

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Anthony Thomson, *The Making of Social Theory: Order, Reason, and Desire*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 409 p., + glossary & notes.

Along with his sound expertise in classical theory, Anthony Thomson brings a cogent understanding of literature and the arts to the writing of a theory text. For example, in a book that shows great respect for the intelligence of the student reader, he writes: “Thomas Mann’s...*The Magic Mountain* never resolves the intellectual dilemma between rationalism and subjectivism. The same can be said of the macro-level social issues that are the subject of this more pedantic and restricted narrative on the making of social theory” (405). Thomson’s text represents the strongest temptation I have seen in some time to use secondary sources in the classroom.

While presenting social thought from Aquinas to Mead, Thomson argues that classical theory provides much insight into the transition from traditional to modern society and the accompanying emergence of capitalism, the state, and a broad range of equity issues. It contains an excellent reading of classical liberalism versus anti-liberalism; Enlightenment rationalism versus Romantic subjectivism; and the place of social Darwinism, economics, private property and materialism in the history of social thought. Women, long invisible in classical texts, make a strong appearance throughout this book. The chapter on Hegel and Marx displays an erudite concision as do well written and appealing chapters on Weber and Durkheim. Literary resources also make numerous appearances. This is a distinct strength of this text which takes as its subject the broader intellectual field in which social thought emerges.

This is a very strong book in classical social theory. Its weakness is one that most texts in this area possess – classical theory presented, mainly, in relative isolation from the contemporary. It never ceases to amaze me how much is written about 19th century thought, in the 21st century, without a fuller integration into contemporary theory. The thought which affects our writing on classical texts largely ends with Sartre (and a few contemporary novelists). Where are Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault (to name three) in this approach to classical texts? The answer of course is that these are unspoken influences, as are dozens of other contemporary resources, in the author’s mind as he/she constructs a text (some, like Rorty, do appear in the endnotes). What we lack in theory text writing is a more deconstructive approach.

Thomson's text does do a fine job of identifying "chains of social theory" in classical thought, but these are not, for me, sufficiently linked to contemporary understandings. The tendency to divide classical from contemporary thought is a deeply unfortunate one in sociology and this otherwise strong book suffers from the self-imposed confines of sociology's dominant perception of theory. While Thomson enlivens classical theory by way of a deeper integration into the broader intellectual field, he does not do so sufficiently in the context of the contemporary field in which he lives and writes. While Thomson's text is tempting, like all such temptations, it is one we should avoid. There are other reasons for this judgment, which, like the above dissatisfaction, is more the fault of how sociology is done today than Thomson's fault.

Thompson is among those who are uncomfortable at the thought of not providing students with a roadmap for reading the primary texts which one could place on the syllabus beside it. This is how pedagogy works its subtle and most well-intended violence of one generation on another. It is also, based on my experiences as a teacher, a dreadful error. It is an error I know well from practicing it for several years. It is also an error that my philosophy professors taught me not to make – that is, I learned to doubt my studies from many well intended professors in sociology after I traversed other disciplines as a graduate student.

For years I experienced nothing but disappointment (and student boredom matching only my own) in my efforts to teach social theory. One day it dawned on me that attempting to teach theory was precisely the problem. Teaching it with those "intellectual training wheels" that are secondary texts, only made matters worse. We cannot teach theory any more than we can teach its twin sister, methodology. A professor can, as the person who arranges the course, provide students with challenging reading and insightful feedback on their questions, but s/he cannot "teach" theory. An impossible task is made all the more so when we use secondary texts in the classroom – even if they are as good as this one.

After years of frustration I went back to the lessons I was taught as an undergraduate in philosophy where, in my first year, books by Aristotle, Aquinas, Locke, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Sartre and Foucault were placed in my hands by professors. There were no secondary texts – no roadmaps of interpretation – although a list of non-required readings (seldom ever mentioned in class) was attached to most course syllabi. Today my theory students read books by Weber, Marx, Durkheim, Mead, Foucault, Derrida, and Baudrillard – and we read the classics in the context of the contemporary. Nowhere does Emile Durkheim live on as strongly as in the provocative thought of Jean Baudrillard. From Baudrillard we traverse backwards to Weber, before connecting forward to Foucault. Thomson's fine effort, like all of its competitors, is of little use to such an approach.

Teaching, a wise old master teacher once told me, is about taking risks. One of the most beautiful risks is placing challenging original texts in the hands of brilliant young minds, some of which are very lazy. My

experience has taught me to avoid lectures for seminars and to not use secondary texts, even if they are as good as Thomson's. The average student will at worst remain average, and the experience will not harm him or her. The best students will excel in such an environment and this will tend to continue in upper-year classes and graduate school. We do take a great risk when we use only primary texts in a theory class, but we expose our students to an even greater risk, when we do not – the risk of a banal education. Despite his most sincere scholarly efforts, even Anthony Thomson's book cannot avoid this difficulty. Thomson's training wheels for the mind may be beautiful, but like all others of its kind, they are props we do not need.

Thomson has written what is probably the best secondary social theory text on the market today. I recommend it as reading for instructors but not for classroom use. This is a stronger recommendation than I can offer any of its current competitors. Like all social theory texts – roadmaps for interpretation – we do not need them in our classrooms and far more importantly, our students do not need them. The dirty little secret in Canadian sociology today is that far too many of the incoming graduate students are thoroughly domesticated thinkers weaned on the interpretations of others. As their undergraduate professors, we need to investigate our own role in the process that leads to this result. Secondary roadmaps, no matter how well intended or well made, are no substitute for finding one's own way. Theory is challenge – and studying it should also be a challenge.

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