged Buddhists* (see specifically Chapter 7 [Hubbard 2001]). Moreover, we must take into account, among others, Robert Bellah's (1957) study of the role played by Buddhism in the affirmation of capitalism in Japan, with its focus on social obligations as a material basis for salvation or Enlightenment. In the same vein, Collins (1997) refers to Medieval Buddhism, namely, the Pure Land sect, Soto, and Rinzai sects—as driving cultural forces of market development, as well as direct protagonists of it through the economic organization of the monasteries (or “religious capitalism”: in the province of Henshu alone the monasteries owned 90% of the real estate). To add some irony to it, Buddhism is the only religion that did not reject openly usury (Graeber 2011).

These are not purely academic questions as among the contemplative practitioners the belief of Buddhism as an alternative social model is widespread in the Western world, even among scholars. On this point, I recall Julie Nelson (2011), who warns about the idealization (or blame) of any economic system (see also Giorgino 2018a) in order to avoid moralism and dualistic thinking.

These open topics do not weaken the perspective and the pathway. Interpretative oscillations seem to be part of a difficulty inherent in the effort to understand institutionalized traditions of wisdom and translate

them into secular form, despite the fact that they are identified under the iconoclastic aegis of the Zen tradition. In sum, it is a matter of choice over a crucial question: How far can we go in secularization?

The conceiving of these practices as not necessarily based on a religion is to say that the knowledge built on them is not a monopoly of a total institution. It can free up unexpected energies and transform them into an authentic process of commoning, a dialogue between equals, based on friendship. Social sciences can contribute to this process in the current network society by redesigning ecosystems in a wise and just way and encouraging collective awareness (Giorgino 2018a; see also Giorgino 2018b; 2018c on contemplative commons). The current expansion of a digital networked society could lead to what Michel Bauwens (2007) calls a “contributory spirituality”:

As we enter this new stage of individual/collective awakening, individuals are being increasingly called to practice the new life-form composed of groups of individuated individuals merging their collective intelligence.

A participatory approach would mean that everyone would be invited to participate in the spiritual search, without a priori selection, and that the threshold of such participation would be kept as low as possible. Appropriate methodologies would be available for different levels of experience.

Tradition is thereby not rejected, but critically experienced and evaluated.

He/she can create spiritual inquiry circles that approach the different traditions with an open mind, experience them individually and collectively, and where the different individual experiences can be exchanged.

The outcome of that process will be a co-created reality that is unpredictable and will create new, as yet unpredictable spiritual formats. But, one thing is sure: it will be an open, participatory, approach leading to a commons of spiritual knowledge, from which all humanity can draw from.

Faithful to a theoretical elaboration that never forgets the human condition in its concreteness, in Chapter Four, the author wonders if and how sociology can be a tool for *the art of living*. I believe that this is a core question for any sociologist, or at least for those who do not want the discipline to become a museum piece, as Ulrich Beck (2005) once warned. While Giddens, Bauman, and Beck, among others, are of inspiration for the recognition of ontological insecurity as the basis of post-modern individuals, their contributions seem to have reached the peak of the possibilities of sociological awareness. The author pragmatically splits his core question into four subquestions: What can sociology *explain* but not *solve* today? How can we improve the sociological understanding to solve ontological insecurity? How can we be inspired by Zen Buddhism to improve the sociological understanding of contemporary society? What is the relation between sociology and the art of living in the light of some Zen Buddhist statements?

In his dialogue with past scholars, his quotation from Mead (p. 94) is pivotal for a non-deterministic vision, and the reader can be grateful to the author for this reminder:

The "I" appears in our experience in memory. It is only after we have acted that we know what we have done; it is only after we have spoken that we know what we have said... But, if the response to it is a response which is of the nature of the conversation of gestures, if it creates a situation which is in some sense novel...then

there is something important occurring that is not previously present in experience. [Mead cited by Konecki]

Although this is a point of crucial importance, Konecki nevertheless comes to critically recognize the limits of "classic" interactionism: its centering on language and mind prevents the recognition of the sentient body (pp. 97-98). Along these lines, I have to add the valuable contribution of the North American phenomenological philosopher Eugene Gendlin (1997).

In Part Two, the author's determination to pursue a transformative pathway is manifested in different applications of contemplative social research. In higher education, academic activities are distilled and revised considering them as a crucial playground for aware experiencing. It means to open a direct dialogue with those who with various abilities are innovating methodologically beyond the disciplinary and academic barriers. To name one, he develops an inquiry into the academic organizational culture with a methodology relying on the three techniques of phenomenological reduction, imaginative variations, and horizontalization.

He also deals with one of the most intriguing and relevant aspects of higher education as service provisioning: the exclusion of the body as an intelligent component of knowledge in a teaching and learning practice. In doing this, he relies on the introduction of hatha yoga in academic courses and in his students' self reports about it. The teaching experience presented and framed in a sociological perspective is of the utmost importance as a contribution to personal and organizational well-being, as well as a tool of renewal of academic higher education theory and practice. Lastly must be mentioned his "zenic" experiments in public spaces inspired by

Harold Garfinkel as original interpretations of social situations.

In sum, the book responds to the need for open discussion between the various contemporary contribu-

tions on secular contemplation as an inner transformative process that is needed for any kind of effective “transformation” *out there*. In my view, it is full of substantive topics and I would not be surprised if it provoked a strong debate in the discipline.

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