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A Hazard Called Sociology: Review of Stephen Turner's *Mad Hazard: A Life in Social Theory*

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*Mad Hazard: A Life in Social Theory Vol: 38*  
Stephen Turner  
Emerald Publishing Limited, 2022  
264 pp.

Years ago, I traveled on a sabbatical to South America and returned with what I thought was a derivative of my companion book on the trip, Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card* (1987), thinking my thoughts and feelings deserved to be published. After a couple of rejections, a kind editor wrote back to say that if I were famous enough, they'd consider it ... Steve Turner is, and that's how we have his autobiography/memoir at the end of his long career, suffering, as he is, from stage four breast cancer. The book is both personal and academic, the first parts meant for family and friends, and the rest for colleagues and perhaps aspiring academics about to launch their own careers. One can easily choose among the chapters what to read.

I remember meeting Steve for the first time in what he so candidly describes as his chosen outfit or costume: "I bought a navy blue suit, which I referred to as my Mafia Lawyers suit, which resembled the one Terry Clark had worn so many years ago, but it was cut close and in a flattering way. I looked the part" (126). Not only did he "look the part," he also stood out among the awkwardly and shabbily dressed academics who probably got out of their closet whatever happened to be least stained and wrinkled. A handsome looking Steve, with piercing brown eyes and an indelible smirk, was a refreshing spectacle among his fellow academics.

I didn't quite understand, as he explains in this book, that he is shy; to me, his demeanor looked like an aloof superiority reserves for those in the know. And to some extent, as we read here, he was in the know, at least in some circles: "I had entered into this different world, beyond disciplines, beyond the contrast struggle with hostile reviewers, and far beyond even the contentious Weber community, within which I was now, in Mafia terms, a 'made man'. I was looking at the big questions face to face. That was the road that remained open" (116). I'd say that he was a "made man" beyond the confines of the Weberian circle of scholars, from Science, Technology, and Society circles to the inception of the large and powerful Society for the Social Studies of Science.

### **The Efficacy of Review**

I was struck by Turner's use of the book review essay as a critical means to engage others with whom he disagreed. Unlike the advice young academics get to review books to add lines to their CV, Turner and a few others (myself included) find value in keeping up with the latest publications in our various areas of interest, poking here and there to find weak arguments or poorly stated positions so as to advance the field. To some readers, this may be an important lesson to emulate, especially when they, like Turner, work across disciplinary boundaries within which conceptual moves are rare and when they appear too often turn out to be uninteresting.

Among the issues that have consumed Turner's professional career has been the statistical turn in sociology, which, according to him, exemplifies "physics envy" as a way to claim "rigor" in the training of graduate students and the presentation of data for public policy. As he says: "The elite professors warned, correctly, that it was impossible to get into the top journals, and therefore to get and keep a good job, without high-level statistical analysis, which at the time meant path analysis and structural equation models" (59). Turner's own interest in what is called in the social science "theory" and which philosophers don't name because it's the air they breathe has moved him over the years to work on canonical figures in the history of ideas, such as Weber, Durkheim, and Parsons who in their different ways belong to more than academic discipline, and appreciate their problems within the historical milieu within which they worked and the specific answers they offered as alternative to the answers of others.

The "issues" that consumed Turner are labeled "illusions" by him, perhaps because of the disappointments he had to overcome when dealing with their proponents and opponents. Not holding back, he states that "The first illusion was that sociology was an important discipline, that the internal issues and conflicts within sociology were worth fighting over, and that one could actually influence the discipline from below, the position I was in" (64). The big gun he brings to the fight, the "leverage on sociology," is the philosophy of science, because sociologists, "especially those in power, pretended to believe that sociology was a science, and this pretense left them open to arguments about the nature of science, or so I thought. That made the positivism dispute important [as] another huge illusion" (64-65). Moving away from the technical debates in sociology to the theoretical margins and challenging the scientific status not only of this or that hypothesis and its testing apparatus but entire theoretical frameworks required familiarity with and convincing expertise in the philosophy of science writ large.

The illusion about science (or physics) envy or the pretense that sociology is a bona fide science is accompanied by another illusion, namely, "that theory did matter." Oddly, the main culprit here is Thomas Kuhn's classic: "sociology may not have had any real 'theories' in the sense of physics, but it certainly had 'paradigms,' and that was [for them] the mark of science" (65-66). Paradigms displace statistics as the markers of scientific legitimacy and all the privileges associated with them, from logical rigor and empirical testing to professional credibility and funding opportunities. Weaponizing the "Popperian model" which "required respect," was the "leverage" Turner was looking for in establishing the fact that "the scientization model implied that most of the discipline was undeserving of respect" (70).

### **Constraining Elite Power**

Following another sociologist who was a closet Popperian and then became a full-fledged disciple (Steve Fuller), Turner time and again returns to the lessons he learned about criticism, refutations, power relations, open and closed societies and academic communities. With Popper in mind he realizes that "there was little tolerance by the elite for criticism of the profession by its outsiders. Ignoring outsider critics was not enough. They needed to be silenced" (71). No matter his professional ascent and publication record, always feeling the outsider to the inner workings of the "elite professors," Turner the critic also realizes that

[Y]ou can't invoke logic to people who don't understand logic. But people who understood logic wouldn't have said the things one is trying to correct. So there is never an occasion in which it is possible to correct someone by appeal to logic. This was to prove to be the Achilles' heel of all of my subsequent attempts to write on these topics, and there were many (77).

The open-ended Socratic dialogue, the ongoing Popperian conjectures and refutations, and the presumed academic citadel of learning all remain beyond the reach of logical disputations or analyses, perhaps beyond the reach of critique. And with this disappointment another realization comes to the fore: the democratizing fantasy that anyone can participate in the conversation and be invited to the grownups table is shattered as well.

All of this is not to say, as we glean here and there, that Turner himself was not part of the so-called elite professors who had power to organize new journals and associations (e.g., 4S, 79) or that his position of Distinguished Research Professor did not allow for latitude in financial, positional, and professional terms. Instead, what becomes clear from yet another lesson (this time learned from Harriett Zuckerman, "Merton's wife") about the so-called the "killing the fathers" period (1960s-1970s), which translated in practical terms to "simply ignore the American sociological hierarchy and publish in Europe. . . [and] submitting to philosophy journals, which the hierarchy had no control over, and which were receptive to my writings" (92).

Given the five-page long list of publications that appear in the Bibliography/References, one cannot feel sorry for Turner's illustrious record of publication. He is head and shoulders above the norm in both sociology and philosophy of science, and definitely above those who find their publication outlets in obscure journals and presses where interdisciplinarity is still welcomed. Yet, Turner is still miffed by the fact that his maneuvers cannot undermine the academic power hierarchy: "The power of the academically powerful is the ability to ignore criticism" (94). Indeed, one cannot be coerced to engage in a debate, which, given Turner's own ideological predilections may not be such a bad thing: the "marketplace of ideas" just refuses to buy this or that idea or critique.

Turner's "pivot" from the liberal left to the "Oakeshottian" right was not exclusively attributable to his upbringing or his affinity with Popperians, even though one reads Turner's explicit homage to Popper, "with whom I felt a strong affinity" (168), calling himself "a good Popperian" (181). The book repeats an anti-elitist instinct at work, perhaps the kind we commonly observe in populist leaders. Whether the disdain for elites has to do with his professional trajectory or his difficulties with his university administrators is beside the point. Being a sociologist first and foremost and a philosophically minded critic, he gives the following explanation:

My instinct was to find ways to constrain elite power, but to grant that the rule of the few was a given in politics and organizational life. The perennial political problem was to control the few. 'Progressivism,' as I had experienced it, was a moralistic mask for this power, not a corrective. Indeed, the very means by which progress was supposed to be achieved concentrated

this power and made it more remote. This was the lesson of communism that was impossible to ignore. This was the general background to the pivot (154).

It's one thing to go after anyone wearing "a moralistic mask," may they be on the right or the left, and quite another to conflate progressivism with communism, especially when one reduces communism to the Soviet Union phenomenon. But perhaps what Turner is all about is refusing to join any club that would have him as a member, and perhaps he is allergic to any optimism that was part of the 1960s-1970s. "The visible triumphs of the transformative social movements of the time thus seemed to validate the emancipatory ideal and legitimate it as social science." But for Turner "It was a refuge for the failed New Left of the Sixties." And in a moment of self-reflexivity he admits that "What did you do in the war, Daddy?" is a legitimate question. What did I do in the face of all of this change? I did not sign up to the emancipation brigade" (166). Was the "emancipatory brigade" loathsome because it was a brigade, because it was promising emancipation, or because Turner already concluded, pessimistically, that there was no hope for the social sciences? The reason why this matters, it seems, is because he continues to publish about the social sciences, not relinquishing the cause of the brigade even when going at it solo.

## **A Big Idea**

Struggling with coming up with a "big theory," Turner says, he did have an "Aha moment," one that "was as close to general theory as [he] got. He "pointed out that trust came from a kind of inference from the parts of the persona of the expert that people could trust to the parts that they could not understand" (124). One should not quibble if this is indeed a general theory or a generalizable observation that sounds more like a recommendation and perhaps wishful thinking about the overall trust experts enjoy even if they don't deserve it (as the "inference" isn't logical but emotive). How does this big idea fare in comparison to other ideas/theories of his contemporary sociologists?

Granting the late Bruno Latour the status of a "genius" who "deserved the celebrity he achieved," Turner hits on something that extends beyond generalizations and translation from one discourse to another. Without mentioning their predecessor Michel Foucault (who enjoyed celebrity status as well), he adds that Latour and "his rival Pierre Bourdieu, [were] in the same business," which was "inventing comprehensive social theoretical vocabularies" (122). This, indeed, is a lesson to be learned: how to "invent" not so much logics (in the sense of the logic of late-capitalism) but "vocabularies" (or as others call them grammars).

I wish he added here that the mere invention, however exemplary of great inventive minds, is never sufficient; there must be something both true and clever that appeals to a wide enough audience of scholars who will begin using them (as the sociologists of knowledge production keep reminding us). In the case of Weber, it was as much the notion of vocation as it was the notion of ideal types; for Kuhn, as mentioned before, it was paradigms; for Popper, falsification, conjectures and refutations, and the open society. They were no inventions in the scientific sense of novel discoveries; they were conceptual vessels in which and through which to communicate vast amounts of data, a great deal of theoretical framing, and perhaps also ways by which to test and critically engage the propositions that were put forth.

The courage to invent a new conceptual platform does not come from the heavens, however much one prays, nor from eureka moments we are fortunate to enjoy sitting under a tree. Instead, claims Turner, we slug through the materials “fate” has thrust upon us. In his words, “One is unable to escape, except partially, from the world of issues one is given ... The dead past weighs on everything you do.” And for him that meant “the Parsons-Merton-Lazarsfeld card.” What sustained Turner during his career, we hear, is his relationships with “the followers and students of Karl Popper, the most stringently moralistic of philosophers of science, and the most willing to speak alone” (128).

Ian Jarvie, Popper’s student and the editor of the *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* is singled out as a “guardian angel,” but surely there were few others of this tradition who were not just “stringent moralistic” but also critical, open-minded, and friendly because they were at the margins of the establishment or because they had nothing to lose but their academic chains, to paraphrase Rousseau. (Donald Campbell is also singled out not only as “the Great White Father,” but also as “the most egalitarian and friendly major academic I had ever encountered” (186)). This lesson about finding intellectual fellow-travelers, though, is given a relative short shrift, in my opinion, especially given Turner’s own disappointments. Outside of collaborations with close friends and graduate students, we hear little about what it takes to forge new alliances and to assemble professional renegades that refuse to bow down to hierarchies and power brokers.

For those interested not only in theoretical questions that guide the field of sociology, but also in the canons of the field, Turner offers another lesson, one culled from his research. He says that he liked “to understand thinkers in terms of the problems they understood themselves to be solving, and this required understanding who they were responding to and why. And this approach did carry over, to a large extent, to writing about other areas of history.” It’s unclear, though, how this approach “was alien to the kinds of ideologically driven history that was increasingly dominant (137).

Does it mean that no historically-informed inquiry was ideologically neutral, except for Turner’s? Or does it mean that historical research is usually understood to have an ideological subtext that turned Turner off? What a feat it would have been if these questions were fleshed out more thoroughly. And just then, a small nugget does appear:

I showed that it was possible to account for this persistence and uniformity without reference to collective objects, by inverting the problem: it was not the cognitive conditions of action and thought that produced the uniformity, but the uniformities of action and such things as training or actions in common that produced the uniformities (147-148).

Always the adherent to the Popperian methodological individualism, we see an attempt to recast “collective objects” as results of perceived uniformities and socialization. Jettisoning Durkheim’s concocted “notion of a shared consciousness” and Parsons’ “Freud-inspired notion of internalization” as “unchallenged cliché[s],” Turner publishes yet another article about “Understanding the Tacit” with a tacit nod to Michael Polanyi (160).

## Fighting Monsters

On occasion Turner does sink his teeth into the conceptual apparatus of which he is a valuable member, but one cannot help but hear him seething sarcastically at it as being inane if not outright misguided and silly. At those junctures, his voice comes through loud and clear and one has an impression that one is getting an insight both to the persona and the intellect that motors it. For example,

The term normativity was one of those fashionable pieces of philosophical jargon that meant everything and nothing. The term was not only a stick with which to beat naturalism ... The use of the term in ethics made the careers of certain people particularly Christine Korsgaard who had been given a kind of apostolic blessing as the successor to John Rawls (197).

The putdown is not limited to ideas, but names are named, and it appears almost personal, as if one is settling scores. He continues to say: "it [normativity] was a hydra-headed monster. There was no one place to go to kill it" (197). So, he's after the "kill." Not so Popperian here, are we? Castration theory comes to mind, referring back to his quote above regarding the "killing of the fathers." And then he moves on to slay another dragon (father?), also mentioned before:

Collective intentionality presented similar problems. It was a concept that seemingly emerged out of nowhere, with a few texts, some of which claimed inspiration from classical sociology . . . It became a standard philosophical research area without anyone complaining that the emperor had no clothes. And there were a few social scientists, allergic to methodological individualism and nostalgic for functionalism, who took up the language of collective intentionality as well (197).

The marketplace of ideas seems too uncontrollable, with naked emperors running around with their minions, disregarding the expected attire of their kingdoms. What happened to Weber's ironic comment that "academic life was a mad hazard"? What happened to agreeing that this comment is "amply confirmed by this narrative" and that "perhaps this is not such a bad thing"? Turner concludes by agreeing that "Chance taketh away, but it also giveth" (218) that he has received quite enough to sustain a full academic life. However misguided others may be, should they be deprived of chances?

One wonders what lessons are dished out here: calling out the emperor? Discarding old theories? Being skeptical of establishment ideas? Distrusting professors? And then another lesson is offered to young scholars:

One was better off dealing with the dead. Secondary literature and understandings of the past changed, but the players didn't change their minds, as Searle repeatedly did, and as my main interlocutor on "practices," Joe Rouse, also did at a dizzying pace. Even Quentin Skinner, whom I had discussed decades earlier, changed his arguments, so that when I returned to him after almost 40 years, I had to read his new ideas (198).

The dead “Great White Fathers” are easy targets not because of their simple-mindedness or their conceptual transparency and brilliance, but because they cannot speak back from their graves, like rowdy students or prickly interlocutors. No matter how appealing this sentiment is, it contradicts everything we have read in the book so far: the outsider critic who exposes the emperor for having no clothes, the philosopher fox in the sociological henhouse, the brave loner who stands up to elite power, whether administrative or intellectual. What happened to the Socratic-Popperian spirit of ongoing dialogue, conjectures and refutations, critical rationalism, and courageous disagreements?

If we are after the truth, however one defines it in sociological and philosophical circles, the living can contribute as much as the dead. Perhaps I have misunderstood this last lesson; perhaps it was meant tactically and not strategically; perhaps it was about publication lines on one’s resume and not about what Turner was really arguing about, which is killing the fathers that don’t deserve to make the lives of their sons miserable. There is some wisdom in this, as long as we remain in the theoretical realm, as Turner insists we should, and as long as we are careful in our choice of father, if such a choice is even within our power.