

Book Review

Rick Helms-Hayes

Measuring the Mosaic: An Intellectual Biography of John Porter

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

In 1977, when he was a young doctoral student at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada Rick Helms-Hayes turned down an invitation to meet John Porter (1921-1979). The occasion was the presentation of an Honorary Doctorate to Professor Porter, a permanent fixture at Carleton University in Ottawa. The event was to be a private reception after the ceremony. At the time, Helms-Hayes considered the most famous sociologist in Canadian history to be “a liberal apologist for the system” (Langlois, 2011: 229). He later acknowledged that his decision to snub Porter had been “idiotic,” and he appears to have been making up for that missed opportunity ever since. By the time he wrote his “intellectual biography” of the great man, Helms-Hayes was able confidently to say: “I know more about John Porter than probably anybody in the world, including members of his own family” (Helms-Hayes, 2010). He was probably right. Still, he never did meet his main subject and primary research interest in person.

Helms-Hayes has taken on a formidable task. It’s hard enough to write a good biography but, in *Measuring the Mosaic*, he not only analyses Porter’s thought and work, but he also takes some time to discuss and to assess Porter’s personal background, his intimate relationships and the consequences of both for an undoubtedly troubling and yet an exceptionally fruitful academic life. And even then he wasn’t done.

In the end, Helms-Hayes has contributed a substantial inquiry into Porter the man, Porter the sociologist, the history of sociology in Canada and Porter’s place in it. These are difficult balls to keep in the air. Some have suggested that they are too many for Helms-Hayes to have handled deftly (Tough, 2012, October). I will refrain from judgement on that matter. Indeed, apart a few brief comments on John Porter’s childhood (he grew up in challenging economic circumstances), unusual career (he became *the* Canadian sociologist of his time, yet a Bachelor of Arts was the only earned degree on his academic résumé), and personal emotional *travails* and career disappointments (he coveted a university presidency, but he was thwarted), I am going to skirt around those issues and try to focus on what Helms-Hayes has to say about Porter as a sociologist and about the evolution of the discipline in Canada.

Helms-Hayes reports that Porter’s background of economic deprivation prompted his interest in social inequality, but his persistent inability to achieve his highest goals produced a level of frustration which, some speculate, may have contributed to his early death from a heart attack at the age of fifty-eight. Porter’s personal issues, however, did not affect just his private life. Driven to succeed personally, he rejected what he perceived as Marxist determinism and strove both to document and to advocate the emergence of a meritocracy in which inequality would remain, but success and the rewards that accompanied it would be more equitably allocated—not on the basis of inherited wealth or social connections, but on personal ability and character. In the end, John

Porter would have endorsed Barack Obama's oft repeated campaign wisdom on the topic of social class: "Everybody should have a fair shot." From the outset, Porter rejected the notion that a dominant, impenetrable or detectably structural "ruling class" even existed. As far as North America was concerned, Porter bought into the prevailing pluralist paradigm.

John Porter also learned the lessons of Mosca, Michels and Pareto. He firmly declared that the robust liberal dream of an engaged and well-informed citizenry was obsolete. He joined the revisionists and realists among democratic theorists and considered any sort of participatory democratic model to be "absurd in view of the frequency with which that theory has been empirically refuted" (Porter, 1965, 556).

In the intellectual company of American political scientists Max Lerner and Robert A. Dahl and sociologists Seymour Martin Lipset and Daniel Bell, and following the lead of voting studies, notably those of Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954), Porter lowered his sights. He observed, in place of inherently conflictual and enduringly unequal social relations under capitalism, a rather easy, pulsating process of civilized give-and-take among contending interest groups and power brokers. Competition among elites substituted for mass democracy. In the pluralist view, representative institutions in government and a relatively free market in economics allowed for a cheerful allocation and reallocation of values in which no group was permanently in power and no interest was wholly ignored. Modest social welfare provisions and a limited public sector involvement and government intervention in the economy were, he believed, adequate to ensure that the virtues of a modern liberal society including personal opportunity and collective progress would prevail.

All of this, of course, was reassuringly described as reality *before* the US civil rights movement and the countercultural commotion that accompanied opposition to American military adventurism in Vietnam. It also came before the full realization of occasionally violent separatist enthusiasms in Québec, and it came before the rise of "second-wave" feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s throughout much of the Western world. Failure to notice the underground pressures, to anticipate these almost seismic shifts in social relations and to predict the inability of "politics as usual" to manage change effectively indicate a problem with the "scientific" credibility of the social sciences—at least as they were practiced by mainstream scholars in North America in the middle of the twentieth century. The cozy comforts of the great post-war consensus pretty much blew up in the faces of the smug majority and the rest, as we have learned, became history.

For John Porter, however, the problem with Canada and the source of Canadian social problems of inequality and inequity (from his perspective the two are not identical) was not a matter of fundamental power differentials in the overall political economy, but merely the residual effect of a prolonged colonialism, a self-satisfied mercantile class, a general aversion to risk taking in the established leadership, and a consequent reluctance to exploit new opportunities for ambitious individuals and rising social groups in the manufacturing and service sectors.

Although annoyed by the complacency of the Canadian upper classes and by the timidity of its entrepreneurs, Porter nonetheless believed that progressive social change could and would come—in time—without profound social reconstruction. Hope was to be found in the gradual democratization of education and a steady erosion of certain cherished Canadian myths—not

least the fiction of a pleasant mosaic of cultures and religions relentlessly “tolerating” one another. He looked forward to a spirited embrace of a new liberalism and progressive social policies initiated by a more confident and assertive national government. I cannot doubt that he was pleased by the centennial celebrations of 1967, but more so by the election of the suave, engaging and intellectually first-class politician Pierre Eliot Trudeau as prime minister shortly thereafter.

The process of what might be called a new phase of nation-building was not, in Porter’s view, something that could be initiated and controlled from the bottom up. Rather, it fell to reformed and recharged elites to enable the maturation of Canada and to guide its transition into a thoroughly modern country. Hierarchically organized, competent and coherent elites were to be the sources of innovation for, as Porter believed, they alone “have the capacity to introduce change” (Porter, 1965, 27). Porter advocated an unsentimental articulation of national values and political and economic institutions willing to recruit new talent and support new opportunities for young men from modest or even disadvantaged backgrounds to penetrate and reinvigorate the elites.

I say “young men” advisedly, for John Porter did not seriously address the issue of women—or indigenous peoples or Canadian multiculturalism or any other sort of demographic divide and the asymmetrical power relations that flowed from them. His *magnum opus*, after all, was based mainly on the 1961 Census and was published before much had been heard from feminists, aboriginal activists or representatives of what would later be called “visible minorities.” So, if he was not especially prescient, we should not be tremendously surprised, though perhaps a trifle disappointed. In his defence, at the time (and even now) Canadian sociology has not excelled in making social predictions.

What mattered about John Porter’s journey to academic and intellectual success, and what made it into a notable turning point in Canadian sociology was the fact that he made the discussion of social class and the treatment of systemic inequality permissible in Senior Common Rooms, Corporate Board Rooms and polite society in general. His studies called attention to the need for social change, and he explicitly encouraged moderate liberal reform as a means to make an already good society better. That he did so within an intellectual and political framework that was satisfied with “cautious optimism” was a drawback only for intense social critics; for the academic establishment, merely mentioning the existence of social “class” (even when it was conflated with a sanitized concept social “stratification”) was quite radical enough.

Porter’s life and work were inextricably entangled with the history of Canadian social science and its evolution from the immediate post-World War II world through to the complicated 1960s and into the fragmented and fractured pattern that it now exhibits. In fact, Porter’s masterpiece, *The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada* (1965) marked what is arguably a defining moment in the late twentieth-century evolution of the discipline.

Canadian sociology had previously been pursued mainly within the boundaries of the dominant ideology in Canada. It held that Canada was the next best thing to a “classless” society in which the principal differences among people had more to do with ethnicity, religion and geographic region than with economic status and opportunity—never mind the mode, means and relations of

production and distribution of goods and services. Sociologists, therefore, spent much of their time engaged in policy research or in the creation, in league with anthropologists, of contemporary ethnographies and thematic discussions of questions of culture, family, education, religion and deviant behaviour. They shunned materialist interpretations and especially Marxist accounts of social power. Above all, their conceptual frameworks and their research designs were essentially derivative. They did not think for themselves.

Whereas French-Canadian sociologists, to and about whom Porter and his Anglophone contemporaries had very little to say, owed much to Durkheim and to European scholarship, his English-speaking colleagues seemed mainly to be a regional, if a somewhat backward and bashful adjunct to American sociology. Here, Porter was an innovator, for he insisted that his own work and the work of others take an empirical turn. Although the statistics he employed in *The Vertical Mosaic* and elsewhere seldom got beyond simple arithmetic and rarely ventured near the sophisticated mathematical gymnastics adroitly performed in the USA at that time (Blalock, 1960; Gurr, 1969; Selltitz, Jahoda, Deutsch & Cook, 1965)—all under the benevolent gaze of Abraham Kaplan (1964), merely connecting empirical dots to reveal a picture of society was something of a revelation to Canadian academics.

If Porter did not display dexterity with techniques such as multivariate regression analysis, factor analysis and the numerous tricks of the statistician's trade, he seemed to be sympathetic to the spirit of the behavioural revolution. At the very least, he was disdainful of idealist metaphysics, idle speculation and what C. Wright Mills scorned as "grand theory" (1959, pp. 25-49). Porter wished his work to be evidence-based and he did the best he could.

In some ways, of course, John Porter was not much different from his predecessors. A commitment to the "facts" does not necessarily mean a nimble hand at number crunching, and Porter was not seduced by the elegance of abstract empiricism. He was content to offer simple tables showing such things as who owned what corporations and changes over time in the ethnic origin of people in particular occupations by percentage. He was therefore importing some elements of American sociology without its more sophisticated methods, but only a decade or so after the behavioral revolution had redefined American social science had displaced the style and substance of its older traditions. Even this nudge toward quasi-science, however, was quite enough to shake up his compatriots at least a little.

In pointing Canadian sociology toward the untapped resource of statistical data that might give empirical weight to historical-hermeneutic narratives, Porter eschewed perhaps the only truly innovative model for social theory and research that Canadian social scientists had or might ever produce. That unique contribution was to be found in the neighbouring field of political economy, where Harold Adams Innis, his associates and followers at the University of Toronto had developed an analytical framework for the study of Canadian society and culture which tied national beliefs and behaviour to the far-famed "staples thesis" (Easterbrook & Watkins, 1984). It was the idea that the evolution of Canadian society was a product of the fundamental economic dependence on resource extraction and the resulting patterns of trade, commerce, culture and governance.

Canadian political economy would soon be blended with a house-broken style of Marxian analysis that provided at least a temporarily assertive intellectual thrust toward socialism and nationalism in the classrooms of the better universities in the country, usually under the influence of young scholars who were associated with the “Waffle” movement (also known as the Movement for an Independent Socialist Canada) within the New Democratic Party.

Despite having focused on the study of social class and thereby having inspired many of the junior radicals lurking on the fringes of the sociological establishment, John Porter would have none of it! He had his own political agenda, and he’d had it for decades.

It is sometimes said that John Porter “channeled” British social theorist L. T. Hobhouse (1864-1929) or was at least deeply influenced by the “New Liberalism” in his politics and his sociology, which Hobhouse had pioneered a generation or more before. It embraced the concept of social harmony, rejected *laissez-faire* economics and encouraged an ample social welfare system. Intended as a means to reconcile liberalism and socialism, its “socialist” policies were to be achieved gradually, without the need for class conflict (Seaman, 1978). Porter’s debt to Hobhouse and to Max Weber (1846-1920) who, coincidentally, was born in the same year as the British scholar-politician were combined in his attempt to develop and practice “a type of methodologically sophisticated, ‘scientific’ sociology that rejected the doctrine of value neutrality and advocated a form of ‘engaged practical intellectualism’” (Helses-Hayes, 2009: 831). While some might be perplexed by the notion of a sociologist who was committed to social change being a follower of Weber, who is often considered to be among the strongest proponents of a “value-free” social science, they need not fret. A quick glance at the last few pages of Weber’s most well-known volume, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958), will find ample evidence of his passionate commitment to certain political values and his contemptuous dismissal of others.

Originally inspired by the New Liberal movement during his undergraduate studies at the London School of Economics, Porter was drawn toward liberal-pluralist politics and empirical methodology, and away from broad theoretical concerns especially when they advocated transformative social change. He was a reformer. He wanted the system to work, but he also wanted it to work better. He wanted people to have a fair shot, and to be rewarded according to their abilities and accomplishments. He wished that future generations would not have to endure and to overcome the obstacles that he had encountered and the class prejudice which he had experienced. He thought he could help make it happen.

Despite Porter’s insistence on resisting Marxian categories of analysis, to say nothing of its revolutionary political pretensions, his legacy enabled precisely the sort of scholarship that he academically and politically rejected. There were good reasons why this was the case. First, Porter was enamored of the mission of the public intellectual, the scholar using his expertise to enlighten the attentive public and thus to enhance the public good. This calm, advisory role was available only as long as political debate remained civil and conducted among men of sound judgement and assumed authority. Second, however tentatively he expressed himself and no matter how ideologically constrained his ideology required him to be, he did have the audacity to make social class the dynamic centre of his work. Less cautious readers took his analysis and ran away with it. The genie was out of the bottle.

John Porter stood at the fulcrum of change in Canadian sociology. Before the publication of *The Vertical Mosaic*, the bulk of classic Canadian studies could arguably be included in a single college anthology (Blishen, Jones, Naegele & Porter, 1961). Afterward, not only did the quantity of studies vastly increase, but alternative texts become available (Archibald, 1978; Grayson, 1983). As well, the mantle was quickly picked up by sociologists of a more explicitly leftist frame of mind. Foremost among them was Wallace Clement, whose work on the Canadian corporate elite (1975) and on continental corporate power (1979) both owed and respectfully acknowledged a tremendous debt to John Porter. It was not easily repaid.

In his “Foreword” to *The Canadian Corporate Elite*, John Porter wrote that he had “not known whether the appropriate feeling should have been pleasure, embarrassment or anger when students in meetings would denounce university administrators with a hail of invective and with the admonishment that if they had read my work the truth would be revealed to them and they would cease to be lackeys of plutocratic power” (Clement, 1975, p. ix).

Since John Porter’s frustrated ambition was to become a high-ranking lackey himself, he admits to being “amused” that, just as student radicals were declaring him a hero, a fund-raiser from a private school asked if he could be quoted in a brochure aimed at the idle rich. In time, of course, he realized that both he and his trembling and occasionally vicious upper-level academic associates had little to worry about. After a flourish of fervour, sometimes associated with the importation of American concerns about voting rights and Vietnam and, north of the border, sometimes reflecting rising independentist urgings in Québec, Anglophone radicalism “retreated in our universities, as elsewhere in North America, at a rate which has surprised, and no doubt relieved, those who viewed it with panic and as a permanent feature of academic life” (Clement, 1975, p. x).

Where did it go?

Well, in one case, it went from late adolescent contempt to middle-aged fascination, and we must be grateful to Rick Helmes-Hayes for his change of heart. For others, it squirreled itself away in the universities, became enamored of variations on the postmodern theme, abandoned grand narratives and went to work carving out various niches in the walls of the ivory-cum-brick-mortar-and-concrete towers.

Women’s studies, Native studies, GLBT studies and a rapacious interest in oral history, qualitative research and post-Marxist approaches to the endless analysis of oppression each attracted an audience. All the moral fervour of revolutionary youth, but without the sense of (or even an apparent desire for) revolutionary praxis gained a foothold and, for the fortunate few, allowed access to “tenure track” positions. Unending discourse about discourse, attention to the “gaze” of the “other” and a penchant for seeing things through the infinitely adjustable “lens” of this or that paradigm substituted for actionable theory and practical politics.

I am not (believe me) trying to denigrate or demean the many worthy young (and no longer young) theorists, researchers and writers in and out of the academy who have published excellent pieces in smaller journals such as *Studies in Political Economy* or *Socialist Studies*, taken their

talents to organizations such as the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, joined in trade union, environmental and similar causes, and so on.

I am also not (believe me, again) denigrating any of the wonderful small presses which have taken on the corporate media giants and are sometimes successful in slipping their books into sociological syllabi in colleges and universities across the country. Companies such as Between the Lines and Fernwood keep a steady supply of thematic books and even an occasional introductory text on the market for educators who are not wholly absorbed in four-colour glossy and wholly interchangeable “door-stopper” textbooks. An example that I regularly use in my own introductory course is Joanne Naiman’s *How Society Works* (2012). There are others.

The bulk of Canadian sociology, as it is taught and practiced in Canada is not so heavily committed. Helmes-Hayes does a commendable job of describing and explaining Porter’s effect upon Canadian sociology throughout his career and for a time after his premature departure. What remains to be done is an analysis of the fate of sociology once Porter’s direction had been adjusted by his many followers. Although much of mainstream sociology has recovered from a Porter-induced interest in socioeconomic inequality, it has readjusted to its main task of providing cover for chronic inequities.

The pachyderm in the palace, it seems to me, is technology. The political economists alerted us all to the influence of the “means of production” (technology) upon not only the “relations of production” (class structure), but also every element in our culture. From popular entertainment and abnormal behaviour to religious institutions and family relations, from the labour process to law enforcement, and from the degradation of the natural environment to international money markets, the power of communications technology has altered, profoundly and essentially, what we think, say and do. And, moreover, we cannot be stopped from tweeting about it.

Harold A. Innis (1951) knew something about this. So did his partial protégé Marshall McLuhan (1964), as he probed and poked away at media and messages at his Centre for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto. So, now, do Arthur and Marilouise Kroker as they disseminate some of the most provocative ideas about society through a series of fascinating books and electronic publications on their “C-theory.net” website at their Pacific Centre for Technology and Culture at the University of Victoria.

What remains uncertain is why Porter, with his emphasis on social class, took Canadian sociology in a direction that could have meant something for the future, but which turned out to be mainly a transient phases, after which the promise of a robust sociological critique either returned to past reformist and accommodationist practices or else fragmented into a dozen chic sub-fields that are permitted to serve largely as radical decorative fashion accessories on what remains a liberal-pluralist academic skeleton. (Herbert Marcuse, lest we forget, called this “repressive tolerance” and “repressive desublimation” when applied to Freudian theories of sexual relations; it is equally apt when discussing the ways in which radical sociology is permitted and thus contained in institutions of higher learning.

Helmes-Hayes himself is curiously diffident in his endorsement of Porter’s legacy. He acknowledges that Porter’s work no longer defines either the main interests or the methods of

Canadian sociology. Langlois (2011, pp. 230-231). He also minimizes the contemporary relevance of *The Vertical Mosaic*. Yet, “even today, it remains a source of inspiration for contemporary research, on the condition that—as for all the classic works of sociology—scholars accept Porter’s intentions, and do not linger over the parts of it that have manifestly aged” and, as others have observed, have become anachronistic” (Vallee, 1981). Moreover, even if inadequate attention is paid to his sociology *after* Porter, there is one aspect of the man that elicits a measure of enthusiasm—no doubt reflecting the passion of the Helmes-Hayes himself.

The intellectual acuity needed to keep one foot in science and the other in politics without offending scientific lore about objectivity was tricky enough for Max Weber in the early part of the previous century. It is no less so today, though the problematics have altered as more and more social analysts are admitting or loudly shouting out that objectivity is probably a ruse used by scientists and pseudo-scientists to convince recalcitrant grant agencies that a proposed project merits support, at least partly because it can claim to be disinterested, value-neutral and bias-free.

It is this issue—known in its crassest banality as the “fact-value” dichotomy—that may be the most serious question arising out of this study of Porter the man and Porter the sociologist. The lessons that he embodied, as mediated by Helmes-Hayes, cannot be less than the understanding that all social science is socially constructed and inevitably biased—if only by the fact that our scientific curiosity and our choice of research interests are almost unquestionably provoked and promoted by some psychological or political investment in the outcome of our inquiries. True, we may come down to a final decision depending on the prospects of career advantage and the promise of funds, but the general field in which we find ourselves is seldom entirely accidental or, as I say, motivated by nothing but a yen for intellectual puzzle solving.

In Porter’s case, Helmes-Hayes has provided a persuasive case that psychological and sociological factors pushed Porter toward the study of inequality, and ideological constraints which were imposed by those very factors framed his specific research proposal. The question that is begged is how to apply the lessons of Porter’s life to the current sociological scene.

It is more difficult today to pretend that even a reformed, liberal capitalism (were this remotely possible) could create the circumstances in which we could create a “just society,” as Pierre Trudeau’s 1968 campaign slogan promised. It is also more difficult to believe that the several impending global catastrophes that seem to be plotting to undermine our civilization if not totally ruin the biosphere, are of a kind and a severity that make waiting for dominant elites to bring bright young people into their inner circles of problem solvers just a little futile. What’s more, our major governmental, economic and educational institutions are so deeply invested in neoliberal ideology that prospects for *genuine* reform, never mind social reconstruction and transformation, are quite unwelcome.

So, in an era when the governments of Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and others still besotted with the ideology of neoliberalism, we find innovation largely defined by schemes to transform public sector services into private sector profit machines, all in the alleged interest of efficiency and fiscal responsibility. In Britain, in particular, “social impact bonds” are facilitating the privatization of everything from building affordable housing to rehabilitating criminal offenders. What’s more, empirical measures (number of units constructed,

rates of recidivism) are said to guarantee results within the context of a realistic “business model.”

What would John Porter have thought? What do contemporary liberal social scientists have to say about the commodification of public goods and the commercialization of public services?

The challenge to contemporary intellectuals is to consider matters of social philosophy, to contemplate criteria of good and evil, to ponder the ethics of making health, education, welfare and even national security subject to contractual relations between public authorities and the lowest private sector bidder. We have already travelled some distance down this dangerous road and it is time for those capable of waking from an ideological stupor to point clearly to the implications of current trends in public policy.

L. T. Hobhouse pointed out one way. John Porter took a few steps in that direction. The question is whether there are enough people in academia or in public policy positions to take a few more. And, if they do, will the innovations that they encourage and for which they provide evidentiary support successfully achieve any or all of their objectives.

In the meantime, the question of liberal-pluralist vs. radical-structural theory can wait until the role of public intellectual is resuscitated and restored. A word of warning though: it is arguable that John Porter’s road to the pinnacle of an already productive career was blocked by his error in asking the wrong question. Those who would follow in his footsteps and march decisively forward from there should remember that he was an iconic figure, and yet his ambitions were still thwarted. What would happen to lesser careerists bears concern.

Of course, since Prime Minister Harper cancelled the long-form Census, the question might be moot, since there will be much less aggregate data upon which to build complementary empirical answers to our fundamentally normative questions. If nothing else, John Porter supported reality-based government, and that is not the most popular model at the moment.

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