he cannot find, and of a middle class that is terrorized into silence. A similar strategy fills in historical background to Toni Morrion's *Beloved.*

Investigation aims to bring into the reader's presence the ghosts that are in and yet not fully present in the texts; "finding the shape described by . . . absence captures perfectly the paradox of tracking through time and across all those forces that which makes its mark by being there and not there at the same time" (p. 6). Finding absence means, of course, reaching beyond the text to the background knowledge that produces absence as a presence. Absence, of course, is in speaking as such. Everything that is not spoken is absent. The notion of ghostly matters or haunting directs us to absences to be produced as presences by the investigating sociologist who traces their "structures of feeling" back into the history that sediments them. "The blind field and its fundamental imbrication in the visible field is what we are aiming to comprehend. The blind field is what the ghost's arrival signals. The blind field is never named as such in the [text]. How could it be? It is precisely what is pressing in from the other side" (p. 109).

Despite the passages of incantatory prose that alternate with the admirable lucidity of the historical narrative and of the explications of the novels, there is a kind of political desperation here. If the dogmatism of the Marxists of the 1960s and '70s has proved impotent (I choose the masculinism consciously), so also has the magnificent democratic impetus that, paradoxically, was the matrix of that dogmatism. If we follow Gordon, there is nowhere to go from here other than to treasure the ghost and the intimations of utopia that arise in the reader as the obverse of the frightfulness in which it originated.

Gordon's ghosts are all from elsewhere or elsewhen, and are mediated by texts. They are produced in a textual layering—the reader situated as voyeur at third hand. Behind novel or photograph lie multiple documentary resources, and beyond them yet again, the actual and unimaginable frightfulness of others' suffering. Her prose interposes yet another buffering layer of abstraction. No wonder Gordon pans Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, a satire (sometimes very funny) of the virtual worlds of the middle class in America. She treads on the very textual ground he undermines.

In her chapter on ghostly matters in Argentina, Gordon comments on "the quiet, unmotivated complicity of those who shut their eyes, go about their daily routines, and find every means available to not know, to shelter themselves from what is happening all around them" (p. 94). Here finally is the source of my disquiet with this book. It leaves our daily routines, our shelters, our closed eyes, unexamined. This sociology of ghostly matters turns us away from what Herbert Schiller calls the "remarkable edifice of invisible control [that] has been constructed, permitting the most far-reaching measures of social domination to escape significant public attention."

Pedagogy

What Are We Trying to Teach?

The Forest and the Trees: Sociology as Life, Practice, and Promise, by **Allan G. Johnson.** Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997. 205 pp. NPL cloth. ISBN: 1-56639-563-1.

Social Things: An Introduction to the Sociological Life, by **Charles Lemert.** Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 1997. 206 pp. $17.95 cloth. ISBN: 0-8476-8538-1. $12.95 paper. ISBN: 0-8476-8539-X.

The Sociologically Examined Life: Pieces of the Conversation, by **Michael Schwalbe.** Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1998. 207 pp. NPL paper. ISBN: 1-55934-931-X.

DANIEL F. CHAMBLISS
Hamilton College
dchambli@hamilton.edu

If recent publishing history is an indicator, many professional sociologists dream of writing a book like Peter Berger's *Invitation to Sociology*: a long essay, accessible to the general reader (especially the undergraduate reader), that introduces the sociological perspective without the comprehensive clutter of a textbook. Of course, in Berger's day (the early to mid-1960s), sociology was more coherent as a discipline, more tightly controlled by a few major graduate departments, and more in agreement on its canon of great writers and thinkers. Since *Invitation* was published over 35 years ago, no book has succeeded so well. Perhaps Berger's achievement can no longer be matched, but that hasn't stopped us

from trying. All three of the books reviewed here make the effort, and all have great strengths. Lemert is provocative and openly political; Schwalbe gives clean explanations of complex theoretical points; Johnson produces a smooth, digestible introduction to real thinking. All of these authors are smart and have things to say. And all are pursuing moral as well as intellectual agendas. I'll share my reactions to these books, but in a sense my reactions don't much matter. The books are written for students, and only experience will tell which of these books will succeed with them.

That said, here's one professional's view.

Charles Lemert's *Social Things* is a book filled with passion and energy; it is by turns autobiographical, moralistic, calm, and informative (for instance, on Weber, rationality, and modernization), and even occasionally overblown. At its best, *Social Things* is sensible and educational. The personal stories are interesting and sometimes revealing; the explanations of sociological theories make sense. In other places Lemert shows a startling anger. I suspect—and the lavish back-cover blurbs from major figures bear this out—that sociologist readers will have strong reactions to the book. It invites them.

For one thing, *Social Things* is unashamedly "PC," extolling in turn the moral authority of the black woman, the tragedy of the destruction of Native American life, and the courage of the housebound Victorian woman writer. In his praise of victims, though, Lemert sometimes romanticizes them:

> It is said that for years after the massacre in 1890 [at Wounded Knee], Lakota people could hear the voices of the dead crying from the grave. . . . in the early 1990s, the voices of the dead at Wounded Knee were silent. These are truly sacred grounds . . . sanctified by people who . . . had the resource of sociological imagination to seize the day from their still-belligerent, but now less overtly brutal, colonizers, thus to free the souls of Lakota people, living and dead. (p. 117)

Lemert seems to forget that the plains tribes, nomadic warriors and hunters, were cruel in warfare, enthusiastically sexist, ardent in the practice of torture, and not at all multicultural in their tolerance of others. Whites were brutally cruel, to be sure. But so were the plains tribes. Morality doesn't account for who won the wars between these groups; power does. To explain why the whites prevailed, the rapid growth of the European population, the demography of disease, the technology of warfare, and the economics of expansion are better sociological factors than their moral and spiritual inferiority.

But for Lemert, the moral message is what counts, and sociology is, and should be, an inherently, openly moral discipline—or, let's say, practice. "[A]s it has moved out of the troubled, if partially liberating times of the 1960s, professional sociology has rediscovered the moral passions that inspired it at the beginning. In this respect, academic sociology has recaptured its true vocation as a science" (p. 118). This approach is certainly a major component of sociology's history as a field, but taken too far it leaves out structural explanations and just falls back on praise or condemnation.

Of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, for instance, Lemert writes that "she was quite evidently able . . . to know . . . that the rest cure was based on the sociologically stupid idea that women did not belong in the world of paid work" (p. 24); and then, that "her healing came, not as a miracle, but as a consequence of courageous action to join the society of those of like circumstances" (p. 27). Lemert doesn't explain why role segregation is a self-evidently "stupid" idea; he only claims that it's a morally weak one. To many people today, it may be stupid. But 50 years ago it wasn't, and even the best sociologists didn't think it was. Were they all sexist idiots? And if the answer is yes, how could that have happened? Lemert doesn't explain why they believed in the division of labor, or why it's a stupid idea, or even how—except as an expression of courage—a woman could escape it.

Or consider Lemert's view of Talcott Parsons's functionalism that ascribes "the worker role to the boys and the nurturing role to the girls." Lemert seems to find Parsons both naive and sexist, saying that "Parsons was not wrong to believe that there are tasks that must be done in most societies. Where he erred was in encouraging the notion that they must be done a certain way according to official, but arbitrary, assignments" (pp. 160–61). But Lemert offers no alternative sociological explanation of the "scam" of "so-called role expectations." It is clear that Lemert thinks Parsons was both theoretically and morally wrong. But in neither case does he say why. I found myself hoping for the theoretically sophisticated arguments that we know from

his other work that Lemert can provide, but not finding them.

In general, then, Lemert's explanations in this book tend to be individualist and moral: People do things because they are good or bad people, with the powerless as good and the powerful as bad. Gilman is courageous, and that's why she escaped the constraints of her life. Black women have moral authority because they're multiply victimized. The Lakota exude quiet dignity because their religion was violated and their people massacred by robber barons. In his summary chapter, Lemert says "What the high and mighty are doing, whether they realize it or not, is sizing up, or measuring, the social distance between themselves and those to whom they condescend in their cold rejection of party cards or their handing down of warmed-over prescriptions for rest without work" (p. 167). That may be true, but by itself I'm not sure it's sociology. In *Social Things*, Lemert clearly suggests that sociological wisdom and moral virtue—defined in historically specific terms—are coterminous. But I don't think he has demonstrated it.

The writing style of *Social Things* has been praised by some readers, and it is certainly more energetically literary than that of most academic books. A few examples may let the reader judge for him or herself:

> Off in the distant shade, a young couple petted. . . . The same heavy sky that could hold an airplane also dampened the throttle of their passions. (p. 147)

> For the living, death is more like summer than winter. The worst heat slows things to a stop. (p. 148)

> Change is exciting. It warms the soul of dreams. (p. 65)

> If, at such times, there is lightning, it strikes because a prior, slow-moving glacier has begun to melt, opening fissures that expose a weakness through the mass, to which the celestial fire and thunder are drawn. (p. 106)

> . . . the sociological life is not a party to which we come. . . . Most parties have some weird, rough edge; and many turn sour when the edge of social things cuts too deep. (p. 190)

Michael Schwalbe's *The Sociologically Examined Life* is an introduction to the symbolic interactionist viewpoint (although he never uses those terms) on social life. He presents clear, sophisticated explanations of a variety of interesting social phenomena: how the "rules of the game" (for instance, in capitalism) constrain possible outcomes; how power can determine who gets called on for accounts; how the setting of agendas is a key tool in exercising power; how male and female gender roles are interdependent; and so on. He knows his stuff and explains it well. Schwalbe rightly notes early in the book that students want to learn about social life, not about sociology, and his analyses aim to clarify everyday life. He is also a fine, clear writer; just skimming over the pages, the reader's eye is caught by lively examples and interesting, though never tangled, turns of phrase.

Schwalbe's central concept is "sociological mindfulness," by which he means the awareness of the many ways that we are connected to other people. Our actions have causes and consequences we don't often see; but when we become mindful of them, Schwalbe holds, we can become better human beings.

And being better people should be the goal, he believes. "Where mindfulness thrives, there will be less ignorance, fear, and suffering in which evil can take root" (p. 98). And more generally, "If it is to be worth practicing, sociological mindfulness must help us change ourselves and our ways of doing things together, so that we can live more peacefully and productively with others, without exploitation, disrespect, and inequality" (p. 207). As a broad goal, that seems reasonable. But Schwalbe's vision is, in fact, somewhat more specific even than that. Time and again, Schwalbe's examples of mindfulness suggest that good sociology is almost the same as a fairly predictably "liberal" stand on contemporary issues. True, he usually provides a disclaimer that mindfulness can cut in several directions, or that "this is just an example," or that he's not pushing an agenda, just a perspective. But the sheer weight of his arguments is on one side:

> page 32: three paragraphs presenting the liberal view of abortion; one sentence on the conservative side.

> page 34: two paragraphs attacking military spending; one or two sentences that admit

that military spending "could be read differently."

page 54: four paragraphs attacking smoking, followed by more than a page against "violent sports" and their "authoritarianism, militarism and sexism."

page 56: six paragraphs showing the damage done by the practice of having "stay-at-home moms"; in this case, the argument is that such women are actually hurting other women.

page 74: women's shaving of their legs takes a hit.

None of these views will surprise or upset most members of the ASA, who may not even notice that indeed this is a bias. In almost every case, Schwalbe denies that his particular interpretation is necessary; he suggests that he's just calling for "mindfulness, " or what Max Weber called an "ethic of responsibility." But time and again, his view of responsibility coincides with a liberal position on current affairs, and Schwalbe seems almost unready to develop any example that will contradict that position. Maybe he truly doesn't see how a reasonable person could hold such views; or maybe he's afraid that a convincing case *could* be made in another direction—and then students might accept it. Schwalbe's arguments are persuasive, no doubt, and I am convinced by many of them. But I worry that the sharp intelligence and subtlety of his theoretical message lose credibility when they too predictably serve one political position.

Finally, consider Allan Johnson's *The Forest and the Trees*. My most frequent margin notes in this book were "great" and "cool," and I wrote them often. Not only does Johnson present the sociological perspective in a smoothly written, easily digestible form, he also makes surprising turns and gently leads the reader into some interesting implications of otherwise familiar arguments. His conclusions are not predictable, and sometimes he finds himself startled by what he's learned. And he's not set on the rightness of his own beliefs. Johnson is a "diversity consultant" for businesses and universities. I imagined, reading this book, that years ago he realized that you can't afford to be moralistic when talking to voluntary audiences of adults. His style is more one of "Hmm, look at this. . . . Isn't that interesting?" And it is.

His examples shine. On the impact of gender roles:

> A great deal of the sex differential in death is about sex as a social status. Men are far more likely than women to die from homicide, suicide, and accidents, as well as from physical causes such as cancer and heart disease that have clear links to how people live. Men are more likely than women to work at hazardous occupations, to take physical risks, and to act out aggressively. They're also less likely than women to see a doctor when they're not feeling well, which means they're less likely to find out about life-threatening conditions in time to do something about them. Men are also heavier users of cigarettes, alcohol, and addictive drugs. (pp. 134–35)

Or on how numbers of people affect system complexity:

> A heterosexual marriage is more complex in that the two statuses are differentiated by gender into wife and husband and the wife's role in relation to her husband is culturally defined as different than his role in relation to her. . . . Adding a child to a heterosexual marriage adds not only that status [of child], but also the statuses of mother and father. As a result, the role structure goes from two statuses to five and the number of role relationships goes from one to eight even though only three people participate in the system. Life suddenly becomes far more complex . . . (p. 96)

But there is more here than clear explanations of important ideas. There is theoretical sophistication as well. On cultural definitions of the environment:

> But the idea of damage and destruction [to the environment] assumes some ideal state, which is primarily a cultural invention. When we forget this—even in trying to "save" the environment—we're vulnerable to a kind of "species arrogance" that, ironically is also at the root of the environmental "damage" so many people are alarmed about. (p. 127)

This last quotation exemplifies Johnson's impressive ability to take the familiar and give it a twist, or to find intellectual surprises in the midst of conventional wisdom. For the students

who will read this book, these bonus ideas give sociology its intellectual justification. In describing the Goffmanian presentation of self, Johnson describes performance and then goes on to say that:

> Even as an audience for someone else's performance, we are never just that, for the audience has its role to play, too. This is why when actors in a theater forget their lines or otherwise ruin their performances, people in the audience often feel uncomfortable. The role of "witness to someone else's failed performance" is difficult to play because the mere fact of our sitting there and watching it happen contributes to the actors' pain. We become part of their failure, since if we weren't there—if there were no audience—the failure couldn't happen. (p. 152)

And in describing the dilemmas of gays and lesbians coming out, he shows how "Since heterosexuals have much greater freedom to talk about their personal lives such talk becomes a form of privilege because it is denied to others. Heterosexuals are rarely aware of this, which is also part of their privilege" (p. 163).

Repeatedly, as these examples show, Johnson explains tricky ideas simply; he leads the reader, step by step, through an explanation of the tensions between the family and capitalism, while never simply saying "capitalism is evil"; he gives a sophisticated critique of functionalism, while never using the word; he even uses the same examples as do Lemert and Schwalbe, relying all the while on sociological explanations, and usually adding that little extra bit at the end to show that life really isn't as simple as all that. He respects his readers, talking in terms they will understand while always pushing them intellectually to take one more step.

His key concept in explaining the sociological perspective (used much as Schwalbe uses "mindfulness") is "paths of least resistance." In Johnson's view, structural constraints create paths of least resistance that encourage people to act in predictable ways:

> Most people know very little about the "real me" as I experience myself. But anyone who thinks they know about fathers, men, heterosexuals, white people, writers, brothers, husbands, college professors, baby boomers, the middle class, and people whose households include dogs, goats, and a snake may think they know quite a lot about me. What they actually know are paths of least resistance that go with statuses I occupy and the likelihood that I usually follow those paths. (p. 146)

Again, a crystal-clear example of an important idea.

In thinking about these three books that introduce our discipline to students, I'd ask my fellow professors two questions:

First, is it the proper goal of sociology to promulgate the multicultural liberalism of 1990s American college professors? These books all move in the direction of saying "yes"—Lemert aggressively so, the others more quietly, but consistently nonetheless. The moral purposes of these books are straightforward and explicit. Certainly, the social justice imperative is strong in American sociology. It's a central tenet of our tradition. But one of sociology's strengths is its ability to show "unanticipated consequences"—for instance, the surprising and sometimes troubling ironies of multiculturalism.

Second, where's the "discipline" in our discipline? The rules of science, in the broad sense of that term, constrain us. They force us to face reality even when we don't like it, or when it threatens our cherished beliefs. Too often in Lemert, I suspect, and sometimes in Schwalbe, sociology seems to support the author's own views. Perhaps I'm not being fair here; perhaps the authors came to hold those beliefs through their experiences in sociology. In that case, their books' persuasive power for students might be enhanced by sharing the sense of surprise and revelation.

All three of these books are well worth reading. The authors are serious thinkers who work hard at their writing and care about their messages. Lemert's passion will appeal to some readers; Schwalbe's intelligent dissection to others; Johnson's lucid sense of wonder to still others. This review, as I said at the outset, is only one professional's view. Depending on your own preferences, you may well love any of these books.