Book Reviews


This book is the twelfth volume of one of the most ambitious series by Brill Academic Publishers, related to the ongoing project of sociological surveys started as European Values Study in the late 1970s and mostly focused on what then was Western Europe, and later gradually extended to the entire European continent and beyond, with new powerful survey waves called World Values Survey which now cover around 85 nations in all world regions and a fascinating scope of issues, from religious beliefs to political attitudes, from family values to economic and work behavior, and so forth. As the editors rightly claim in the Introduction, “European and World Values Survey is by far the most comprehensive and enduring social science project for the systematic and empirical study of cultural values and value change” (p. 5).

This twelfth volume is a collection of national case studies based on the comparison of data from three major waves of surveys, 1981, 1990 and 1999. The cases are the United States and Canada, two Latin American nations (Mexico and Argentina), three cases from Northern Europe (Sweden, Denmark and Netherlands), Central Europe (Austria and Germany), the Mediterranean region (France, Spain and Turkey), a case from Asia (South Korea) and a case from Africa (South Africa). While this geographical scope is impressive in its own way, the absence of other important Asian cases and of the entire region of Eastern Europe and Eurasia seems regretful, though I can imagine the difficulties that may occur in producing quality papers the limits of data availability.

All volume’s papers stick together thanks to a few major guidelines they try to follow in their focus and interpretation. These guidelines, which provide a minimum of theoretical framework for all studies, are set in the
Introduction. The editors briefly comment upon the main terms such as ‘social change,’ ‘value change’ and ‘culture change.’ Change is the key word here, and in fact, observing changes (or the lack thereof) is what a sociologist does when comparing data of similarly structured surveys ten or twenty years apart. Changes are obviously there: the 1980s-1990s, this last two decades of the past century, saw tremendous changes in some regions (tectonic in South Africa, crucial in Mexico and Argentina, but less significant in the ‘old Europe’). However, the ambition of the Value Surveys is to go beyond the obvious political and social transformations and to grasp, thanks to the unique quantitative data, the deeper changes – changes in values and cultures. Some of such changes may follow the institutional dramas, while some proceed almost unnoticed, without any outward turbulence. The editors understand, as do the authors of case studies, that “cultural change is a very slow process” and that “the cultural patterns are change resistant” (p. 4); therefore, they distinguish between ‘changes in values’ (particular values, or subsets of values, such as, for example, sexual/family values or civic/political values), and the changes of the entire ‘culture’ – that is, the change in “patterns or configuration of values” (because, according to a modest and succinct definition they use, culture is “a specific configuration of values and norms”). Thus, value may change, but cultures as a complex configuration of values, only slightly modifies accordingly, and ‘persists in toto. Hence the title of the volume.

Another common frame for most of the case studies is a theoretical set of binary oppositions that define any approach to values and value changes. Of them there are two main pairs of characteristics: traditional versus secular-rational values and survival versus self-expression values. While the first pair is the vision as old as the Enlightenment and reflects an almost common cliché of social sciences, widely criticized as being simplistic but also widely used, the second pair is coined relatively recently in path-breaking works by Ronald Inglehart who has been a major brain of the World Values Survey. Inglehart’s idea is that the ‘survivor values’, which he calls ‘materialist’ and which dominated the world for centuries, prioritizing basic survival concern, has gradually been replaced – mostly in the postwar West, as the basic need have been satisfied – by what he called ‘post-material values’ which prioritize individual self-expression and self-fulfillment.

The cultural map of the world, drawn at the conjuncture of these two dichotomies, is treated at length by Wayne Baker in his essay on the United