

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

KATE NASH and ALAN SCOTT, eds. *The Blackwell Companion to Political Sociology*, Malden MA: Blackwell. 2001 (paperback version 2004) 478 pages.

This book is a collection of pithy and insightful commentaries on specific topics that relate to political sociology. The authors claim that this is not a temporary way-station on the way to political science or sociology but an emerging discipline (albeit with fuzzy and uncertain boundaries at the edges) in its own right located “in the gaps of the conventional boundaries drawn between the political, cultural and economic...” (2). The book covers just about everything related to political sociology, but some topics are more consistently profiled than others.

Luckily each chapter begins with a well-written paragraph that acts as a guide to the contents and to where the article is located.

This is definitely a Eurocentric book. If one were to judge by institutional affiliation rather than birth one could conclude that this is a very European (in the EU sense) book. Out of the 38 contributions, just three are from American scholars. Of the others, one was written by two contributors from Quebec, twenty-one are from British academics, and three are from Australian academics.

This is a big book and there are a lot of ideas. This reviewer could not cope with the range – it’ll be, at least over the next year, a process of “read a chapter (or if it’s one of the weightier chapters and there are many of these, read half or a third of a chapter), and then walk around and reflect on it”. Although chapters don’t generally reference each other, they do speak to and often speak against each other. That means that re-reflection and more walking will often be required.

These aren’t really the kind of review articles that one finds in the *Annual Review of Research in Sociology or Psychology*. They are rather conceptual reviews of the trends in thought. I believe that the authors indeed intended this type of abstraction.

Naturally any political sociology worth its salt will have a perspective on economics and a number of the commentators contrast their approaches with traditional economic ones. There’s a lot of insight on the differences

between different rational choice perspectives as well as on the defects of all such perspectives.

Rather than a host of summaries, in order to pique your imagination and convey some of the content, I will select a few quotes from included authors that were particularly thought-provoking:

Norval: Pluralization, in this [active] sense, would refer to subjecting static conceptions of “cultural diversity” based on categories such as gender, race, class, and ethnicity as givens, to the disruptive effects of a conception of difference as irreducible, and to actively cultivating the visibility of the deeply split nature of identity politically. (280)

Bagnasco: Both authors {Putnam and Fukuyama} know full well that the historical process intervenes to redirect lines of development at particular moments, but their references exclude individual or collective subjects oriented toward strategies that they attempt, with varying degrees of coherence and awareness, to implement in a concrete situation which at once limits them and opens alternative possibilities (238)

Connell: “Poststructuralist and postmodern thought tends to abandon the concept of “the state” as such, replacing it with discursive conceptions of “governmentality” or with discussions of local and specific powers” (199-120)

Dowding: “...the precise institutional rules which exist are just as important for the final outcome as the preferences of actors.”(34)

The book was first published in 2001. That was before the Towers and the second invasion of Iraq. Of course, the basic ideas have not changed but the hues that they cast have shifted appreciably. Nevertheless this book continues to be relevant because of its more conceptual focus.

The book’s breadth betokens the Shakespearean “What a piece of work is sociology! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty!” In this regard, its title, Companion, is appropriate. Given the multitude of insightful analyses of concepts and trends, theoretically focused researchers in political sociology will get a lot of use out of this book.

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