

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

ALAN SEARS, *A Good Book, In Theory – A Guide to Theoretical Thinking*. Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 2005. 175 p.

Alan Sears has written a very accessible book on *how* to think theoretically. Using one theoretical debate – between social order and conflict models of theory – he aims to demonstrate that theory matters by teaching students *how* to theorize and *how* to critically conceptualize their everyday lives. The book is focused on systematic reflections and conceptual, organizational skills. It is also focused on developing students as active subjects and agents in their own lives and in their social contexts.

Sears wants teachers to develop in students an appetite for theory and so this book encourages students to: 1) apply new theoretical insights to their everyday experiences; 2) develop skills at reading theory; 3) write theoretically; 4) develop critical thinking and persuasion skills; and, most significantly, 5) find their voice and integrate it within an analytical framework. Sears aims to make theory relevant and fun for students, so these objectives are pursued in an informal tone: “I hope you have fun with this book. I think theory is a hoot.” (14)

Alan Sears links knowledge with personal and social transformation. He *models* how one approaches the analysis of a theoretical position. Students will find this invaluable. Sears demonstrates how to track down fundamental premises and establishes how specific understandings about society emerge from those foundations. That is, he demonstrates how different theoretical perspectives *explain* how society works and how society changes.

By discussing macroscopic and microscopic perspectives, and the relationship between theory, opinion and fact, Sears highlights the selection and organizational processes involved in ‘looking’. In this way Sears aims to create students who are aware of their own agency. The focus on consciousness and intersubjectivity is then used, in an integrative way, to illustrate social relations of race, gender, sexuality and social class. This integration is a major strength of the book.

Encouraging an historical analysis of events, Sears attempts to help students develop a ‘sociological imagination’. By stressing the social construction of reality, Sears emphasizes the possibilities of agency – individual and collective – to create social change and to show how

‘society’ that is seen as ‘solid melts into air’. In addition, Sears demonstrates that each individual is a theorist, as we are all involved in processes of abstraction. By highlighting processes of abstraction such as extension, level of generality, and vantage point, Sears makes students aware of how contradictions and paradoxes emerge when specific details are examined within historical contexts.

Finally, Sears focuses on formal theorizing. He helps students sharpen their thinking by suggesting a disciplined logical approach and by emphasizing empirical rigor to demonstrate cause and effect with precision. Sear’s discussion of self-reflection and reflection on the nature of knowledge, the character of existence, and the emergence of consciousness gives this book depth and opens the door for students to link the everyday art of living to the ‘big’ questions, such as the assumption of *a* human condition.

The book has six chapters. Sears includes exercises at the end of Chapters Two to Six to encourage students to do methodical reading, effective writing and to reflect on their own consciousness, human nature and their own personal experiences. The exercises then focus these reflections by linking them to formal theories while analyzing various substantive issues such as racial profiling and social stratification.

I recommend this book highly. It can be used in theory and method courses and in any substantive area as a supporting text to encourage students to develop their capacity in critical thinking. I enjoyed reading this book and will definitely be using it as a pedagogical tool in developing my own courses.

The book could have been improved by including reflections on related topics. Theoretical thinking and critical thinking are part of other instructional and developmental sequences, such as the capacity to take emotional risks and attempt new ways of thinking, to focus a research topic, and to develop an analytical argument. What are the pedagogical challenges involved in developing these capacities? I certainly think more in-depth reflections, research and writing on such topics are needed.

Overall, however, this book makes a valuable contribution to pedagogy. By encouraging students to reflect on personal experiences, and then by linking these reflections to personal growth and social change, Alan Sears makes theory come alive. With this book, I imagine that, at the end of the term, students will agree with Sears – “theory is a hoot”!

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