Suggestion Theory Across the Disciplines

The History of Communication Research Before Communication Research

Jefferson D. Pooley

Muhlenberg College

pooley@muhlenberg.edu

jeffpooley.com

Suggestion Theory Across the Disciplines: The History of Communication Research Before Communication Research

Jefferson D. Pooley, Muhlenberg College, pooley@muhlenberg.edu

February 2021

PATRICK PARSONS' MONOGRAPH "The Lost Doctrine" is a remarkable work of scholarly retrieval. Parsons has demonstrated that *suggestion*, as a protean theory of influence, was braided into early twentieth century U.S. social science. The case is made with rigor and care, largely through close readings of the published literature. Suggestion, he informs us, was everywhere—and yet there's no trace of the label-*cum*-theory in the field's historiography. Among other things, "The Lost Doctrine" is an indictment, a thrilling one, of the sub-field devoted to the history of media and communication research. Parsons' evidence is hidden in plain JSTOR sight; he lingered in the digital stacks, doing the work of reading that we'd all neglected. The irony, not lost on Parsons, is that he is revising the revisionists. While not defending the old hypodermic-needle straw man, he shows that in our rush to topple the received history—the self-serving powerful-to-limited-effects storyline—we revisionists over-corrected. We were right that no one believed in magic bullets, but we left it there—and stopped reading. Parsons' achievement is to recover, from the post-war myth-makers *and* the "new history" revisionists, a major current of communication thought.

"The Lost Doctrine" is among the finest works on the intellectual history of media studies published in the last decade. I read the monograph as an appeal, politely issued, to revisit the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century scholarship on communication topics. Parsons' suggestion, if I can use that word, is not merely about the period, but also the question of historiographical temper. He is asking, by his example, for historians of communication research to linger more deliberately, more patiently, on the words that past scholars actually used. The point, on this approach, is to reconstruct thought worlds with sensitivity to their alien contexts. The implicit standpoint is one of interpretive charity, an openness to surprise. Paul Ricoeur has famously distinguished between two hermeneutic modes, the "recollection of meaning" and the "exercise of suspicion." Parsons has worked in the former mode, in notable contrast to the demystifying spirit of "new history" revisionism. The unmasking style has its time and purpose, but comes with a muckraker's indifference to thesis-diverting meanings.

I hope that the small community of field historians accepts Parsons' invitation. In that spirit, I want to pick up a thread from "The Lost Doctrine," concerning the discipline of sociology. There is an ambiguity in the monograph around social psychology, the scholarly domain that, in Parsons' account, is the main vessel for suggestion theory. The monograph treats social psychology, for the most part, as a subfield of the psychology discipline. At the same time, Parsons includes the work of self-identified sociologists like Albion Ross under the social-psychology umbrella. The implication is that Ross and other sociologists crossed into a neighboring discipline—an impression confirmed by the monograph's predominant orientation to the context of disciplinary psychology.

But the reality is that sociologists had their own robust branch of social psychology. The pair of 1908 founding texts that Parsons mentions, William McDougall's *An Introduction to Social Psychology* and Ross's *Social Psychology*, are the fountainhead to two distinctive traditions. Sociology, at the time, was barely differentiated from its political economy parent, while psychology remained in the early stages of its breakaway from philosophy. It is true that the boundaries between the two social psychologies were porous through the 1910s and 1920s, and there was a brief, foundation-sponsored rapprochement after World War II. But the sociological and psychological variants of social psychology were, and were understood to be, rival traditions. To this day, the much smaller community of sociological social psychologists maintains a distinctive literature and pantheon of theorists. Among them is Herbert Blumer, an important figure in Parsons' account that I will return to.

"The Lost Doctrine" does not distinguish sufficiently between these two traditions, with the result that disciplinary psychology is the implied backdrop for most of the monograph. The spine of Parsons' story is about psychology and psychologists, with detours— mostly unsigned—into the work of Robert Park, Frederick Lumley, and Blumer. Sociology is both present and absent in the account.

This matters for two reasons. The first is that the distinctive treatment of suggestion in the work of sociologists gets underplayed. With Park, then Blumer, in the lead, Chicago sociologists developed an approach to social life—media and communication very much included—under the banner of "collective behavior." Suggestion and suggestibility were indeed animating concepts for Park and Blumer, and remained so into the postwar years in classic texts like Kurt and Gladys Lang's 1963 *Collective Dynamics*. But the sociologists' concern was with the vicissitudes of social solidarity and disorder, not the phenomenon of interpersonal influence as such. This tradition—this alternative incubation of suggestion theory—deserves to be drawn out too.

The second reason to bring sociology into the foreground is to illuminate Parsons' account of suggestion's postwar eclipse. In the immediate post-World War II years, Blumer was a spirited critic of the survey-based opinion research that Paul Lazarsfeld and his allies had successfully, if improbably, established at the discipline's center. Here the story descends into the trenches of intra-disciplinary rivalry, but it's worth sketching to fill in some of the sociology story.

Collective Behavior

In the early 1920s, the University of Chicago's Park established a new sociological domain, which he called "collective behavior," although its roots go back to his 1904 dissertation *Masse und Publikum*. Though Park was not the first to use the English-language phrase, his definition of the concept was widely accepted by sociologists well into the 1940s. He gathered together a variety of social phenomena under the "collective behavior" banner, formations as varied as crowds, social movements, religious sects, public opinion, rumor, and fashion. Crucially, he and other Chicago sociologists stressed that collective behavior was not merely disruptive, but also generative of new institutions and social solidarities.

All the way back to his dissertation, Park had leaned on Gabriel Tarde's distinction between the crowd and public, though with a cheerier cast than the Frenchman. In a nuanced exegesis of figures like David Hume, Adam Smith, and Tarde, Park identified an elemental social process he named "reciprocal suggestion." Hume called it "sympathy," Tarde "imitation," fellow American sociologist Franklin Giddings "likemindedness," and so on, but all these notions (some more sophisticated than others, added Park) invoke the "suggestive influence exerted by people on each other." For Park the crowd was the social concentrate of this reciprocity, in which the individual dissolved without trace into the collective. The crowd was an extreme, and therefore illustrative, expression of the social logic. When two or more people come in contact, he wrote, a "circular process" of mutual suggestibility gets triggered.

Park's discussion of reciprocity position the public as the crowd's more reasonable relative. Unlike the crowd, the public is fractious and argumentative; its unity consists in its collective *attention* on common issues. The public, Park wrote, is grounded in a second social process, the drive to distinguish and differentiate ourselves from others; he called this "secondary reciprocity," as a contrast to the primary, imitative type that generates crowds.

By 1921, installed full-time at Chicago, Park used collective behavior as the anchor of *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*—the

remarkable, thousand-page textbook he co-authored with Ernest Burgess. By the mid-1930s, his student Blumer was refining the area of study, with his typical definitional precision. Suggestion and the European crowd psychology remained, in Blumer's major 1939 codification, an outsized presence, at least in his elaborate, four-stage theory of crowd emergence. In keeping with the Chicago tradition, however, the accent was on emergent social solidities: The crowd's "collective ecstasy," Blumer wrote, is a "potential device for the emergence of new forms of conduct and personality." More importantly, Blumer was keen to stress two other collective formations, the mass and (following Park and Tarde) the public. He admitted that masses might be occasionally whipped into crowd-like behavior, by "excited" radio appeals and overt propaganda. But Blumer counterposed the suggestible crowd, a waning phenomenon anyway, to the mass and the public. In the crowd "spectacular suggestion predominate[s]," while in publics "contentions are challenged and become subject to criticisms." Most fundamentally, Blumer was concerned with social order: How new kinds of collective behavior are "built up and crystallized into fixed social forms."

The postwar fate of collective behavior as a domain of sociological study, inclusive of media questions, is an as-yet untold story. Blumer's own shift of attention to what he was, by the late 1960s, calling symbolic interactionism is a likely factor in the tradition's decline. American sociologists' broader relinquishing of media questions to the new organized communication discipline is another probable cause. The heir to collective behavior is the study of social movements, which—in a return of the repressed—has in recent decades absorbed media dynamics back into its analytic toolkit.

The point of briefly tracing the Park-Blumer approach is to gesture at suggestion theory's distinctive incorporation into sociology, in which the relevant backdrop wasn't, for example, behaviorism or Gestaltist rationalism. Parsons, to be fair, deftly summarizes Blumer's early 1930s Payne Fund work, and nods to Park and Blumer's reflections on mass and public. But the monograph takes disciplinary psychology as its primary frame of contextual reference. The two disciplines' joint custody of social psychology goes mostly unflagged, with the result that the psychological backcloth is stretched too far.

"The Lost Doctrine" 's account of suggestion theory's decline is both rich and overdetermined. The discussion of Carl Hovland's "linguistic pivot" is brilliant and revealing—a welcome corrective to the existing literature's bug-eyed fixation on Lazarsfeld's Bureau. My own hunch is that the early postwar shifts in psychology that Parsons documents might, with care, be knitted to broader developments in what, by the early 1950s, was a proudly proclaimed,

cross-disciplinary "behavioral sciences" movement, forged out of shared World War II service. I will just register the valence—the ideological temperature—of this period, with its cocksure scientism and choose-the-West assurance. Parsons picks up on this mood, including in Hovland's language choice—and he cites J. Michael Sproule's convincing account of propaganda analysis's rapid wartime ebbing in these terms. The problem with suggestion theory, for postwar social scientists writing on communication topics, was that it positioned media as a domestic threat. Consider, too, that many of these same social scientists, throughout the 1950s, were working for the national security state to refine overseas propaganda campaigns. Suggestion theory, like propaganda analysis, had a disqualifying impertinence: It failed to distinguish between good and bad persuasion.

One last note about Park, Blumer, and the collective behavior tradition. Speaking of impertinence, Blumer loudly called out (in a 1948 ASS address, among other venues) the a-sociological sins of survey research in the Lazarsfeld mold. As a leading representative of a Chicago tradition then in decline, he mounted a rearguard attack through the mid-1950s on the variables sociology that, through Lazarsfeld and many others, had captured the discipline's center. With this unspoken backdrop, Blumer's pre-war writings on the mass, the crowd, and suggestibility earned him a prominent place in the ignominious fraternity of "mass society theory." The putative theory, a Cold War pejorative, was used to assign contemporary disputants to a discredited past. Blumer and the other mass society theorists were lumped together, in Elihu Katz and Lazarsfeld's 1955 *Personal Influence*, as adherents to a since-surpassed, powerful-effects naïveté. I mention this subplot to reinforce the point that attending to the sociology side of the house might enrich Parsons' account of how suggestion theory was lost.

Parsons has done us all a great service. The monograph is superb—a model of careful scholarship and close reading. The next step should be to pick up the other disciplinary paths, sociology included. Suggestion theory is a boundary object in Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer's sense—robust enough to travel around, and plastic enough to fit local disciplinary contexts. So let's take up Parsons' invitation and follow it wherever it led.

Conclusion

The great challenge of writing the history of U.S. communication research is that there was, until the 1940s, no such thing as communication research. There was, instead, social scientific reflection on the topic of communication. Well into the 1930s, the mainline social sci-

ences were themselves in a soupy state of emergence. So the historian of thought on communication faces a daunting task. She has to comb through it all: the psychological treatises, the proto-sociologies, the SSRC reports, the social problems textbooks, and the self-promotional musings of PR hacks. The vastness of the literature isn't the main problem. The issue is that thinking about media and communication is stitched into works on apparently unrelated topics, often in fleeting mention. The redeeming fact for projects like Parsons' is that full-text searching isolates lexical needles in PDF haystacks.

But then the work of contextualizing beckons—the task of situating scholars and their research in their intellectual time and place. Here the historian of communication thought turns, as Parsons has done adeptly, to the rich store of secondary literature on the history of social science. But the task is too large, if the goal is to give each disciplinary context its historical due. A further wrinkle is that the historians of social science—the would-be context-providers—tend to downplay the media-related bits of their stories. They are, after all, historians of sociology, of psychology, and on down the line.

In a way that Parsons nicely brings out, the mid-century storytelling around limited effects—so avidly taken up as an origin myth—has had the effect of blotting out most of the pre-World War II reflection on communication (unless it took place in a converted Newark brewery). So the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries still feel uncharted. Parsons' lost doctrine is in fact a vivid proof, in its sense of ex nihilo revelation.

By necessity of scope, the monograph is focused most on disciplinary psychology. It does an admirable job of placing suggestion's uptake in that discipline's intellectual surroundings. The sociology strands, as I have tried to suggest, deserve closer inspection. The same is true of political science, which in these same decades was swept by disenchanted realism and democratic doubt, much of it embroidered with crowd psychology and the fear of popular suggestibility.

We won't ever close the hermeneutic frontier. The next best thing is to foreground the limits of our projects, to admit that we're sure that we're leaving lots of the story out. This suggestion violates the norm of authorial omniscience, and may well draw more scrutiny from reviewer #2. But typescript humility of this sort has the character of an invitation, to continue the work that remains unfinished.