

Book Review: Sleep and society: sociological ventures into the (un)known

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Book reviews

Sleep and society: sociological ventures into the (un)known

Simon Williams, London, Routledge, 2005. x + 198 pp. ISBN 0415354196

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On first hearing, the idea of a sociology of sleep sounds implausible. To sleep is to lose consciousness of the waking world and, dreams notwithstanding, of oneself. It is to cease acting in the social world and, by extension, to temporally cease ‘doing’ that world by way of the performance of social roles, relations, practices and so on. What is there to say about this from a sociological point of view? Ironically, the potential loss or suspension of the social world during sleep, and more particularly the vulnerability that it creates at the level of both the collective and the individual, is one reason why sleep is an interesting topic for the sociologist. Sleep, like illness, is a major potential ‘external’ disruption to the social world which generates problems and dangers that must be socially managed. If ego sleeps while alter is awake and *vice versa* then how can they coordinate their actions? And how can each trust that they will not be exploited during their sleep or at least miss out on the opportunities generated by the interaction of others? Will alter raid my coffers when I am asleep? And what if the share price falls and I miss a bargain? The reluctance of children to go to bed when there is ‘something going on’ is testament enough to this worry. If ego and alters all sleep simultaneously, however, then who or what keeps the social world going during this time? Does the social world ‘sleep’ too? There is much to excite the sociological imagination in these various and variable scenarios.

Furthermore, sleep and waking life are mutually affecting, a fact that again makes the former an important and interesting topic for social research. Sleep, and more noticeably absence of sleep, affects our ability to perform in waking life. Action and particularly the complex interactions involved in social life presuppose rest. Conversely, the stresses and strains of social life, not to mention technology and the social organization of time, affect the performance of sleep. Sleep may not exactly require action, as action requires sleep, but it is certainly aided (or not) by the context of interaction in which it occurs. One consequence of this is that the effects of social change may be mediated through sleep. The shift towards a 24hr society, for example, may have a damaging impact upon sleep patterns, which in turn may have a negative impact upon society as tired social agents crash their cars more often, do less work and find themselves more

vulnerable to illness. Little wonder then, to cite a third reason why sleep may be of interest to sociologists, that sleep has been increasingly subject to 'medicalization' and 'healthicization' in late modern societies. Sleep is becoming a problem.

On closer inspection then, sleep appears to be an important, interesting and exciting focus for sociological research. Nevertheless, despite the good reasons for researching sleep, and notwithstanding a handful of articles in the archive, it is only relatively recently that the sociology of sleep has begun to emerge as an area of research. Simon Williams has been one of the key pioneers of this area and his book is, to my knowledge, the first extended treatment of the topic in the sociological literature.

As a 'first' it faces certain inevitable and inbuilt advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, it has the opportunity to frame the domain and to excite its readers with new ways of looking at and thinking about sleep. The author is dealing with a topic where we haven't 'heard it all before' and each new point and insight breaks new ground therefore. Williams capitalizes upon this well. He makes a good case for the sociology of sleep, opening the area up from a variety of angles, and he generates a number of avenues of interest with which to draw readers in. Additionally, I think that he shows how sleep can serve as a useful lens through which to view wider sociological phenomena, and perhaps particularly wider social changes. The way we sleep, in all of the different ways one might interpret that phrase, is an important indication of the organization and disorganization of wider society for Williams, and he makes a strong and interesting case for this.

The difficulty facing any pioneering work is the lack of intellectual resources for one to rely upon. How does one build a sociology of sleep from scratch? Following the path trodden by many sociologists of the body, Williams' strategy, for the most part, is, firstly, to re-read certain classic texts (including Elias, Foucault, Parsons, Schutz and Merleau-Ponty), digging up the insights which these thinkers make in relation to sleep; secondly, to rejoin central debates in sociology, such as debates on medicalization and on social change, using sleep, as noted above, as a lens with which to shed new light upon them. Sleep, in Williams' hands, sheds new light on established sociological debates, and these debates help to prize sleep open in a sociologically relevant manner. The result, on the whole, is successful. I felt myself drawn in on a number of occasions. I was often left wanting more, feeling that I had only got a glimpse of what might be there, but again that is a positive in a pioneering book and corresponds, as far as I can tell, to Williams' strategy. A pioneering book which said it all or at least appeared to might be both the beginning and the end of whatever it is pioneering. Furthermore, Williams' aim appears to be to open up the sociology of sleep from a number of different angles, rather than focusing in on any one particular issue in great depth. He wants to whet our appetites and illuminate a range of possible research agendas. And he does this very well.

The lack of direct material for Williams to draw upon, and in particular empirical material, is the source of the chief weakness of the book however. It is a strength of the book, up to a point, that one is left craving further and/or better empirical material with which to extend, contest and modify the claims that Williams makes. But in the final analysis the empirical basis of this new research area is relatively thin at the moment and it is difficult not to feel a certain amount of disappointment on that count. This is not Williams' fault, of course, and his call to arms will surely be an important move in the correction of this deficit – indeed I believe that he is currently engaged in a major empirical project on sleep himself – but it is a limit to the book all the same.

We find out most about Williams' own research and views in the chapters on 'Sleep, Embodiment and the Lifeworld' and 'Medicalization and Beyond'. Here he goes beyond the existing literature, to venture a number of insightful claims about the nature of sleep. These were the most impressive chapters in my view, the chapters where the sociology of sleep really began to take off. Williams is an experienced researcher in these areas, with an extensive knowledge of them, and his account is particularly valuable because of this. The book as a whole is strong, however, and will play a central role in the development of sleep studies within sociology. It is a must for anybody working or contemplating working in this area.

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The voice of breast cancer in medicine and bioethics

Mary C. Rawlinson and Shannon Lundeen (eds). Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Springer, 2006. 207 pp. ISBN 1–4020–4508–5 (hbk).
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This provocative collection, volume 88 in Springer's Philosophy & Medicine series, might better have been titled the *voices* of breast cancer, because it emphasizes the plurality of both the disease itself – breast cancer 'is not a single disease' (p. 124) – and the multiple voices that breast cancer instigates. A third of the chapters are based on presentations at a conference organized by the editors at Stony Brook University in 2002, under the auspice of the Program in Women's Studies. The two themes of these chapters are breast cancer activism and clinical research on breast cancer, with minimal dialogue between their quite different claims. Two shorter sections have been added to the published volume. One section includes three personal accounts of breast cancer, and the other describes two experiments in teaching breast cancer.