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Roseneil, Sasha (2016) Father and Daughter: Patriarchy, Gender and Social Science by Ann Oakley - Bristol: Policy Press, 2014. [Book Review]

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Ann Oakley

Father and Daughter: Patriarchy, Gender and Social Science

Bristol: Policy Press, 2014, £13.99 pbk, (ISBN: 9781447318101), 256pp.

I must confess: I struggled with this book. It took me two false starts before I was able to immerse myself in it and read to the end. The second time I put the book aside, after again getting little further than the end of the first chapter, I rued the day I had agreed to review it. I had excitedly accepted the invitation, intrigued by the rich feminist promise of an autobiographical exploration of the intertwined lives of two ground-breaking social scientists, daughter and father Ann Oakley and Richard Titmuss, and an inquiry into “patriarchy, gender and social science” through this lens.

It was not for the literary pleasure of the read that I finally returned to the text and fought my way through my initial resistance – the book does not have a compelling narrative arc, and its aesthetic qualities did not seduce me. Rather I continued with what felt like a chore out of a sense of duty, a commitment to the collective, to the discipline and the institution of this journal, underpinned, perhaps, by a sense of myself as someone who tries to keep her word and meet her obligations, who is a good citizen, a responsible member of the academic community. It was my formation within the kind of communitarian value system invoked in the work of Richard Titmuss as foundational to the post-second world war welfare state - “sentiments of altruism, reciprocity and social duty” (Titmuss, 1970: 225) - that impelled me back to the book, when I would rather have given in to the sybaritism of a sunny August afternoon lazing in the garden. The moral bonds that hold together academic networks meant that it was about the maintenance of reputation amongst my sociological peers, as much as “giving something back” to a *not-for-profit* British Sociological Association journal and its editors, to whom I felt grateful for publishing my work recently. Ultimately, however, I was glad that I had acquiesced to these disciplinary imperatives, for I learnt a great deal from this book about the history of the social sciences and the welfare state in Britain.

Oakley offers an incisive account of the centrality of gender politics to the contestations of the 1950s and '60s that saw social administration, social work and sociology emerge from a much more fluid interdisciplinary social science field as separate, hierarchically positioned disciplines. In this she places centre-stage her father and his homosocial band of “Titmice” at the London School of Economics, as the forces driving the project of establishing patriarchal social policy – both the academic discipline and the practice of the welfare state. Her analysis shows little filial loyalty in its excoriating critique of how this group of men treated their women colleagues at LSE, providing a case study in the machinations of university politics, the practices of professional closure and the battles over the courses, funding, intellectual credit and tenure that constitute departments and disciplines. I was particularly interested to read about the modes of survival and resistance of the women academics who were part of this scene: their own intense homosocial worlds of love, life-partnership and friendship, and their wider transnational networks of women, which provided the base from which they were able to continue to work in the hostile climate of mid-century patriarchal academia.

But I learnt about far more than the history of the social sciences from this book. Following the psychosocial method of depth-hermeneutic reading of a cultural text which suggests alighting on, and analytically attending to, that which affectively provokes or troubles the reader (Bereswill,

Morgenroth and Redman, 2010), I pondered what it was that had halted my reading before I reached these fascinating discussions of the gender politics of disciplines and university departments. I had responded to the early pages of the book by wanting no more of it, casting it aside and turning to other more pleasurable activities. Comprehending the affective power of the book, I realised that I found it profoundly depressing to read.

The book opens with a description of Oakley's childhood bedroom as "awkwardly-shaped and unfriendly", its window letting in "a mean rectangle of light". "Blue Plaque House", the Titmuss family home, in which Oakley grew up, is depicted as a drab, cold, unhomey place, and the family life lived there as devoid of warmth and physical affection. The Titmusses' reputedly "inspirational marriage" is dissected, their "deep psychological involvement which is sometimes known as love" understood by their daughter as "in some strange way unkind [...] devoid of tenderness, and laced with anger" (p.11). Food did not provide nurturance or pleasure: mean portions reflected the legacy of rationing, and the stodgy meaty menus lacked salad and fresh fruit. One of most telling images for me, capturing the stultifying atmosphere of life in Blue Plaque House is that of Richard Titmuss sitting on the upstairs toilet with his copy of *The Times*, and his wife sitting on the downstairs toilet, with *The News Chronicle*; both were smoking whilst defaecating, "so that neither toilet was a very pleasant place to be". Poor Ann was thereby prevented from using either before she went to school: "Like insomnia, constipation became for me an acquired defect". And Oakley gestures towards traumatic memories from the age of 2 or 3, of her fear of her father and "a historian colleague" of his in the bathroom with her whilst she was bathing, and her mother doing little more than smiling and smoking when called to the scene by the distressed child. Oakley's lonely, unhappy childhood then stretches into adulthood, her isolation and sense of being unsupported continuing as a young mother suffering from post-natal depression. Her parents were embarrassed by her, "even apologising to my husband for having landed him with such an imperfect wife", and they took no interest in her intellectual labours and its prolific, ground-breaking fruits. All-in-all the book spares few blushes in what it reveals of the private world of the Titmuss family.

So, just as the book dissects the patriarchal politics of the intellectual networks at the heart of the British social policy, it continues Oakley's career-long work of unpicking the gender politics of The Family, weaving together the personal and the political, public and private, and thereby offering the reader melancholic insight into the affective crucible from which the British welfare state emerged. Performatively enacting the radical shift in ways of thinking about intimacy and personal life, emotional worlds and human well-being that feminism produced, this book offers a powerful corrective to nostalgia for the social institutions and social relations of the post-second world war welfare state.

References

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