

*Book Review*

AN ACADEMIC SKATING ON THIN ICE. By Peter Worsley. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books. 2008. 296 pp. ISBN 978-1-84545-370-1 (cloth)

Peter Worsley's recently published book *An Academic Skating on Thin Ice* is a cogent first-person account of the intellectual life of one of the 20th century's most important scholars. Among his many major contributions, Worsley became known internationally for having brought the concept of "le tiers monde" into the English lexicon as part of his influential explication in the book *The Third World: A Vital New Force in International Affairs* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1964). He is equally recognized for having honed the concept of "cargo cults" with the similarly best-selling *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of 'Cargo' Cults in Melanesia* (MacGibbon and Kee 1957). Both of these books were later republished in new English editions as well as being translated into other languages. Among his other books are *Inside China* (A. Lane 1975), *The Three Worlds: Culture and World Development* (University of Chicago Press 1984) and his important overview *Marx and Marxism* recently out in a new revised edition (Routledge 2002). In the late 1980s, he edited *On the Brink: Nuclear Proliferation & the Third World* (Third World Communications 1987). He was interested in the topic of indigenous knowledge very early on, when he did doctoral research in Groote Eylandt, Australia. He later wrote the two wide-ranging books on the topic of knowledge: *Knowledges: What Different Peoples Make of the World* (Profile Books 1997) and *Knowledges: Culture, Counterculture, Subculture* (New Press 1997).

Having been taught anthropology at Cambridge University by Reo Fortune, G.I. Jones and E. E. Evans-Pritchard (visiting from Oxford), Peter Worsley received a bachelor's degree in 1947, sooner than normal as part of "Wartime Regulations" (p. 55). Despite his lively description of his connections with other students and faculty in various institutions throughout his life, Worsley also explains how when he was an undergraduate at Cambridge students were socially divided by year, College, and academic rank to the extent that "It's significant that of the eleven people who were Communists in Cambridge in the late 1930s/early 1940s who recently wrote about their Cambridge days, I knew only one of them" (p. 24). Later on in the book, however, we hear about his path crossing with scores of individuals who were similarly involved in endeavours such as the founding of *New Left Review* which, he recounts, for a time became "more than a mere journal, but a movement, with a score of discussion groups across the country and an office in Soho, complete with coffee bar" (p. 131).

Worsley was recognized early on by his professors to be a leading thinker. For example, he was one of two winners of the Curl Prize from the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1955 for an article that was an abridged version of his MA thesis (p. 113). However, his participation in Communist politics and his own commitment to social justice in the face of a world—including an academic one—largely controlled by capitalism, colonial relations, racism, and

sexism prevented him from taking part in opportunities that were easier to access for other research stars of his generation. About his first interview to work with the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, for example, he recounts:

The research post was for research into race relations in Southern Rhodesia. ‘What is your attitude toward the colour bar?’ asked the Colonial Office man. I said that I was opposed to it on scientific grounds, on ethical grounds and just about any other grounds that I could think of. Needless to say, as Max told me on the phone next day, I didn’t get the job. But, he said, he had just been appointed to a new Chair of Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester, and would I be interested in applying for a Research Studentship? [pp. 69-70]

A few years hence, as with academics in the US and other countries he found that

the Cold War was still with us. I applied again for a post with the RLI, and this time, Max told me by phone, I had got the appointment, but MI5 had put a block on it. The viciousness and omnipresence of the Cold War is hard to recall from this distance in time. [p. 77]

Many years later, he tried again with a similar result:

I now made another application to the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute. This time, Max informed me, I was indeed appointed. But MI5 stepped in to veto this. My anthropological achievements counted for nothing. After ten years studying the subject, and Africa, it was obvious that I would never be allowed to do fieldwork again in territories controlled by the Colonial Office. [pp. 125-126]

He, like others, was also restricted in where he could gain permits to do research as a doctoral candidate. Ready with supplies for long-term fieldwork and a Research Studentship from the Australian National University:

I went down to Territories to collect my entry permit for New Guinea—a formality, I thought. ‘Not for you’ was the response of the official I saw. MI5 had struck again. I had been banned once more, from another continent. [p. 83]

Worsley’s politics also propelled him into jobs in sociology rather than anthropology, first at the University of Hull and then at the University of Manchester. By his own account, Worsley worked very hard to educate himself in sociology and contribute to building strong departments. He recounts his memory of the appointment drama at Hull:

Had I been on the appointment committee for the sociology job, I would not have appointed Worsley, because there were five other good candidates, all with training in sociology [. . .] I remember looking out into the Front Quadrangle and thinking, ‘If they appoint me, I’ll dedicate myself to developing a really strong department’. They did appoint me, and I did what I had promised myself. [p. 128]

Indeed, with a group of colleagues he produced two very successful and influential texts in 1970: *Introducing Sociology* (Penguin; later reissued in new editions as *The New Introducing Sociology*) and *Modern Sociology: Introductory Readings* (Penguin; with a later issue *New Modern Sociology Readings*).

Worsley also reminds us throughout the book of the violence of struggle and conflict. In South Africa, just before apartheid is written into law, Worsley approaches the Communist Party and is shown the reality of the shantytowns by the journalist Ruth First who “was eventually blown to bits by a letter bomb sent by South African Intelligence to Maputo” (p. 68). Worsley often interweaves his own memories of events with printed sources—those that he had read in the time period of which he is speaking and those that he consulted later on. In some instances, it is a case of him having accessed new information about events that occurred decades ago that had only recently come to light. His book is therefore both a memoir and a reanalysis of the social relationships, ideological battles, and economic and political forces that were at play in contexts he participated in and/or thought about at different points in his lifetime. One example is his discussion of the Mau Mau rebellion and the camps where the government detained thousands of Kikuyu. He had spent time in Kenya and other countries in that part of Africa during WWII as a member of the 2/6th King’s African Rifles (p. 36). He notes that

when I returned from Australia in 1954, it was very difficult indeed to unearth what was going on in the camps, though we knew it included tortures every bit as horrific as the atrocities which the British public were told was a monopoly of the Mau Mau. [p. 119]

Further, he writes “it was not until September 1955 when more and more leaks, many from people who had played major roles in the camps themselves, became a flood” (p. 120). However, as with so many events that occurred during his lifetime, he draws our attention to additional information that came to light later on: “half a century had to elapse before two American scholars, Caroline Elkins and David Anderson, were able to document the details of the atrocities” (p. 120).

His ever-present awareness of inequality is never hidden from view, even on the last pages of the book where he lets his readers know that among his current leisure activities is his weekly visit to

a West End [in London] pub, which would be too expensive for the one in five people over fifty who live below the poverty line or the seven million who may have bus-passes but have no access to public transport. [pp. 273-274]

I encourage readers of *New Proposals* to follow Worsley’s self-described journey. Those who have crossed paths with him, or the situations and institutions he discusses, will undoubtedly recognize much. Those who have not will learn a great deal about the real-world contexts in which fields such as anthropology and sociology emerged in the post-World War II period not only in the England where Worsley taught at the University of Hull and the University of Manchester, but also throughout the world where he conducted research. He also landed in a number of locations as a visiting professor, including what was then Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in Montreal; the Colegio de México in Mexico City; the CUNY Graduate Center and New School for Social Research in New York City.

Throughout this account, we are shown an individual who was a voracious reader, an indefatigable researcher and writer, a brilliant public intellectual and institution builder. In a period of intense corporatization of universities and marginalization of critical research, his story is a good reminder of both earlier struggles and of the legacy of steadfastness that we have in academics such as Peter Worsley.

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