

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JOHN SCOTT (Ed.), *Fifty Key Sociologists: The Contemporary Theorists*. New York: Routledge, 2008, 228 p.

John Scott is Professor of Sociology at Essex which he does not hesitate to tell us is the “leading department of sociology in Britain.” He and thirty-nine other contributors (only one of whom is located outside of the West) have produced a book which is, sadly, limited by the vision of its editor. The point of the book is to present essays (of about 2000 words each) concerning the fifty contemporary theorists “who have made the most significant and innovative advances on the formative ideas set out by theorists included in *Fifty Key Sociologists: The Formative Years*” (a previous Routledge volume). For the purposes of the book “contemporary” theorists need not be working in the present or immediate past but are considered to be contemporary “by virtue of the continuing relevance of their theoretical innovations to current sociological work.” This means, as it turns out, that contemporary theorists who are innovating beyond the boundaries of formative sociological theory (as defined by the previous volume) fall outside this book. There are many curious omissions and inclusions: Hélène Cixous is left out (except for a brief mention by the person writing on de Beauvoir) and Edward Said is, rightly, included. The lack of an essay on Cixous becomes very puzzling when one reads, in the introduction: “Of all the areas within which social theory has advanced since the formative period, however, two stand out above all others. These are to be found in the works of those writers who have made gender and ethnicity into their central concerns.” Homi Bhabha is also curiously absent although he is mentioned in the essays concerning Fanon and Spivak

The choices involving women writers tend to reflect the heavy British-based input. For example, while Hannah Arendt, Julia Kristeva, Nancy Fraser, Iris Marion Young, Luce Irigaray, and Cixous do not receive essays, Melanie Klein, Viola Klein (who died in 1973), de Beauvoir, and Mary Douglas do. To the editor’s credit there are essays on some women who we might have expected to be left out: Shulamith Firestone and Ann Oakley. There are also many essays concerning those women we would expect to find in a book such as this: Dorothy Smith, Donna Haraway, and Judith Butler. An enormous problem should have become apparent to the editor and publisher when they found it so difficult to trim the list of “key” contemporary theorists down to fifty. The number fifty is not the problem – the problem occurs when too many theorists from the mid-twentieth century take places which should have been occupied by thinkers who are actually contemporary. If someone of Viola Klein’s time is to be included then why not Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty or Jean-Paul Sartre? Scott admits another problem with the list, which he calls “inevitable,” that it reflects his own interests and concerns. He also admits that he did not go beyond

a panel of colleagues in his department at Essex for advice in making the final list. This is curious given the near certainty of connecting with authorities around the world via e-mail – even from Essex. Two-thirds of those contributing short essays are from Britain, six are from America, one is located in Asia and the rest are based in Europe.

Other thinkers one would expect to be present, and who are, include: Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Zygmunt Bauman, Pierre Bourdieu, Gilles Deleuze (but not Felix Guattari), Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens, Erving Goffman, Jürgen Habermas, Stuart Hall, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Alain Touraine, and Immanuel Wallerstein (but not Fernand Braudel). Stark and inexplicable omissions include (aside from those mentioned above): Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Lacan, Richard Rorty, Paul Virilio, Giorgio Agamben, Paul de Man, Jean-Luc Nancy, Vilém Flusser, Slavoj Žižek, Maurice Blanchot, Georges Canguilhem, and Emmanuel Lévinas. One wonders how Baudrillard made it into a collection that would keep so many of his contemporaries out. French theory seems separated, in the main, from Essex by more than La Manche. One reason, to answer Alan D. Schrift's question "Why do We Read the French So Badly?" is that we do not learn much about them in our textbooks [Alan D. Schrift. "Is there such a thing as 'French Philosophy?' or Why do we read the French so Badly?" In Julian Bourg (Ed.) (2004) *After the Deluge: New Perspectives on Postwar French Intellectual and Cultural History*]. And given the disproportionately Anglo-American constituency writing much of this volume, where are Peter Singer or Noam Chomsky? Among other moderns included we find Althusser (but not Poulantzas), Howard Becker, Manuel Castells, Randall Collins, Harold Garfinkel, Alvin Gouldner, C. L. R. James, Ernesto Laclau, Ralph Miliband, and C. Wright Mills.

The absence of an essay on Marshall McLuhan may not, at first, strike the reader as odd in a book on "contemporary" theorists. Why then are there essays concerning several of his arch-conservative contemporaries: George Homans (the self-appointed protector of Harvard sociology from Marxism), and Talcott Parsons (the high-priest of a long dead American functionalism). One thing this book does well, without meaning to, is to illustrate the problem of dividing sociological theory into only two periods: classical and contemporary. As we pass further into the new millennium we need to acknowledge a middle period which, for lack of a better term, we might call twentieth century thought. Classical theory ends with the First World War and the passing of Durkheim and Weber. Twentieth century thought operates mainly from 1920-1980 and contemporary thought really includes thinkers who came to prominence in and after the late 1970's.

There are also essays on Ulrich Beck, Norbert Elias, Harold Garfinkel, Clifford Geertz, Niklas Luhmann, Georges Gurwitsch, Basil Bernstein, Ernest Gellner, Paul Gilroy, William Julius Wilson, and Orlando Patterson. Few of these contributions succeed in convincing me that the thinker under examination is more important to contemporary thought than the likes of Derrida, Virilio, Žižek, or Rorty. If the book has a strength, it is the inclusion of several theorists who have done important thinking on race and ethnicity over the past forty years. Aside from its curious exclusions one wonders if many of those who have contributed essays

were actually the first choice to do so. The entries on Foucault, Bauman, Barthes, Said, Touraine and many others, are of good quality but are penned by people who have not written a book on the theorist in question. There is also a strong tendency among the contributors to be practically minded users of theory rather than theorists themselves.

As for the quality of the writing of the essays, it is mixed as one would expect in such a collection. Most of the entries struggle mightily to succeed but eventually fail to do any significant justice to their topic given the harsh word-length restrictions in place. This leads to a book that is something akin to the contemporary newspaper in decline as it moves away from depth and analysis to paragraph-long written “sound” bites. Surely a scholar of John Scott’s repute (from such a mighty school as Essex) has better things to do with his time than organize an uninteresting collection for a major corporate publisher (Routledge is controlled by Taylor and Francis, itself now under the attentive eye of a global entity called “Informa”). If this book is to be the test, Informa could do more to inform. Perhaps the name implies a parsed down understanding of the old term information – in that case this book could be viewed as a success of sorts.

What is one to do with this book? We really cannot justify asking undergraduates to purchase it as there are so many other books which do what it does, and so much more. I shall not order it for our university library because it takes up one-half inch of good shelf space. It would stand a chance as a competitive text if each entry were to go into more depth and were followed by essential and fascinating selections from each writer under consideration. This could lead to a book of about three times its current size. If the editor and publisher had taken this approach, they might well have provided a useful international best seller in undergraduate theory. I wonder why a house like Routledge doesn’t take the time to do such a book? Instead we have a volume which in all likelihood will go largely unnoticed – a kind of scholarly *People* magazine for an incomplete list of key contemporary theorists. In its present form this book is at best a work in progress and not very useful as a pedagogical tool. About half way through it you may come to realize that it is the kind of book which reduces, without intending to, each of its essays to little more than an advertisement for the book itself. It is a book which does a poor job, even on its back cover, of justifying its own existence. Sadly, it is not very long into it that we realize why. It is very rare in my experience to discover a book that is so thoroughly superfluous and ineffectual. However, it might well be an ideal book for people who do not like contemporary theory very much. This is, perhaps, the market Routledge is seeking and perhaps we should not underestimate its potential for producing sales.

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