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Sara James (ed.)

Metaphysical Sociology: On the Work of John Carroll

Routledge: London, 2018, £115 hbk (ISBN: 9781138091788), 170 pp.

Reviewed by: Matt Dawson, *University of Glasgow*

The Australian scholar John Carroll's vision for Metaphysical Sociology is one which concerns itself with three questions: 'Where do I come from? What should I do with my life? and what happens to me when I die?' (p. 1). To explore these questions this fascinating collection presents a vision of a cultural and everyday sociology which, in Carroll's words, seeks to demonstrate that 'we live by story' (p. 160).

The text begins with an introductory essay by James and a chapter by Carroll discussing what is meant by 'Metaphysical Sociology'; these provide a useful introduction for a reader unfamiliar with Carroll's work. Carroll's project rests on three precepts. Firstly, reflecting the questions above, humans live metaphysically, concerned with questions of meaning. Secondly, following a broadly Nietzschean position, the emergence of modernity and humanism sidelined spiritual questions in favour of materialism and rationality. Thirdly, that even in the 'spiritually starved' (p. 3) condition of the modern West, 'every culture has...a body of archetypal stories' which are retold through the generations, providing 'a timeless lens through which individuals can view themselves' (p. 20). Therefore, Carroll's project is fundamentally cultural, focusing on stories and the meanings attached to them. His own chapter demonstrates this by references to literature such as *Hamlet*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Illiad* and *The Ambassadors*, alongside the *Sopranos* TV show, all of which explore questions of what it is to be, including how we should live and what it is to die.

Following this, the next five chapters all deal with Carroll's work on Jesus. As Scruton highlights, Carroll's retelling of the gospel of Mark casts Jesus as a solitary, even domineering figure, unconcerned with codes of morality or ethics and instead driven by questions of being. Carroll suggests in a reproduced interview (p. 33) that this is a Jesus for non-believers, opposed to ossified institutions such as churches, which also provides a story fit for contemporary religion. Dickson's chapter argues that, being a Jesus who emphasises individual responsibility, it also reflects Carroll's broader political conservatism. Consequently, Murphy's contribution proposes Carroll's work is a 'neo-Calvinist sociology', driven by questions of internalised authority and everyday practice as a way of connecting with the sociologically sacred. Finally, this section contains a chapter (or, rather, a collection of emails) by the actor Michael Sheen which explores his 72-hour live action community play *The Passion of Port-Talbot*. This is a welcome contribution since, as Sheen discusses how his retelling of The Passion was not a religious story, but a reflection on the town of Port Talbot in which Sheen's Christ-like character was 'a vessel for the history of the town and its people' (p. 61), we see how it is also a demonstration of the precepts of Carroll's metaphysical sociology and living by story.

The remaining chapters of the book focus on specific cultural phenomena relevant to Carroll's project. While Bradshaw explores the representation of contemporary terrorism, both Tester and Gibson reflect on death in different contexts, from how we deal with the possibility of

human eradication to the nebulous nature of what a 'good' death might be. Of especial note are the chapters by Maloney and James. Maloney explores how video games operate as retold stories engaging in the critique of modernity, with the added benefit of requiring the engagement of the player in the narrative. For example, *Red Dead Redemption*, with its condemnation of rationalising, self-serving, bureaucrats, suggests a 'sense of what has been lost in modernity's civilising of the "untamed frontier"' (p. 104). Meanwhile, James' chapter explores the contradiction between a late modern transformation of romance along consumerist and technological lines alongside the continued embracing of the 'soulmate' ideal via a reading of Spike Jonze's movie *Her*. For James, Jonze's movie shows the continuing appeal of the soulmate archetype and its perceived ability to 'transcend the everyday' (p. 151).

Taken together, this book provides a valuable entry point to a particular way of doing cultural sociology. In this it is greatly aided, as Carroll notes in his concluding response (p. 166), by its coherence which reflects well of James' editorship. One question it prompts is to what extent sociology itself, a part of the Humanities in Carroll's vision (p. 21), is both a reflection on the stories humans tell in order to obtain meaning *and* itself one of those very stories. Whether one shares Carroll, and his interlocutors', views on what this story tells us, it encourages us to think of sociology as an ambitious endeavour concerned with fundamental questions of being human.

Word Count: 780