
James W. Carey and Communication Research: Reputation at the University's Margins. Jefferson D. Pooley. New York: Peter Lang, 2016. 234 pp. \$52.95 pbk. \$94.95 hbk.

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Communications scholar James W. Carey (1934-2006) is well-known in media studies, but little known outside of the field. This contrast puzzles Jefferson D. Pooley,

Carey's last PhD student, and furnishes him with the rationale for a lucid, probing, and sure-footed meditation on that most elusive of subjects: academic reputation.

Pooley's book is, he freely admits, not a full-scale biography. Pooley quotes sparingly from Carey's correspondence and says little about Carey's 14-year tenure at Columbia University (1992-2006), during which Carey established the PhD program in communications in which I currently teach. Even so, Pooley has much to say about Carey's life and times. Diagnosed with a heart ailment as a child, Carey grew up in a tight-knit working class neighborhood in Providence, Rhode Island, that was "bound by talk, shared struggle, and a common [Irish Catholic] religious-ethnic identity." Homeschooled until ninth grade, Carey obtained a full disability scholarship to the University of Rhode Island. Carey's never-published University of Illinois dissertation took its primary inspiration from the structural-functionalist sociological theory of Talcott Parsons (the Parsonian god-word "system" appears 3 times in its title). Upon graduation, Carey obtained a teaching position at Illinois, sparing him the hazards of the academic job market, a circumstance that probably helps explain Carey's low-key approach to graduate training and disdain for premature professionalism.

Running through Pooley's narrative is an eye-opening account of the making of the "impossibly eloquent" essays in *Communication as Culture* (1989), the only book Carey published. Yet Pooley's main quarry is neither the merits of these essays as history, a contested topic, nor the literary devices that explain the "sheer beauty" of their prose. Rather, Pooley hones in on the "dynamics of reputation and relative field prestige."

In assessing Carey's influence, Pooley is less interested in the universe of academics who write about communications—a large and diverse group—than in the tiny guild to which Pooley belongs: namely, academics who specialize in "communication research." No other communications scholar, Pooley flatly declares, has been more honored posthumously within this guild. The "key" to Carey's reputation, in Pooley's view, was his ability, as a "*roving ventriloquist*" for communication researchers (italics in the original), to appropriate for them the insights of luminaries whom they might otherwise never have encountered. Built atop a "motley cluster" of "barely compatible, legitimacy-starved skills training traditions," communication research as Carey found it was an academic ghetto that, by virtue of its marginality, gave Carey the "hermeneutic license" to trade on the "reputational lucre" of "higher-status thought." Like the cultural milieu chronicled in the pop song "Hotel California"—Pooley quips, in one of the book's many memorable aperçus—the field was the academic equivalent of a black hole: "ideas flow in, but they can never leave." Among the subjects of Carey's "disciplinary story-telling" were the sociologist Talcott Parsons, the economist Harold Innis, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, and the philosophers John Dewey and Richard Rorty.

The ideas Carey popularized fenced off an interpretative domain distinct from both the arid positivism of social-survey research and the sectarian orthodoxy of Marxism. Carey called this domain "cultural studies"—a concept similar to, yet distinct from, the Gramscian cultural studies tradition of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall. Williams and Hall asked how "exploitative societies" produced consent among the exploited; Carey asked, instead, in a discernibly Parsonian spirit, how the "miracle of

social life” was “pulled off.” The “main motif” of Carey’s answer to this question, in Pooley’s view, was a communitarian critique of American public life that revolved around the opposition between a *ritual* view of culture, which Carey admired, and a rival *transmission* (or “transportation”) view, which he did not.

The most influential example of Carey’s “raconteurial license” was his popularization of the then-novel claim that in the 1920s, the journalist Walter Lippmann squared off against the philosopher John Dewey in an epochal debate over the merits of democracy. Lippmann the anti-democrat, Carey contended, wrongly defended a representational theory of public opinion that unfairly privileged elites; Dewey the pro-democrat, in contrast, correctly rested public opinion in open-ended discussion. The existence of such a debate would come to be widely accepted among communications scholars, at least in part because “the low-status discipline was notably bereft of, and therefore impressed by, imported erudition.” Unlike most of Carey’s ideas, it was also picked up high-status academics such as the historian Christopher Lasch. In one sense, this is unfortunate, since Pooley, following his colleagues Sue Curry Jansen and Michael Schudson, debunks the idea that such a debate ever took place. Dewey hugely admired Lippmann, and both Lippmann and Dewey were democrats, even if they differed on certain relatively minor matters of perspective. Carey’s most influential contribution to the wider world of scholarship, in short, was wrong.

Carey’s ideas, right or wrong, were but one reason he has proved so influential. Urbane yet unpretentious, Carey offered graduate students a “tweedy, high-minded alternative” to the “professional social scientist’s cross-tabulated careerism.” The idea that communication research might be a “discipline” was, for Carey, little more than an administrative nicety. Unconfined by a particular method or corpus of ideas, communication researchers should embark on “cross-disciplinary foraging.” Pooley’s fine book—at once a contribution to the sociology of knowledge, intellectual history, and communication research—is a compelling tribute to the enduring value of a legendary teacher’s advice.
