

Mauss's Travels

Armand L. Mauss. *Shifting Borders and a Tattered Passport: Intellectual Journeys of a Mormon Academic*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2012. 280 pp. Hardcover: \$23.76. ISBN: 978-1-60781-204-3.

Reviewed by Brayden King

Sociologist Karl Mannheim believed that knowledge is relational. Our social positions, like community affiliations or the roles we take in a group, shape and constrain what we know and how we know it. As members of a religion, for example, we absorb certain types of knowledge and see the world through a particular lens. It is this same position that makes it difficult for us to analyze our own history or to see our community as others see it. We cannot easily separate ourselves from the obligations and preconceived notions of the religious community that influences our view of reality. Sometimes people feel that the only way they can obtain an unbiased perspective is to break free from those groups that anchor their understanding. For this reason, Mannheim argued that intellectuals ought to be outsiders and remain unaffiliated with the social groups they analyze and criticize.

Mannheim is a useful starting point for understanding Armand Mauss's personal memoir, *Shifting Borders and a Tattered Passport: Intellectual Journeys of a Mormon Academic*. Mauss's memoir is in part a straightforward account of his professional development. After a chapter that briefly introduces his main personal and career accomplishments, the rest of the chapters detail specific episodes in Mauss's career that shaped his evolution as a "Mormon academic." He presents his own life for analysis of what it means to become a Mormon public intellectual. Not surprisingly, Mannheim was one of Mauss's early influences as a sociologist. Like Mannheim, Mauss sees the intellectual as a product of social position. However, Mauss uses the metaphor of a passport to illustrate how the intellectual can never be truly outside the community he or she studies. The intellectual, then, is someone who moves *between* knowledge communities. The passport metaphor invokes not only the distance (cultural or otherwise) travel-

ers cover but also the scrutiny they inevitably face as they encounter “customs agents” and other “enforcers” of local norms. The conflicting pressures Mormon academics deal with result not only from strong community norms but also from the distinct ways that each community conceives of knowledge and how to obtain it. What passes for truth in one community might be contested or at least met with skepticism in another.

Mauss’s reflections raise a number of interesting questions. Does belonging to different knowledge communities—being a religious devotee and a social scientist, for example—make one a better intellectual? Will a faithful Mormon’s scientific views of the Church be seen as credible by mainstream members of either community? What are the personal costs of being a Mormon academic?

Although many Mormon academics choose to travel undercover, this was not the path Mauss took. Over the course of his life he was able to integrate these two knowledge communities, putting himself in a position where he could engage with both sociology and Mormonism simultaneously. Mauss brought with him to the study of Mormons the methodological tools of data analysis and a sociological perspective that helped him to view the Church as a social and formal organization. This perspective allowed Mauss to compare the Mormon world to other social phenomena, such as social movements, and offer broad generalizations. He could write *The Angel and the Beehive* and *All Abraham’s Children* and come across as both a true believer and as someone with a unique assessment of the Church’s relationship to society and race. His position as believer and analyst distinguished him from the Mormon apologists of his time as well as from their counterparts, the anti-Mormon critics. Mauss’s position was also separated from that of other sociologists of religion who examined the Church in purely secular ways. Unfortunately, he also notes that crossing such borders was not without cost. His position distanced him from scholars in his home field of sociology who did not always give his Mormon studies research the credit it deserved or who may have occasionally been skeptical about his intellectual independence. And even though Mauss escaped serious run-ins with ecclesiastical authorities, local Church leaders at

times questioned him with regard to his academic research—inquiries he referred to as “periodic passport checks.” He describes how astounded he was when other scholars, who were not so lucky as to have empathetic Church leaders, faced Church discipline over their scholarly positions on Mormonism.

These costs are apparent to many younger scholars, who see in Mauss and the scholars of his generation examples of both what to do and what not to do when building an academic career. As a sociologist myself, I wonder if Mauss’s influence in his original discipline might have been greater had he not taken up Mormon studies. Even though he made an early contribution to the study of social problems by showing how problems like deviance or alcoholism are constructed by social movements, without his continued presence in the field to further develop and refine his theories, his ideas are much less influential in the field of social movement scholarship today than they might have been. And Mauss himself also worries that his ground-breaking Mormon scholarship is still not treated with the same level of respect or seriousness as the work of his non-Mormon contemporaries, such as Rodney Stark. Even Stark, with whom Mauss shared the same advisor at Berkeley, does not fully acknowledge Mauss’s work on assimilation and retrenchment in the Mormon Church. It is disappointing that Mauss’s work has not shown signs of providing a lasting impact on his home discipline.

Given these difficulties, it is important to give Mauss and other Mormon studies scholars credit for the work they did to create a welcoming institutional space for the scholarship of Mormon academics. Mauss was not only a founding member of the Mormon History Association and Mormon Social Science Association, but he was also a regular contributor to and board member of *Dialogue*. He was involved in the creation of a Mormon studies program and chair at Claremont Graduate University. Mauss and his colleagues knew that Mormon scholars working along the “borderlands” needed to find a home where they were free to investigate and express themselves independently, protected from the other communities that might otherwise overly regulate or dismiss their research. Institution-building of this type helped establish Mormon studies as a field of inquiry, protected from over-

zealous border guards. It is inspiring to know that new generations of Mormon academics interested in studying the Church have a thriving community that understands their work.

Near the end of the book Mauss speculates that the Mormon Church is currently going through a phase of assimilation and that the Church's leadership is becoming more tolerant of Mormon scholarship. Of course, Mormon academics still face skepticism from many of their academic colleagues and from "grassroots Mormons" who do not see the value of academic study. His memoir illustrates the value that comes from being an intellectual who bridges the boundaries between distinct knowledge communities, but it is also a reminder of the precarious position such intellectuals occupy. Readers of his memoir will likely find themselves wondering, as did I, if the trade-offs are worth it. Mauss, of course, believes that they were. Had he and his peers not made the investments that they did in Mormon studies, it is plausible that serious academic scholarship on Mormonism might still fail to be well-received by the institutional leadership of the Church. The current phase of assimilation would hardly be as rewarding if the only intellectual voices making noise were apologists or critics—representatives of their respective knowledge communities who lack the credentials and cultural skills needed to translate knowledge across those communities. Mormons are ultimately better understood both inside and outside academia in part due to a thriving community of boundary-spanning Mormon scholars.