NAOMI CREUTZFELDT, MARC MASON and KIRSTEN MCCONNACHIE (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Socio-Legal Theory and Methods*. Oxon: Routledge, 2020, pp. 442, ISBN 9781138592902, £190 (hbk).

The *Routledge Handbook of Socio-Legal Theory and Methods* (hereafter, ‘*Handbook*’) is different. The editors set out their goals in the introductory chapter: they choose not to get lost in tedious definitional debates – is the proper term law and society, law in society, the sociology of law, or law and sociology? And so on. They do note, however, that ‘[a]t its broadest, the field of socio-legal studies might be defined as a way of seeing, of recognising the mutually constitutive relationship between law and society’ (p. 4) and that socio-legal studies (hereafter ‘SLS’) has been ‘a magpie discipline’ (p. 6). Given the sheer variety of topics and approaches that could fall under such a definition, they instead choose to focus on the ‘*doing*’ of SLS. There are plenty of texts on theory; but few telling what ‘socio-legal projects look like from the inside’ (p. 5). This is meant to be a handbook which is practical.

And so what we get is diversity and variety, practicality and personal reflection. Of the 28 chapters, two-thirds have women as authors or co-authors; and there are contributions from scholars at different stages in their career: from PhD students to early and mid-career academics, to more renowned scholars. The aim is to give readers a sense of the broad spectrum of SLS. The *Handbook* is divided into three sections: ‘approaching socio-legal studies’, ‘disciplinary and theoretical relationships’ and ‘methodological choices’, with each section roughly having 10 chapters each.

‘Approaching socio-legal studies’ contains chapters about the history and development of SLS (Creutzfeldt, Menkel-Meadow), and then practical matters that all socio-legal scholars face – so (among others) there are chapters on the process of conducting socio-legal research (Webley), the uses and abuses of SLS (Menkel-Meadow), ethics (Brooks), impact (Murray), the process of writing (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos) and doing theory (Davies). For myself, I would have appreciated a more in-depth and analytical discussion of SLS, and some of the tensions that pervade it (e.g., between obscurity and relevance, or scholarship and impact; between disciplinary cohesiveness and the desire for the richness of interdisciplinarity). Creutzfeldt’s chapter in particular on the development of SLS in the US and UK attempts to cover some of this: it looks at the institutionalisation of SLS, and then the paths that individual scholars took. But it is tentative, and left me wanting more – it lacked the depth of (say) Patricia Ewick and
Austin Sarat’s short but useful survey of the field of law and society (Ewick and Sarat, 2015). I look forward to Creutzfeldt’s forthcoming book.

‘Disciplinary and theoretical relationships’ has chapters exploring the way in which SLS scholars understand and have made use of different disciplines. Thus, there are chapters on (among others) anthropology (McConnachie), social psychology (Hollander-Blumoff), geography (Layard), feminist theory (Hunter) and intersectionality (Skeet). Chapters from this section overlap with those in the last section on method. This is unsurprising, because to some extent, a discipline is defined by its method. All that said, some chapters in this seem to be far more about method than discipline. Anleu and Mack’s chapter on law and sociology, for example, is more about their (important) work on observational work in courts – but we learn very little about law and sociology and their fraught relationship with each other. What distinguishes the best chapters in this section is their willingness to explore the core problems of other disciplines and their interconnections with law. Craven’s chapter on SLS and economics, for instance, is not another dreary foray into law and economics, but gives the reader a sophisticated discussion of the development of economics and economic sociology as disciplines, and how they have enriched or can enrich studies of legal phenomena. McConnachie’s discussion of law and anthropology notes some of the advantages (a focus on fieldwork, highly reflexive) and disadvantages (often marginalised and devalued, time-consuming) of anthropology as a discipline, then supplements this with a case study of her own anthropological research of a refugee camp.

Chapters in the ‘methodological choices’ section focus on questions of method. Among others, there are chapters on archival work (Seal and Neale), narrative (Nurse), legal aesthetics (Giddens) and researching online activity (Stremlau and Gagliardone). Some chapters are far more granular than others. Kirkham and O’Loughlin’s chapter on content analysis of judicial decisions, for instance, goes into some detail about coding, and the problems of coding judgments. Other chapters are perhaps less detailed (e.g., Farrand on intellectual property and process tracing) and more reflexive about the importance of method (see in particular Giddens’ thoughtful chapter). In part this stems from the method being used: the more granular tend to be those using positivist methods (Kirkham and O’Loughlin, Yesberg and Bradford on experiments in criminal justice contexts, Jay on legal epidemiology and family justice).

There is a strong emphasis throughout the book on personal experience. Many, perhaps most, chapters have an element of personal reflection. McConnachie’s chapter ends with the sobering conclusion that interdisciplinarity is great in principle – potentially offering new ways of seeing, but is a high risk option in terms of a career strategy – the researcher risks being seen as a dabbler and not belonging to either discipline. Cloatre and Cowan’s chapter ruefully discusses the problem of interdisciplinarity in relation to publication. Brooks’ chapter concludes with the view that ethics, on the whole, are there to protect the institution and not the researcher. Murray discusses how her research on stop and search was subject to the ebbs and flows of politics. These are hard experiences that many SLS researchers have to face. One problem with the emphasis on the personal is that it threatens to become more about the trees and less about the woods – about what connects all these approaches together. But maybe nothing does.
So, on the whole, a mixed bag, and a little expensive, at almost 200 pounds (although on Amazon, a lot less). The Handbook does not promise to be comprehensive and it is not. It is a book for the curious and interested to dip into, and (for the most part) to be happily surprised and become better informed by. There is some unevenness in the chapters, but that is to be expected from any large edited collection.

I came away from the Handbook with some ambivalence. It is like reading old (and even some present) discussions of the UK constitution in which coherence comes primarily from history: it is useful but not entirely satisfactory. The impression is of a strand or strands of research which work against ‘doctrinal’ scholarship; of knowledge which is accreted, in fits and starts; but a rather limited sense of how this all fits together, if at all. In fairness, it is worth noting, that each chapter does have a further reading section; and Menkel-Meadows raises the question of whether or not there should be a SLS ‘canon’, but lacked the space to develop this further.

Maybe this ambivalence is uncalled for. Perhaps what we see in the Handbook is similar to what it is often said of sociology as a discipline – fragmented and lacking in cohesion. But as Alejandro Portes has argued, it is better to see sociology as a discipline of Mertonian theories of the middle range:

‘the “middle range” is all there is. This is no intermediate stage to the arrival of the final synthesis, for the latter will never happen or will simply repeat the errors of the past. Instead, it is at this limited level where theory really pays off, by entering into a dialogue with empirical facts, organizing them and being, in turn, modified by them. Today, sociology has no grand theoretical system; instead, it has a multitude of medium-range theories addressing specific patches of social reality.’ (Portes, 2010: 39)

That is, the variety of topics and approaches in the Handbook can be read as fragmentation and incoherence, and at worst, a lack of analytical rigour, but it could also reflect the diversity and energy of SLS (see the comments of Mavis Maclean in Creutzfeldt’s chapter, p. 28). The Handbook reflects the state of SLS: not quite a discipline, not quite a movement, but still ‘making progress’.

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