

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

BLACK HAWK HANCOCK and ROBERTA GARNER, *Changing Theories: New Directions in Sociology*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009, xii + 256 p., index.

Making social theory accessible, especially to the uninitiated, can be an arduous undertaking. What can often seem like a fruitless endeavour for all parties involved can become an enlightening exchange of ideas if the proper materials are utilized. In order to penetrate the dense bog of complex concepts scattered amongst various theorists and their theories, one needs to find an appropriate entry point. DePaul University faculty members Black Hawk Hancock and Roberta Garner have sought to do just that with their book *Changing Theories: New Directions in Sociology*. All things considered, the authors are successful in providing such a path into the complex world of social theory.

While a welcoming tone resonates throughout, the book provides a journey through the works of major social theorists both classical and contemporary. The philosopher Thomas Kuhn's concept of a paradigm shift – originally applied to the shifts in the natural sciences – is appropriated here for the social sciences to explain the shifts that have taken precedence over the years in social theory. Although the authors identify four successive and distinct, yet sometimes overlapping, periods, they are primarily interested in the transition from the third period (emerging at the end of World War II) to the fourth period (roughly beginning around 1968), which is identified as the contemporary era.

The six chapters of the book are well structured, especially for an introductory book. Divided into two parts, the text is intelligently presented in a manner that gradually eases the reader into the daunting waters of theory by initially relating it to the “real world.” Appropriately titled “Changes,” the first part of the book presents a variety of contemporary issues that chart social change throughout the globe. For this, various social issues are sketched by Hancock and Garner such as globalization, neoliberalism, hyper-industrialization, the AIDS epidemic, environmental degradation, and racism, among several others. Employing these tangible examples in concert with theory is often lacking in many theory books, but the authors excel in joining theory with the “real world.” This is an important step for establishing the context(s) of the various theories presented over the course of the book.

To help orient the reader, Hancock and Garner give a broad overview of the history of social theory beginning with Marx and Engels, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel. These classical theorists are kept in the background for the majority of the book, but occasionally surface at appropriate times to flesh out the links with contemporary theorists. This contrast between theorists both classical and

contemporary is another major strength of the book. Such an approach is not only instructive regarding the history of social theory, but it also helps situate the work of contemporary theorists in the broader context of sociology as a discipline.

The second part of the book focuses on what the authors refer to as the four “transitional giants.” Erving Goffman, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Stuart Hall are deservedly granted this lofty status. Hancock and Garner justify their choices by describing the substantial impact each author has had on social theory. Appearing in chronological order, each “giant” is presented in his own chapter. The entire oeuvre of each “giant” is given considerable attention and is cogently synthesized, which can be attributed to Hancock and Garner’s clear mastery of the material. The authors again excel with their comparing and contrasting by linking the work of each “giant” with the other “giants.”

As for the current state of social theory, Hancock and Garner present a void that is in desperate need of filling. The authors use the broad, catchall label of “conflict constructionism” (7) to describe the fragmented state of contemporary social theory. Such a classification denotes the plethora of theories that often overlap and blur at the edges, yet certainly do not fall under one distinct and rigid school of thought as symbolic interactionism or structural functionalism once did. With this, the authors present a metaphorical fork in the road where no single paradigm is dominant. As well, Hancock and Garner believe that nothing akin to the transitional giants is taking place in the present landscape of social theory. They conclude their book “by suggesting that the cycle of paradigm change that began in the last decades of the twentieth century may now itself be drawing to a close” (209). Such a view is either an optimistic call to arms for theorists, or it is a pessimistic obituary for the hope of anything new. This is a somewhat problematic stance given the lack of attention paid to the full range of contemporary social theorists who have produced valuable work in recent times.

This brings to light the one slight misstep by the authors: the omission of several notable contemporary theorists. For example, references to such luminaries as Zygmunt Bauman, Anthony Giddens and Jürgen Habermas (to name a few) are conspicuously absent. If such authors were given even the slightest consideration, perhaps the intellectual landscape of social theory would not seem quite so barren to Hancock and Garner. In this respect, the authors’ goal to “provide a comprehensive overview of contemporary sociological theories” (xi) falls a tad short. This is understandable since the primary focus is on the four “transitional giants,” but an enlarged overview of theorists would have been a welcome addition. Such material would have provided a much fuller picture of the contemporary social theory scene.

Regardless, with *Changing Theories: New Directions in Sociology*, Hancock and Garner have largely accomplished what they set out to do. This text is an excellent introduction to contemporary social theory that would predominantly benefit undergraduate sociology students. The layout of the book, with its helpful list of key terms at the end of each chapter, as well as the carefully constructed list of suggestions for future reading at the back of the book, makes it a handy reference resource. In addition, several thought-provoking questions are posed throughout the text that would undoubtedly encourage classroom discussion

and/or individual reflection. Along these lines, this book could be used as an effective teaching tool in an introductory contemporary social theory class. Graduate students throughout the social sciences who are not well versed in social theory would also find this book to be a welcome catapult into theory. In short, Hancock and Garner's book would be of interest to anyone looking for a quick and painless introduction to contemporary social theory.

Patrick Gamsby, Laurentian University

© Canadian Sociological Association/La Société canadienne de sociologie