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Book Review

DeGloma, Thomas. 2014. *Seeing the Light: The Social Logic of Personal Discovery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Sociologists frequently argue that Westerners today lack a “sociological imagination.” Westerners, the argument goes, too often isolate the autobiographical from the historical and structural. “Public issues” get confused as “personal troubles,” and consequently, people are in need of some consciousness adjustment. This argument has been applied to topics ranging from divorce to mental disorder to poverty. The argument is true enough; in fact, it is obvious. Most sociologists would not find it noteworthy when a contemporary American blames an illness on a virus rather than on a neighbor’s witchcraft, nor is it compelling when the same individual blames his or her financial distress on a personal drug addiction rather than on the functioning of the “base” and “superstructure.”

Seeing the Light, however, proves this argument about misguided consciousness to be even more banal. In the book, DeGloma shows that stories about “personal troubles” and personal blessings—autobiographies—are a way for individuals to step into debates on public issues. DeGloma concisely develops a novel approach to personal stories by illustrating that they are not necessarily just expressions

of the self but can also be a way that people classify the world into right and wrong, good and evil, and true and false. *Seeing the Light* offers new projects for the sociology of knowledge, the study of social movements, and most importantly, the analysis of autobiography. While the book focuses on stories of “awakening,” DeGloma provides sociology with a paradigm that can be applied to autobiographical stories in general.

Seeing the Light is a work of formal sociology. DeGloma’s interest is in the generic patterns among a diversity of personal “awakening” stories. “Awakening narratives,” according to DeGloma, are “stories people tell about having once been contained in a world of darkness and ignorance and subsequently awakening to an enlightened understanding of their experiences and situations” (p. 2). The book identifies the similarities in narratives among an array of late-modern moral entrepreneurs, such as anti-war veterans, political radicals, religious converts, religious apostates, ex-homosexuals, ex-ex-homosexuals, those who claim to have recovered memories, as adults, of childhood sexual abuse, and those who claim their recovered memories of abuse were false memories.

However, he also considers stories of awakening exemplary of the so-called “Axial Age,” “an era extending from approximately 800 BCE to 200 BCE” during which thinkers “began to engage in a new type of critical second-order theoretical reflection that involved, in each case, postulating the nature of, and the path to, ultimate truth” (p. 35). These thinkers include, for example, Plato with his cave allegory and Siddhartha Gautama with his transformation to Buddha under the Bodhi tree. According to DeGloma, the Axial Age classics—and other transformation stories from antiquity, such as Paul’s conversion to Christianity—have become “established storytelling models that actors adapt and recombine” to affirm a contemporary community’s version of the truth (p. 63). This is the first historical argument in *Seeing the Light*. The second historical argument is that awakening stories have multiplied as a response to the increased moral pluralism of late-modernity. He argues that awakening formulas are “cultural resources” (p. 63) that actors use “to make sense of the world in the face of complexity—to resolve contradictions about moral obligations and to negate feelings of anxiety that often stem from moral uncertainty” (p. 152).

His main theoretical contribution, however, regards not history but symbolic representation. DeGloma shows that awakening stories turn personal time into moral space; the temporally divided self symbolizes normatively divided worldviews. Consequently, autobiographies are vehicles for moral persuasion. In awakening narratives, the individual’s past represents a false worldview. Before the awakening, the individual lived in moral darkness. The awakening is enlightenment to the moral truth.

In this way, the individual’s past self and present self embody wider societal divisions over how to define war, sexuality, religion, recovered memories, or some other issue or identity. As DeGloma puts it, “By employing a moral polarization of identity, [moral entrepreneurs] reinforce the cultural boundary between dueling communities in a contentious cultural arena” (p. 148). They take a stance in this cultural arena by debasing the past self. Though they debase the past self, the past self establishes “cognitive authority” (p. 5) for tellers. Because they have lived in the “darkness,” they have a “socially founded right...[to] testify to the false nature of the rejected lifestyle and its associated worldview” (pp. 136-137).

Awakening narratives make claims about right and wrong, but they also involve claims about how one comes to the truth. DeGloma conceptualizes “autobiographical periods” (p. 97) in awakening stories as being separated either by “sociomental express elevators” (pp. 102-109) or “sociomental staircases” (pp. 110-121), accepting that any awakening narrative might include aspects of both. “Express elevators” and “staircases” generally correspond to different epistemologies. An “express elevator” awakening is an awakening that suddenly *befalls* the individual. DeGloma argues, “Whether psychological, political, sexual, scientific, or religious in focus, [express elevator stories] ask us to believe in some ‘power’ that often works in mysterious ways” (p. 109). In contrast, “staircase” awakening is a longer process of uncertainty and searching that separates the past self and present self, and the movement from falsehood to truth is the result of individual agency or intentional pursuit.

Seeing the Light is simple, concise, readable, and richly illustrated. At the same time, DeGloma pointedly engages a breadth of theory and theorists, such as cognitive sociology, semiotics, Goffman's dramaturgy, Giddens, Mead, and Bourdieu. The book would be appropriate for undergraduate and graduate courses on symbolic interaction, social psychology, the sociology of knowledge, social movements, gender and sexuality, narrative, and, among others, contemporary sociological theory.

However, do not let the simplicity and accessibility of DeGloma's work deceive. It is a highly sophisticated sociological contribution. While his emphasis is on the "strategic use" (p. 95) of autobiography by moral entrepreneurs, DeGloma provides a new paradigm for the sociology of autobiography in general. No longer should the study of self-nar-

rative be only the study of identity. As DeGloma shows, autobiography conveys moral boundaries, epistemologies, and judgments of authority. This is true of any autobiography: Autobiography is a statement about the self, but it also expresses knowledge about the world. Stories about "personal troubles," as well as personal blessings, even when the key protagonist is the self, define "public issues" or "shared cultural realities" (p. 95). When an individual attributes his or her financial distress to drug use, for example, the person is making a claim about the moral location of drug addiction, just as much as the individual is making a statement about his or her self. This is something sociology has missed for the most part. DeGloma enlightens us to the fact that autobiography is sociological imagination, which itself is an awakening for the discipline.

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