



Qualitative Sociology Review – Book Reviews

Volume III, Issue 3 – December 2007

Marek Skomorowski
Lodz University, Poland

Book Review:

*Memories of Branch Davidians. The Autobiography of David Koresh's
Mother*

by Bonnie Haldeman and Catherine Wessinger, Baylor University
Press, 2007, 199 pp.

February the 28th, 1993, Waco, Texas. An event which took place that day, attracted the world's attention. It started with the visit of the ATF agents (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms) who showed on the Branch Davidians farm with the search warrant. The leader of this religious group, David Koresh, was suspected of the illegal traffic in arms. It was the first day of a siege, which had been lasting approximately 51 days. When the negotiations with the community leaders were giving no satisfactory results, the authorities decided to use force. They tried to compel the members of the Branch Davidians to leave the ranch. Different techniques were used to do so, such as pointing searchlights to the farm in the night and playing loud noise through the speakers. When these methods had failed the ATF and FBI decided to carry out an assault. The consequences of the occurrence were tragic. As a result of the shooting and raging fire, 76 members of Branch Davidians and 6 FBI agents were killed (Moore 1994).

The Branch Davidians case and the assault carried on by the authorities is interesting for the social scientists and practitioners in two aspects. On one side, one can examine the mechanism or a set of mechanisms that lead a group of religious people conducted by an authoritative individual to form a sect. How these mechanisms change one's perception of the surroundings and the group definition of situation so that ordinary people change into a group eager to sacrifice it's members' lives in the name of the professed beliefs? The crucial part of that analysis is to examine thoroughly the process of creating the leader of such a sect – a charismatic individual who spread his or her perception of reality into the minds of the followers.

On the other side, social scientists can inspect the attack itself. It is a matter of reservation for those involved in the occurrence both as the representatives of the authorities, the Branch Davidians community as well as the observers worldwide. The civil and criminal trials lasting for several years show how complicate this case was. President Clinton himself confessed that the ATF raid on Mount Carmel Ranch was one of the biggest failures of his presidency (Haldeman, Wessinger 2007: 169). It is worth looking at the assault from the sociological point of view. How the definition of the situation was created by the sides of the conflict? What kind of interactions occurred before, during and after the attack? What symbols were used by both sides

to justify undertaken actions and to disparage the antagonist? These are just few of the countless questions that emerged during and after the Waco incident.

Many publications have been released since the siege (see: Breault M, King M 1993; Docherty 2001; Faubion 2001; Reavis 1995; Wessinger 2000 and others). One recently published is the book entitled "Memories of the Branch Davidians. The autobiography of David Koresh's mother." written by Cathrene Wessinger, Professor of Religious Studies, Loyola University, New Orleans. The inspiration for this work came from the author's meeting and the interview with Bonnie Haldeman, the mother of the Branch Davidians Leader. It consists of the recorded and edited interviews, which total length was 543 minutes, and the additional remarks made by Sheila Martin and Clive Doyle, two other Branch Davidians who survived the fire. The whole book, combined with the photographs from Bonnie Haldeman's archives and David Koresh's poems, is supposed to show the common life of the Branch Davidians, the background of and the inevitable path to the tragic events of the 28th Feb 1993. Author presented these contents on 199 pages. The book was published in 2007 by Taylor University Press, Waco, Texas.

The main aim of the book was: "to make people more aware of the true facts. I wanted to know what type of person David was, and what kind of people were at Mount Carmel." (Haldeman, Wessinger 2007: 1; words of Bonnie Haldeman). James Tabor, Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North California at Charlotte, pointed out that the publications concerning the Waco incident do not present the point of view of the victims themselves (Haldeman, Wessinger 2007, back cover). The reviewed book gives the opportunity to fill this gap by presenting the autobiography of the one involved in the Branch Davidians community – the mother of their leader.

The method of collecting the empirical data for the book seems the most appropriate for the aim presented above. By using the narrative interview the writer is able to present the world view with eyes of Bonnie Haldeman and the Branch Davidians. Therefore she is able to discern the complexity of their reality which would not be possible if the structured interview was used. By using different pre - categories the ethnography would be meager by the lack of these elusive details (see: Fontana, Frey 2000). Despite focusing on collecting the life history of Bonnie Haldeman only, analyzing other sources of data such as numerous publications available in press, TV and the Internet (e.g. Culp 2006; Dratt, Goldstone 2003; and others) and additional remarks made by two other Branch Davidians survivors enabled the context of the tragedy to be captured, alongside with the cultural, social and religious conditions of the community existence (see: Tedlock 2000).

The book is divided into three main parts. The first one presents Bonnie Haldeman's story about the time before the assault, the assault itself and its consequences. This part is told in the first person perspective so that reader gets the impression of listening to Bonnie. The narration is a combination of her story and additional remarks by Clive Doyle and Sheila Martin. The two other Branch Davidians add those facts that Bonnie could not know. Wessinger tried to capture the character of the tale by conveying the specific Texas accent which Bonnie had been using. The facts, characters and plots that seems to be explained not enough are described by footnotes, which are limited to providing some important facts, not the comments on them.

The second part of the book presents David Koresh's poems written in different parts of his life. They are presented with the information about the period of his life when they were created and their content. The third part consists of the photographs

from Bonnie Haldeman's archives which gives the impression of David, Branch Davidians and the Mount Carmel ranch.

The most important feature of the book is the fact that the plot is presented without any comments or theoretical analysis from the author. This approach to the empirical data has advantages and disadvantages. The main plus is the presentation of the unbiased narration. The reader can thoroughly examine and interpret the words of Bonnie Haldeman. It was crucial to conveying the perception of reality of Branch Davidians. On the other hand the lack of scientific commentary or analysis of any kind results in a difficulty in grasping the context of the life and fall of Branch Davidians. The reader can put his or her own theoretical frame on the data presented in the book but it would be interesting to know the author's approach to it. Especially the author is a specialist in religious sciences.

The autobiographical part is also divided into parts which undertake different aspects of Branch Davidians' and Bonnie Haldeman's lives. In the first part the narrator gives an account of David Koresh's life, his fascination with religious movement and the very beginning of forming the community under his leadership. It also gives the background of Bonnie's joining the group. The picture of an everyday life of Branch Davidians gives an impression of a group of normal people living in a selected and limited environment, sharing the same interests and hobbies and spending time together. The description lacks in parts showing the religious practices, which does not affect the quality of the book. Bonnie only mentions there were some meetings and collective Bible studies, but does not deepen into the details.

The second part of the narration touches the issue of the siege, the assault and the fire during the first part of 1993. The occurrence is described on 5 pages only, which is just a minor part of the book. Author added numerous and extensive footnotes here. They are a report from the site of events rather than a scientific analysis of them. The narrator focuses on her feelings and gives the account from her point of view so these additional information help placing the events in the correct time order and places.

Such an approach to the events of 1993 results in focusing on other issues of life of the Branch Davidians community rather than on the Waco incident. One who seeks the extensive relation from Mount Carmel both from the inside and from the outside when the siege was lasting might feel a little disappointed but publishing another specific plan of the 51 days of the ATF raid was not the goal of this book. Thus it is definitely not the flaw of Wessinger's work.

The lack of description of the siege and the fire from Bonnie Haldeman reveals how hard times had she got to go through in 1993. Nevertheless it has been a breakthrough in her life and the lives of the survivors which is conveyed properly in the book. The narration itself changes from precise descriptions of the community everyday existence to more thoughtful reminiscence of friends and members of her family who died in the fire. Bonnie gives an emphasis on the fact that she treated Branch Davidians as a "big old extended family" (Haldeman, Wessinger 2007 p. 88). The members of this family are presented as individuals having their own problems, ways of living, hobbies and occupations rather than as the followers of a sect leader who were attacked on their ranch by the evil forces.

As I emphasized earlier, Cathrene Wessinger's book gives a fresh and interesting point of view on Branch Davidians. It is one of a few works where the community members themselves might express their opinion on the siege and change the stereotypical and false group image. As Bonnie admits "He (David)

wasn't the person the media say He was. (...) There hasn't been too much human side put to David or most of the other people at Mount Carmel" (Haldeman, Wessinger 2007: 1) This book is a vital part of the process of changing the common perception of Branch Davidians and their leader as a violent sect.

The absence of theoretical analysis or comments is a weak point of his book. I assume the reason for that was making the interview with one person the basis for the book. The author might have thought that even though the interview was rich in details and saturated with data, it would have been insufficient for the theoretical analysis. The second reason is probably the idea of giving the opportunity to tell the story by one of the Branch Davidians and therefore resignation of any comments in order to avoid any bias. Though, it would be interesting to find the interview analyzed from, for example, symbolic interactionism point of view. To look for example on the process of developing the group identity and examine the occurrence of 1993 by finding the rules of negotiation of the symbols and meanings.

The disadvantage mentioned above does not affect the general impression of the book. It is definitely worth reading and I recommend it. It is an informative and interesting presentation of a religious community which was wiped out in an unprecedented confrontation with the state and federal authorities. It presents important facts for description of the Waco incident. Leaving the collected data without the theoretical comment gives the reader the opportunity to look at the autobiography with his or her own theoretical frames. Therefore the book will be interesting for sociologists as well as psychologists, religious studies specialists as well as a regular reader. It is simply universal.

References

- Breault, Marc and Martin King (1993) *Inside the Cult: A member's chilling, exclusive account of madness and depravity in David Koresh's compound*. New York: Signet Book.
- Culp, Cindy V. (2006) "Branch Davidians caught in yet another Power struggle." Waco Tribune – Herald, April 20.
(<http://www.censur.org/2006/waco.htm#Anchor-Controversia-13910>)
- Docherty, Jayne S. (2001) *Learning the lessons from Waco: when the parties bring their Gods to the negotiation table*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press
- Dratt, Jude and Jennifer Lew Goldstone, producers (2003) *Primetime: Witness: The children of Waco*. New York: ABC News. Television broadcast April 17
- Faubion, James (2001) *The lights and shadows of Waco: millennialism today*. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Fontana, Andrea and James H. Frey (2000) "The Interview. From structured questions to negotiated text." Pp. 645 - 673 in *Handbook of qualitative research*, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Haldeman, Bonnie and Catherine Wessinger, editor (2007) *Memories of the Branch Davidians. The Autobiography of David Koresh's Mother*. Waco: Baylor University Press.

- Moore, Carol (1994) *The massacre of the Branch Davidians. A study of government violations of rights, excessive force and cover up*. Online text.
(<http://www.firearmsandliberty.com/waco.massacre.html>)
- Reavis, Dick J. (1995) *The ashes of Waco: an investigation*. New York: Simon & Schuster
- Tedlock, Barbara (2000) "Ethnography and ethnographic representation." Pp. 455 - 487 in *Handbook of qualitative research*, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE
- Wessinger, Catherine (2000) *How the Millennium comes violently: from Jonestown to Heaven's Gate*. New York: Seven Bridges Press.
(<http://www.loyno.edu/~wessing>)

Citation

- Skomorowski, Marek (2007) "Book Review: Memories of the Branch Davidians. The Autobiography of David Koresh's Mother." *Qualitative Sociology Review*, Vol. III Issue 3. Retrieved Month, Year
(http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php)