Phenomenological Sociology: Experience and Insight in Modern Society

John McNamara


This work is an exploration of the roots and merits of the largely neglected field of Phenomenological investigation within sociology. It extols the virtues of employing this strand of theorization in the study of modern, contemporary society. Ferguson examines the emergence and trajectory of the evolution of Phenomenological thought, its significance within the field of classical social theory, as well as its intrinsic value in relation to current sociological investigation in this wide-ranging and thought provoking book.

Ferguson lauds the experiential reliance to which Phenomenology defers and highlights how the experiential dimension of Phenomenology is elementary to and reflected in Sociology. Further, he advocates an inter-disciplinary countenance when approaching issues for research that embraces the Phenomenological perspective. The result is a comprehensive and informative account of the rise and development of Phenomenology combined with an incisive examination of its influence on classical sociology. A compelling argument is built upon this study, outlining the persistent value of Phenomenology in the field of historical sociology and examinations of contemporary social life.

The book’s introduction is dominated by an assessment of inter-disciplinary atomization. Ferguson considers the increased level of specialization and hermeticism within Philosophy and Sociology, along with other factors, to have inadvertently led to the mutual scepticism and incomprehension between these two closely related disciplines. As well as outlining the various reasons for the academic status quo, Ferguson counsels us on the merits of a sociological reading of philosophy as well as a philosophical reading of sociology. He terms this as “constructive intertextuality” and believes that such an approach can only benefit scholars of each discipline and hasten insight into the fundamental questions that dominate academic investigation. The author does not make any pretensions about the originality of this thesis. What he achieves instead is an insightful, authoritative and undeniably convincing argument as to the feasibility and value of the Phenomenological perspective within sociology.

Broadly, this book is divided into two sections. The first section charts the development of Phenomenology from its inception through Edmund Husserl to the later modifications enacted by Martin Heidegger among many others. Ferguson’s assessment of Phenomenology and its origins is explored through an account of the innovations in the spheres of science and art, among other fields of human endeavour, which hastened the onset of an explication of the nature of human perception. The author focuses on feelings of “astonishment” that he considers symptomatic of what he calls the “shock of modernity” resulting in an inevitable progression from Cartesian dualism to a consideration of the subject/object dynamic of consciousness.

In the second section of this book Ferguson catalogues what he considers to be the Phenomenological influence on the development and rise of sociology as well as elements of sociological thought that are symptomatic of the Phenomenological perspective. Phenomenology, considered as it is - in Ferguson’s words – “the philosophy of modernity”
is uniquely positioned to complement the fundamental issues facing sociology. A treatment of Alfred Schutz as a kind of inter-disciplinary, theoretical bridge-builder, who synergized Husserl's work with elementary Weberian thought, sets the scene for a rigorous account of the exchange and interaction of Phenomenological and sociological ideas. The author proceeds to pinpoint recurrent, pertinent themes such as “embodiment” (or disembodiment) and temporal perspective in the midst of the most canonical works of Sociology. It is here that he practically unpacks his case for the consistent value of the Phenomenological perspective and its practical application through its Sociological implementation. The final lines of this book include the assertion that “Phenomenology is the most radical development of humanism; an attempt to assimilate the unfamiliar to the self-transparency of experience” (212), advancing his case for the relevance of his subject-matter and further identifying the context and arena in which it is to be best utilized.

Though emphatic in its contentions, this work does not read like a treatise. It is, in itself a sound manifesto, but also, beyond that, it is rooted in a forensic and extensive overview of the subject-matter in its entirety. It is more an explication than an endorsement. Ferguson is a terrifically competent guide through this topic and provides a very fine outline of this inter-disciplinary, reciprocal relationship. The book remains engaging through a sometimes inevitably dense subject matter and manages to comprehensively address the issue at hand despite the fact that it is restricted to just over two hundred pages. Unavoidably, certain issues or points are raised that beg further analysis or explication. Also, though excellent in his appraisal of the compatibility of Phenomenology and sociology, the author is somewhat scant in addressing the possible shortcomings of such an alignment. The question of the differing motives of the sociologist and his philosophical counterpart receives less attention. The issue of sociology depending upon what is essentially, a philosophical methodology as well as the reality that sociology seeks to be definitive and explanatory while philosophy broadly surveys the transcendental and metaphysical realms cannot be without practical concerns. Some further exploration of these potential problems with regard to their reconciliation may have been helpful. Overall, the author manages to be quite comprehensive, absolutely authoritative and an excellent advocate of this methodology. This work is of value to anyone interested in social theory.

John McNamara: University College, Cork