Summaries

RANDALL COLLINS

The uses of counter-factual history:
Can there be a theory of historical turning-points?

The article deals with theories of historical turning points which assume that the course of history would have been changed dramatically by a single event. Most turning-point arguments refer to military events (a decisive war or battle), political events (an election, a legislative decision) or individual leadership (what if a famous individual had died sooner, or lived longer). These arguments in general rest on weak assumptions. (1) They select one moment from the known chain of historical events and neglect the large-scale processes and patterns that are of a stochastic nature. (2) In the case of individual leadership, they overstate the importance of peculiar personality characteristics and deny the fact that such characteristics (including charisma) are socially formed. (3) They overstate the uniqueness of certain historical 'bottlenecks'. The author concludes that in general turning-point arguments cannot stand to the test of critical scrutiny on the basis of systematic sociological theories of causal processes.

ALI DE REGT

'Welcome in the rat race':
On the pressure of the Cito-test

This article discusses why the Cito-test (a scholastic aptitude test) at the end of the primary school has become so important, while at the same time parents, primary and secondary school teachers and educational professionals argue that excessive weight should not be placed to the test results at the expense of the advice of the primary school teachers. An analysis of the coverage of the beginning of the Cito-test in five national newspapers in February 2004 shows two reasons. Selection for the hierarchically ordered secondary schools takes place directly after elementary school. Secondary schools rely more and more on 'objective' admission criteria and ask for a minimum test score. In the race for the highest educational qualifications parents stress the importance of the Cito-score for their child to guarantee admission to the higher levels of secondary education. At the same time, parents judge schools on their average

Cito-scores. So, in the competition for pupils, schools have to demonstrate their quality. Moreover, the state demands that schools account for their achievements. Quantifiable measurements, like the test scores at school level, are the easiest to judge, and are increasingly considered as an indication of the quality of the school.

STEPHEN QUILLEY

Social development as trophic expansion:
Food systems, prosthetic ecology and the arrow of history

The ecology of human social development is presented as a process of 'trophic expansion' leading to the establishment of an increasingly 'prosthetic ecology' in which natural processes are channelled to divert solar energy for the demographic and industrial growth of the dominant species. From this long-term perspective, the key regulatory and technological choice facing humanity is how to separate and/or integrate the trophic systems of the anthroposphere and the biosphere. Outlining the technological possibility of hiving off a closed-system prosthetic ecology from the wider systems of the biosphere, the essay poses the question of the social conditions necessary for transforming technological possibilities into viable practices.

SIPCO J. VELLENGA

Salvation and healing:
The mobilisation of the interest in holy places of healing in Dutch catholicism
since 1850

This article investigates the development of the popularity of pilgrimage to Catholic holy places of healing in the Netherlands since 1850 and the factors that contribute to it. This development is divided in three periods: a period from 1850 till about 1960, from 1960 till about 1980 and a period from 1980 up to the present. In the first period, interest in making a pilgrimage to holy places of healing increased strongly, but in the 1960s this interest fell. However, since the early 1980s some devotional sites – both official and unofficial – have increased in popularity once more, and individuals' interest in pilgrimages has been slightly growing again. Starting from a mobilisation approach, this development is related to contextual and institutional factors. With regard to the context, the growth and decline of the power of organised religion, the pillarisation and de-pillarisation of Dutch society, and the rise of a culture of

health, fitness and healing since the 1960s are all significant. Changes in the style of functioning of the Catholic movement are also very important; the three periods are characterised by an attitude of mobilisation and militancy, of openness and assimilation, and of a renewed awareness of its own Catholic identity. The development of this attitude is connected to changes in the power and cultural position of Catholicism in Dutch society. It is argued that devotional practices of healing are not an anachronistic element in Dutch and Western European culture, but a normal phenomenon with the vitality to survive in modern times.

ANNELOU YPEIJ

Gender, poverty and the state:
The case of single mothers in Amsterdam

With the reforms of the National Assistance Act of the last decade, the Dutch state has changed its responsibilities towards single mothers. Single mothers are no longer considered to be full-time mothers and the state no longer automatically replaces the income of the absent male breadwinner with a monthly benefit. Instead, single mothers are defined as able-bodied workers who are required to look for a job. The result of this policy reform is that the financial insecurity of single mothers has increased. This paper aims to relate the new stereotypical images of these women, constructed through welfare reforms and social policy, to the women's own self-images. These women view their treatment at the social service agency – the agency responsible for the administration of the Assistance Act – as highly unjust and as in contradiction with their own self-images. This conflict between ascribed and appropriated images motivates the women to engage in behaviour that is partially aimed at breaking the rules and turning their back on the state. By hiding part of their daily lives from the agency's employees, the women try to regain control over their financial situation, to increase their independence of the state and to reclaim their self-respect.