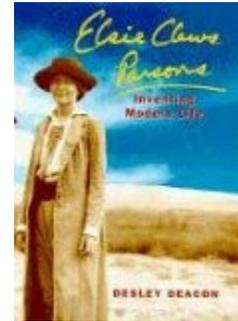


H-Net Reviews

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Desley Deacon. *Elsie Clews Parsons: Inventing Modern Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. xvi + 520 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-13907-4.

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Criticizing the Elders

Desley Deacon, associate professor of American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, has written a fascinating biography of a complex, little-known, and clearly influential woman. Deacon's thesis is that Elsie Clews Parsons (1874-1941) presaged and "helped create modernism" through her life and work (p. xi). Parsons earned a doctorate in education from Columbia University in 1899, with minor fields in sociology, philosophy and statistics. From Columbia she took an abiding interest in ethnology and anthropology, and it was by using the latter that she worked to "free herself from the black hole' of outmoded and unnecessary age, sex, marital, and cultural classifications, and the psychoses' they brought with them (p. 128)." She was also an unconventional daughter, wife, and mother; a social critic; an author of prodigious output; a field researcher; a benefactor; an intellectual inspiration for other scholars; and a feminist.

The principal claim of Deacon's work is that Parsons was in the vanguard of New York intellectuals whose lives and work showed American society the way out of nineteenth-century strictures on sex and marriage. Parsons was a moral modernist. Criticizing conventional—which is to say, stereotypically Victorian—morality, she publicly experimented in her private life. As Deacon puts it, Elsie Clews Parsons pioneered "a new, flexible morality based on sincerity and privacy," evident in her desire to enable women and men to enjoy "trial marriage, divorce by mutual consent, access to reliable contraception, independence and elasticity within relationships, and an increased emphasis on obligations to children rather than

to sexual partners (p. xii)." Gender equality was at the core of her philosophy and her approach to life, an approach facilitated by her wealth.

Parsons challenged the conceptual apparatus and fiscal infrastructure of American anthropology, with its reliance on evolutionary theory and its privileging of male researchers. She joined with a distinguished group of graduate students whose cultural relativism was remaking the field, and, as support for anthropological research evaporated, backed research from her own resources. Her anthropological fieldwork in the American Southwest changed the way that Americans thought about the Pueblo while altering the methodology that other anthropologists applied to their field studies. Deacon claims that Parsons "blazed the trail for almost all of the new' developments in the discipline: acculturation studies, biography and autobiography, ethnohistory, community studies, and applied anthropology (p. 373)."

The combination of self-confidence, courage, and intelligence with which this life's work began started when Elsie Clews was a young girl. Born to the American aristocracy, she had all of her material desires satisfied, and grew up with a stubborn streak that stood her well first as she defied her mother and insisted on a full education, and later as she entered her chosen fields—all of them dominated by men. Formally trained by Franklin Giddings and Nicholas Murray Butler, and influenced strongly by Gabriel Tarde, Pliny Goddard, Franz Boas, and Alfred Kroeber, Parsons defied the categories, both personal and professional, that her colleagues found

comforting. She began her public career by attacking the social mores of her own class, and opened, in *The Old-Fashioned Woman* (1913) “that woman’ was an outmoded category kept alive only by the bizarre rituals of the Elders,” or the New York old-money elite. Parsons supported birth control and wrote about the advantages of separating childbearing from marriage. These and other radical sentiments jeopardized the career of her husband, politician Herbert Parsons. Their marriage became a proving ground for Elsie Clews Parsons’s ideas. Overcoming her jealousy when her husband had an extramarital affair, Parsons herself took lovers, including architect Grant LaFarge and author Robert Herrick, whose thinly veiled novels tattled an idealized version of their long-running relationship.

Parsons made her mark in many fields. At various times in her career she was president of the American Folklore Society, the first female president of the American Anthropological Association, a lifetime member of Heterodoxy, a writer for *The New Republic*, and the founder of the Southwest Society. Her academic papers and books reflected the catholicism of her tastes. The bibliography of Parsons’s works and their reviews published here runs to fourteen pages. The topics include withering critiques of the U.S. aristocracy, especially women’s roles in it; sexual and birth taboos, and child rearing and parenthood in different cultures; feminism; pacifism; ethnological methodology; American folktales; African-American culture; and the status of anthropology, among a great many others. Parsons published scores of notes in academic journals of the cultures she observed, among them Filipino, Zuni, Pueblo, African-American, Bahamian and West Indian, Hopi, Tewa, and Mexican. She was well-known because of her writings on myriad topics both in her scholarly communities and by the public. As a social critic, Parsons wrote letters to editors and sent in articles to magazines which would have been read by a broader spectrum of Americans. It is even more curious, therefore, that Parsons should be so little remembered today.

Although the author weaves a seamless tapestry between Parsons’s public and private lives, the book’s chief fascination is with Parson’s ability to juggle them. A fine example of a feminist biography, Deacon pays special attention to the nexus of Parsons’s private life and her persona as scholar and anthropologist. Gender remains at the center of the book as it did in Parsons’s own life. It isn’t just her non-traditional relationships with men that make the book fascinating—Parsons had interesting relationships with almost everyone. She was a coach and, by

the end of his professional life a mentor, to Franz Boas. Deacon cites Mabel Dodge Luhan, Mary Simkhovitch, Alice Duer Miller, and Katherine Dexter McCormick as examples of women friends—all of whom led iconoclastic lives in their own way. Fascinating people crossed Parsons’s path, like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Alice Roosevelt Longworth, Diego Rivera, Walter Lippmann, Crystal Eastman, Ruth Bunzel, and Margaret Mead. These, of course, make the book an even more compelling read.

In her rejection of strict categories in her personal life and in her professional life, Parsons negotiated a path to the modern. “Sexual plasticity,” “cultural tolerance,” and the “new woman” were, if not invented by Parsons, certainly honed and applied in her own life and work (p. xi). Parsons left behind the condescension of preceding anthropologists toward other cultures, today a hallmark of modern cultural anthropology. Deacon argues persuasively for including Elsie Clews Parsons in our history courses and texts. As a forward-thinking, radical-living career woman well ahead of her time Parsons deserves the attention of historians, quite apart from the influence she had on the specialized fields of ethnology and anthropology though, oddly, Deacon does not comment on whether or not Parsons’s corpus is still read by graduate students or taken seriously by anthropologists today.

Deacon has punctuated her book with extended, but never arcane, discussions of sociology, ethnology, and anthropology to illuminate Parsons’s battles. *Elsie Clews Parsons* is well-written, logically argued, and amply supported with examples and evidence. The research is impressively thorough. Deacon consulted a number of archival sources, newspapers, family papers, secondary sources, and the copious writings of Parsons herself. The notes are extensive and helpful, although a general bibliography would have added a useful tool. The bibliography in the book is the chronological list of Parsons’s works mentioned above; it is not a standard bibliography of Deacon’s sources. The book’s length probably makes it unsuitable for most undergraduate classes, but it would certainly generate discussion in a graduate course in women’s history. Anyone with an interest in historical anthropology and the origins of cultural relativism would enjoy the book, and every historian of U.S. women ought to read it to redress past neglect of this fascinating feminist and her self-consciously modern career.

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