

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

FRANK J. LECHNER and JOHN BOLI, *World Culture: Origins and Consequences*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 260 p. + index.

Both globalization and culture are central research topics in sociology and academic debates today. This book by Lechner and Boli provides an excellent way into the literature on these topics. While sociologists are likely to start a discussion of these questions with the famous quote from Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* on how the capitalist bourgeoisie would create a world culture in its own image, Lechner and Boli update the theoretical tools at our disposal by outlining four paradigms for thinking about the origins and consequences of global culture. They are comprehensive and fair in their judgements, have written an interesting and lively text, and make a good case for two of the four approaches even as they acknowledge the value of competing theories. They provide a model for eclectic theorizing about world culture; and successfully handle the empirical material, world processes, and events which draw our attention to these new theories and concepts.

Lechner and Boli begin with an extended and entertaining discussion of the roots of the modern Olympics in 19th century French aristocratic circles. They have also written thoughtful chapters on UN meetings as the global rituals that serve to create world culture, the question of national identity and the pursuit of diversity, the anti-globalization movement, Islamist movements and the international criminal court. Particularly original is the fascinating discussion of Pentecostalism as a global movement and an emergent element in world culture.

These case studies come alive because of the four theoretical perspectives the authors outline and use to address the questions of world culture: world system theory, world policy theory, globalization theory and macro anthropological theory. Created by Immanuel Wallerstein, John Meyer, Roland Robertson and Arjun Appadurai respectively, each of these paradigms lays out unique and valuable approaches to thinking about culture under globalization. Lechner and Boli are excellent at critically presenting the theories. Even if one does not find their particular vision of a synthetic theory compelling (they combine world policy theory and the cultural-universalism promoted by the globalization theory of Robertson), the text would serve as an superb introduction to the topic in upper-level undergraduate or graduate seminars.

Canadian sociologists will be familiar, for the most part, with the world systems theory of Wallerstein, a neo-Marxist perspective that sees culture as an ideology rooted in the material context of a world economic system ruled by a “core” which imposes its hegemonic culture over the “periphery.” While utilizing some of the insights of Wallerstein where they are appropriate, Lechner and Boli draw on the more qualitative and interpretive theories of the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai to highlight questions of creolization, glocalization and niches in what are called “global scapes.”

At the core of the book, however, is an attempt to synthesize the approach of the British sociologist Robertson with the neo-institutionalism of the American sociologist John Meyer. It is the “world polity” perspective forged at Stanford that is probably least familiar to Canadian sociologists, so I will outline the approach here as a possible resource for scholars interested in these questions. But it is the fact that Lechner and Boli use competing theories to address these questions without descending into simplistic eclecticism that makes the book a valuable resource.

Rooted in earlier research on education by John Meyer and his students and collaborators at Stanford University, world polity theory stresses the ways in which organizations and practices diffuse globally through the mechanism of institutional isomorphism. That is to say, organizations outside the core, in Wallerstein’s language, adapt the practises and structures of American and Western organizations for cultural and political reasons. Modern schooling as a social form, for example, has spread globally, despite the fact, according to the Meyer perspective, that the links between schooling and economic efficiency are “loosely coupled.” Schooling as a social form provides cultural and political legitimacy to non-Western states and various actors involved in schooling organizations in ways that are not necessarily linked to concrete gains in economic productivity and political democracy. The Meyer perspective has recently been used to study the diffusion of science and the spread of NGOs and various globally oriented political institutions, making for a provocative theoretical angle into the questions of world culture. Lechner and Boli succeed in using Meyer’s undoubted insights while drawing on theories that stress the unequal power of the global north in economic and political exchanges, a weakness in Meyer’s approach. As a result, they have produced a well written, useful, theoretically informed and empirically grounded overview of the vitally important question of world culture that makes for excellent classroom material and illustrates the ways in which sociological theories and research traditions are central to current debates about culture and globalization.

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