Controversies in Drugs Policy and Practice

As academics, researchers and perhaps policymakers (if you do get to read this) we are charged with finding out about the social world, discussing and reporting on it, and hopefully along the way something may happen which may mean that things are done for the greater good (Briggs, 2010). As someone who has researched in this manner for over a decade now, I was very enthusiastic to read and comment on Neil McKeganey’s new work which tackles the most pressing arguments and debates in the context of drug policy and practice.

Overall, the book is extremely accessible, easy to read and well structured. Chapter 1 starts with, what seems to be, a never-ending list of questions which immediately throws the reader into the book’s debates. By raising these questions of legalisation, harm reduction and law enforcement, the reader is already juggling with central issues which the book aims to disaggregate. Thereafter, McKeganey quickly sets the scene for drugs policy and outlines the structure of the book. Using the examples of HIV and AIDs epidemic in chapter 2, he charts the movement of harm reduction, debating whether it was focussed on health and welfare of drug users or was a Trojan Horse for drug legalisation. Indeed, Gerry Stimson has made similar observations at the start of the millennium (Stimson, 2000). Continuing in this vein, in chapter 3 McKeganey then examines the role of drug treatment in the UK and draws on evidence to suggest how and why the system may be failing a substantial proportion of drug users despite the NTA rhetoric (see NTA, 2007). The chapter questions the role of methadone in the recovery of drug users and draws attention to the billions of pounds which have been thrown at the treatment sector – only for a small number to remain drug free (Fox et al., 2005).

Chapter 4 addresses the myths and realities of drug enforcement: not only on a global but also on a local scale. It considers whether people are deterred
as a consequence of hard-line policies on drug possession/dealing/using. This chapter contains an interesting commentary on the function of the prison in harbouring problematic drug users; the accountability which the prison institution holds in resolving these problems but also the flawed attempts at preventing drug use and dealing in prison. Here, the point could be reinforced that that regardless of seizure, prevention and enforcement strategies, a crude mixture of structural and social processes seem to continue to provide a ready stream of people to fill any gaps which become available in the drug market – from the top (Adler, 1985) to the bottom (Pitts, 2007).

In the fifth chapter, McKeganey discusses the classification and myths of cannabis – appropriately titled ‘How to make a hash out of the world’s favourite drug’. Here he deconstructs the use of cannabis and its classification while touching on available data on its social use and health risks. While he concludes that cannabis is not a gateway drug (see Booth Davies, 1997), he should perhaps also draw on empirical evidence which states that other drugs such as alcohol carry heavier health and social consequences than cannabis (for example see Patton et al., 2007). This would augment his argument.

Chapter 6 charts a very grey area; that of the children of drug-addicted parents. With the advent of the Baby P case, there is no doubt that this ambiguous area continues to create difficult decision-making on the part of professionals, and rightly so, McKeganey offers a discussion of agency accountability. However, there is some neglect of U.S. literature which suggests that many children and young people exposed to the various drug-related abuses of their parents during the ‘crack era’ of the 1980s and 1990s actively grew up rejecting the lifestyles of their parents – despite being exposed to these risks (Reinarman and Levine, 2004). Some consideration of this literature would have been useful here.

Chapter 7 offers a chapter which one would expect from a book with such a title: it examines the legalisation debate. Drawing on examples of policy and practice from different countries, McKeganey discusses the advantages and disadvantages of liberalising or toughening up on measures to deal with drug use. Chapter 8 is my favourite – probably because here McKeganey talks directly from his experience on the politics of researching drugs issues. Here, he reflects on the bureaucratic practicalities of doing the research, of writing the reports, of presenting the findings and dealing with the consequences. I think we have all been in these situations; where we are battling with our governmental funders over the content of our research while simultaneously trying to deter the media from pouncing on some bizarre anomaly only to make it into a next-day panic headline. Through the examples he gives, McKeganey seems to have skilfully kept his integrity intact, and impressively so, at a time when governmental/academic relations are fragile and perhaps evermore distant (Silverman, 2010). The concluding chapter presents a moving narrative which summarises our journey through drug policy and practice over the last thirty years.

Neil McKeganey has done a really great job in this book. It is skilfully crafted and accessible for all. The chapters are succinct and the examples
which support his arguments are both solid and powerful. There are also some good questions for debate at the end of each chapter which are beneficial for both academic and student discussion forums. To be honest, I have come to find the world of drug research difficult to absorb especially having read Michael Agar’s (2006) life testimony of the trials and tribulations of attempting to shift the dominant perspective of drugs and change the lives of those living in the margins of drug addiction and dealing. I suppose we all wonder if what we do in the research world is for some good and here, in this work, Neil McKeiganey perhaps summarises our current dilemmas in our research projects as well as our life projects. He shows us that while potential disillusionment may always tempt us down a precarious path of conceding to powerful political pressures and media hysteria, we should always retain our ability to ‘tell it how it is’. This certainly seems to be what he has done.

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References


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Old Assumptions, New Realities deserves the attention of welfare analysts and policy-makers on both sides of the Atlantic as one of the first publications to
tackle the future of the American welfare state after the global economic downturn (which the authors term the Great Recession of 2007–2009). The chapters, written by leading welfare, political and economic analysts, reveal the glaring disparity between US and international welfare achievements and make a strong case that bridging that gap is not only necessary from a humanist point of view, but is affordable and beneficial for the economy in the middle and long run. The authors discuss pertinent issues for US welfare, such as workforce development and tackling discrimination in low-skill labour markets; making policies more family-friendly; the potential of universal asset-based policies for achieving security for all income groups; and the problems of social security services that are heavily dependent on non-profit organizations; among others.

The book’s strength is its combination of forward-looking analyses, based on a wealth of recent research, with practical suggestions for reform in key areas of labour and social policy, including health-care, childcare, education and training, employment security and retirement income. The authors take an openly Democratic and pro-reform position to these issues. In chapter 2 (pp. 31–70) Jacob Hacker, a prolific welfare analyst widely known as the author of Obama’s Health Care Plan (Hacker, 2007) and one of the developers of the Economic Security Index (ESI), lists the consolidation of a conservative movement among the key reasons for what he terms the Great Risk Shift (other reasons include the rise of the filibuster as a tool to sabotage reform (p. 47), the increasing importance of economic motivation for both voting and policy-making and the recently noticeable class-stratification of voting (p. 45)). Some of Hacker’s suggestions for general reform (pp. 50–65) seem commonplace and modest from a European standpoint, yet are revolutionary in the US: such as ‘a few weeks of family leave’ (p. 54); however, his idea of introducing ‘portable’ social insurance is very interesting. Unfortunately, the analysis remains locked in the limitations of the US debate: even Hacker’s brazen suggestions for universal welfare are explicitly limited to those ‘with any direct or family tie to the labor force’ (back to the old assumptions of welfare as only for the ‘deserving’ citizens).

The book’s main contribution to the debate is that it focuses not on traditional risk groups (such as the disabled, elderly, unemployed, or single mothers) but on ‘ordinary Americans at extraordinary risk’ (p. 33). The authors argue that working families, presumed to be the backbone of US economy and society, are precisely the ones deemed until now ‘too small to save’ (p. 35) and largely neglected by the increasingly thread-bare safety-net of the post-2008 welfare state; and also the ones whose wellbeing is the best indicator for the resilience of a country’s welfare system. The book draws extensively on global and European welfare experiences and represents one of the two main voices which will dominate the debates in the upcoming US presidential election campaign: one to which most Europeans, regardless of political conviction, are likely to subscribe, but not necessarily the most popular one in the USA. In particular, two novel concepts for US social policy
are brought into the debate: demand-side approaches to labour market improvement (Osterman in chapter 4) and universal asset-building, especially focusing on the low-income bracket (Sherraden in chapter 5).

The collection promises to debunk old welfare assumptions and lay the ground for new ones better suited for dealing with today’s socio-economic realities. It fulfils this promise by offering a rich historical and factual background that demonstrates how realities have changed, while policy-making assumptions have persevered; rigorous analyses with references to global and European good practices; and detailed policy recommendations addressed to US policy-makers. However, two resilient old assumptions remain unquestioned: that, in the 21st century, families remain the key unit of social life; and that what American families need most is security – and economic security in particular. There is little wrong with these two assumptions: many of the suggestions – in particular those in chapter 6 – are very sensitive to changing family realities such as dual-bread-earner households and single-parent families; and we need to bear in mind that in the American welfare tradition economic security is tightly linked with economic opportunity (a point clearly made by Hacker: 35).

One significant criticism can be made from the viewpoint of the capability approach, which is based on the works of Amartya Sen and has been gaining momentum in recent European studies of welfare and social policy (e.g. Clark, 2006): however progressive, most of the articles in the book remain limited to a framework of residual welfare as a safety-net, rather than a holistic conception of wellbeing; an instrument for the targeted relief of poverty, rather than a mechanism for enabling all citizens to fulfil their best potential and live meaningful lives. Paul Osterman’s chapter 4 (103–124) and Michael Sherraden’s article (chapter 5: 125–149) are welcome exceptions. Both Osterman and Sherraden discuss ways of creating opportunity at the bottom, through reform of labour market institutions which could provide more relevant skill training; and through developing universal asset-building policies, including those in the lowest income brackets, respectively. Sherraden’s topic is particularly innovative and should be of interest to British and European policymakers and analysts.

The five chapters in Part I are dedicated to policies to increase economic security, while Part II discusses challenges facing safety-net programmes for the working poor (Allard: 187–213) and low-income workers (Sandfort: 214–42).

In chapter 3 (pp. 71–102) Michael Stoll discusses ‘workforce development’, the major approach in the US addressing skill deficits in the low-skill areas of the job market (p. 72). UK education experts will be familiar with the problem of ‘raising economic cost’ for individuals with a limited education, which in the US especially applies to minority communities (ibid.), as well as with the need for more adequate training that would provide more general problem-solving skills suited for changing workplaces in today’s increasingly precarious job market.
Chapter 6 (Heyman and Earle, pp. 150–83), based on formidable empirical research, is a striking, detailed account of the ‘gaping holes’ (p. 168) of US welfare protection for working families, paid leave, pre-school care, and education arrangements, some of which even violate UN standards signed by the US. Heyman and Earle ask a reasonable question: can the US catch up with the rest of the world in adopting legislative changes that would allow better workplace provisions and education programmes to increase social justice and equality – and can it do so now, after the Great Recession? They draw convincing parallels between today’s situation and previous breakthroughs in US welfare, all of which emerged as responses to economic crises and were successful in achieving greater stability and justice. The authors also note an interesting alternative to unions’ instrumental role in passing progressive legislation in the 20th century: electronic forums as a new means of political organization in the 21st century.

In chapter 7 (pp. 187–213) Scott W. Allard observes that the fragmented nonprofit-run safety-net itself needs a safety-net and warns us to expect a longer-term ‘ripple effect’ of the Recession on economic security (p. 205). The key problem with America’s non-profit-organization-based social security system is the instability and unpredictability of provision: it decreases right when needed most, and is least available to the most needy. His answer is partnering of state service agencies with community-based organizations.

In chapter 8 (pp. 214–42) Jodi Sandfort uses Richard Elmore’s concept of ‘backward mapping’ to paint a comprehensive picture of America’s currently extremely fragmented welfare system, and develops a range of practical suggestions for a radical (especially by US standards) redesign of the actual operation of social security mechanisms, drawing on good practices in a number of US states. Both the need to reduce the ‘system oversight’ (p. 234) and Sandfort’s arguments for purposive public investment and replacing unnecessary administrative complexity with a more intuitive system which is both efficient and accessible to ‘citizen “customers” ’ (p. 235) will ring familiar with UK welfare specialists.

The main messages of Old Assumptions, New Realities – that America’s ‘divided welfare state’ (Hacker, 2007) is breaking down; that risk is shifting back onto workers and their families; that urgent, comprehensive, and radical reform of the US social contract towards its universalisation is necessary; and that, regardless of financial cost, these reforms must be carried out sooner, rather than later – will not surprise European audiences.

As usual, however, even the far end of the scale of legitimate welfare arguments in the US is much less adventurous than its counterpart in Europe and even the UK: many of the policy proposals concern areas often taken for granted, such as the provision of ‘several weeks of paid leave to care for newborns’ (p. 54), the right to one day of rest a week, or (near-)universal basic health-care coverage.

What is perhaps more interesting is the way in which arguments of economic efficiency, long-term sustainability, and promotion of economic oppor-
tunity for American citizens and businesses are employed in defence of a comprehensive, universal welfare state. Even though the proposed policy solutions stem from a fundamental belief in comprehensive and universal welfare, the overarching argument is that the government has a ‘social imperative [...] to promote opportunity and economic security’ (p. 235). In the general tone of US welfare debates, even the most pro-welfare circles endorse the need to preserve ‘the potentially beneficial processes of change and adjustment that produce some of these risks’ and the importance of economic opportunity for economic security; and the authors of this volume make no exception (e.g. Hacker: 35; Sandfort: 214–235). Their apparent conservatism does not necessarily stem from neoliberal convictions, but from a realisation of path dependency: as Hacker (pp. 31–70) points out, the reason why even the most ambitious reforms, such as the 2010 Affordable Care Act, fall ‘well short of the international health policy standards of universal coverage and robust efforts to restrain medical cost’ (p. 35), is that a welfare state cannot be designed on a clean slate: it has to build on existing, if controversial and imperfect, heritage. Still, in view of the shrinking European social model due to the recent economic crisis which began in 2008, it is admirable to find a rigorously-argued publication that defends a well-functioning welfare system as inextricable from a society that is both fair and economically sustainable.

The book will not only be useful to those interested in American welfare debates. The first two chapters give a dense historical background on 20th century US welfare which makes the book a good starting point for European readers who seek to understand the heritage of US social policy and its recent developments under the Obama Administration. A few key terms, such as the 401(k) account, may not be familiar to readers and a glossary would have been welcome.

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References


Rethinking Family Practices

In Rethinking Family Practices David Morgan reviews how his concept of family practices has been taken up in recent scholarship and considers how it
might be refined. Morgan introduced the idea of family practices in the conclusion of his 1996 book *Family Connections*, and it has since become one of the key analytical tools in this field. In the introduction Morgan reiterates that using the term family practices implies an attunement to the fluidity of family life, its everyday and active character and a concern with linking the perspectives of the actor and the observer of history and biography. The first three chapters seek to establish the continuing relevance of the concept by considering how it might be extended based on the author’s own reflections on its limitations, a careful examination of alternative theoretical frameworks and the critiques the concept has generated. Morgan stresses throughout that the term ‘practices’ was already in widespread use before he came to develop it for family analysis and that the idea of family practices reflects the particular intellectual developments of the time, especially feminist scholarship and the ethnomethodological turn. This intellectually generous approach characterizes the book and it’s refreshing to see a well known scholar recognize that the production of ideas is necessarily a collaborative endeavour.

Chapter two starts by introducing eight different dictionary definitions of the word ‘practice’ as a way of theoretically locating the discussion. I wasn’t immediately convinced of the effectiveness of this approach as I was concerned it would make the discussion theoretically light, however it does enable Morgan to draw attention to the everyday meanings of the term. Moreover the definition of ‘practice’ as a term encapsulating the tension between structure and agency – or action and habit as Morgan puts it, drawing on Bourdieu – provides an important theoretical refinement. A slightly distracting habit of the author is to frequently state what the book is not doing, this distracts the reader’s attention from the discussion and overemphasizes the limited scope of the book. Chapter 3 explores competing approaches including Lynn Jamieson’s work on intimacy, Carol Smart’s idea of personal life and Miriam Glucksmann’s idea of TSOL amongst others, arguing that these approaches are compatible and useful additions to family practices in that they all seek to capture the complexity of modern life and go beyond the pre-ordered category of the family. Although there is clearly value in seeing connections over differences when reviewing others’ work, and in fact one of the strengths of this book is the author’s ability to listen attentively to others’ voices in the field, at times I felt this conciliatory approach prevented the author from making a bolder statement about the distinctiveness of his approach. Chapter 4 considers the development of family practices including Janet Finch’s work on displaying families. The suggestion that to elaborate on this concept we might also look at how class and family practices of display overlap and that more attention should be paid to the different kinds of audiences involved in display are worth following up. In dealing with more critical developments – some of which are auto-critiques – namely that the family practices approach downplays structural constraints, doesn’t pay enough attention to discourses, and reproduces a eurocentric and heteronormative model of intimate relationships, Morgan shows that these
are limitations which can and should be incorporated into his approach rather than making it redundant. I was intrigued by Morgan’s suggestion that although he has seldom focused on what he calls ‘the darker side of family life’ the concept of family practices could also be used to study abusive or destructive practices in intimate life. I would be keen to hear whether this is a potentially useful analytical tool for social scientists working in this area or whether these issues require a different theoretical apparatus altogether. Out of the substantive chapters the ones on Time/Space and Embodiment were least successful for me as they do not go beyond suggesting that there is a deep affinity between the practices approach and these contemporary trends in the social sciences. However the chapters on emotions and ethics particularly stood out for me as raising important questions. The argument that there are strong linkages between family and ethics – or doing family and doing ethics – is more sustainable here as the historical construction of this connection, including the division between the public and private sphere is highlighted. In chapter seven, Morgan insightfully points out that we need new sociological ways of thinking about emotions in family life without having to use the terminology of ‘emotional labour/work’. This is indeed a significant challenge for sociologists working in this field, however his reluctance to engage with psycho-analytical accounts of emotions prevents him in my opinion from furthering this debate. The conclusion makes an eloquent argument for the distinctiveness of family relationships thus justifying the usefulness of family practices as a particular but non-exclusive approach. As a sociologist of gender and families, reading this book has alerted me to the already existing linkages between space, time, embodiment and ethics in my own work and I hope it will encourage others to develop a sensitivity to these interconnections. Whilst at times I was longing for the book to provide a stronger statement about family life, Morgan’s emphasis on theorizing family life rather than constructing a theory of family living has prompted me to think anew about the process of theory development and to acknowledge its open-ended nature. This is an engaging and stimulating read I have no doubt this book will be read widely by scholars in the sociology of families and beyond.

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Masculinities in Transition

This book is a careful and thoughtful contribution to the study of masculinities from a feminist perspective. It brings to the fore the diverse experiences of men in different contexts and the reassertion and/or questioning of their own masculine identity. Beyond the exploration of the concept of masculinity, the
authors also investigate the exercise, or in the authors’ words, the ‘doing of masculinity’, and ask to what extent men nowadays move between a public world of employment – which to a certain degree is masculinised – into a feminised home environment. Further, Robinson and Hockey question the legitimacy of ‘the public and private notion’ as separate spheres where men, and also women, perform gender (p. 4).

In order to disentangle the ‘doing of masculinity’ and its multiple aspects, the authors carried out an almost three year long field study in a city in the north of England. The field study involved interviews with men and with women in varied relationships with the men, as partners, relatives and friends. The field study was further comprised of participant observation in three occupational areas. The occupations carefully chosen by Robinson and Hockey reflect gendered stereotypes attached to these kinds of work: firefighter (stereotypically masculinised), estate agent (gender neutral), and hairdresser (feminised work). Moreover, the fieldwork takes into consideration aspects of age and class in the interviewees and their areas of observation by including in its sample young, mid-life, and older men, as well as working-class and middle-class social environments.

The book is structured in three main parts, each having an introductory chapter where the main theoretical aspects of this work are contextualised: masculinity in transition, body in embodiment, and intimacy and emotion.

In the first part, for Robinson and Hockey, transition becomes a substantive theoretical aspect of their work because this serves as a tool to understand how masculinity is considered in public and private spaces, in men’s different stages of life development (age, civil status, (un)employed) and in relation with their social class status. Questioning whether public and private performance may stimulate the reformulation of gender identities or reinforce an established hegemonic masculinity, this section develops the identity category of masculinity (p. 33). Echoing Richard Jenkins (2004), for Robinson and Hockey identity is seen as a process in motion with no ending; thus with regard to masculinity, the authors argue this is explained in relation to heterosexual identification and as an opposition to a feminine identity. Nevertheless, with the data presented, particularly in chapters three to six, the authors then conclude that hegemonic masculinity, and as a consequence how it is understood as masculinity identity, can be and in fact is customized in relation to the context and situations that men experience in their work places, in their home, and with their partners, co-workers, and friends.

The second part of the book moves on to theories of the body and its relation with masculinity, and explores the fluidity of the male body situated in particular times and spaces and in connection with what the authors call embodied others (partners, friends, family, among others) (p. 77). By introducing a clear distinction between gendered conceptions of the body and individual men’s experiences of embodiment, the section shows through the data collected how dominant discourses of masculinity in the three chosen
occupations (firefighter, estate agent, and hairdresser) are jeopardized by those men performing contradictory masculinities in relation to their jobs. Yet at the same time these men are affirming a ‘professional’ identity. These contradictory observations of the same man performing what we can name intertwined-entangled identities constitute the body in relation to which men’s embodied subjectivities are negotiated (p. 97). Furthermore, Robinson and Hockey dedicate a specific chapter to each profession, exploring the embodied experiences of each of them. This allows them to conclude that men manage embodied transitions into different social contexts, age periods and activities.

Finally, the third part deals with the still little studied area of emotions. In an impeccable and innovative work, the authors look into men’s emotional lives in the public (work) and private (home) arenas. Albeit in different and diverse ways, and through their every day work and life, hairdressers, firefighters and estate agents perform emotional labour. By doing emotional labour, Robinson and Hockey argue, men also find themselves gendering and re-gendering feelings rules, and the understanding of their own occupational identities. Moreover, in further chapters within this section, the book engages in how emotional labour can be used to challenge or maintain a hegemonic masculinity linked with the stereotypes of the occupations. The authors also claim that emotion(s) and the different styles of them precede in the doing and expression of specific kinds of masculinity and femininity which permeate the boundary between work and home.

Robinson and Hockey successfully present innovative research on the area of masculinities. It is important to mention to future readers that the book is situated in English-British society which is indeed very much divided by social class. Ethnic or racial aspects of masculinity as well as locations (where they come from or live) are absent in the research. Although the authors cover men at different age ranges and with diverse class backgrounds, Robinson and Hockey do not consider specific ethnic minority groups in which masculinity can be understood, performed, and exercised in very different ways.

This aside, *Masculinities in Transition* is much needed research that aptly explores the ‘mutability of doing masculinity’ (p. 2). The book presents data which transit between men’s work, household and recreational environments and concludes that the doing of masculinity vary not only between men but within the same subject (men) as his social contexts is altered.

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Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul’s School

At its best sociology reveals how the natural order of things is anything but natural. Easy talk of ‘elite’ institutions rests on an often unspoken but widely-held premise that the cream naturally rises to the top. Exposing the myth that high-status positions in high-standing institutions are occupied by people of exceptional natural ability should be the target of any self-respecting sociological study on elites.

This is precisely what Shamus Rahman Khan deftly achieves in his book Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul’s School. As a former member of St. Paul’s boarding school (established in 1856 in Concord, New Hampshire) Khan’s insights into the subtlety of elite formation are acutely observed. Nuanced interpretations of everyday interactions at the school between and among students and staff, informed by a seamless use of concepts derived from scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu and Erving Goffman, make a compelling read.

The formative impact of Khan’s own personal experience at the school is critical. As one of a small number of Asian American students entering this institution in the early 1990s, Khan’s initial surprise at being met by a number of black and Latino faces in the common room of his dormitory was swiftly tempered by recognition of a deceit. He had been placed in a dormitory for people like himself – sequestered into a ghetto within the school which instantly informed him of his place in such an institution.

The question that intrigues Khan and motivates the study is a simple one: why are inequalities growing in the US despite a principled commitment, rooted in the Jeffersonian ideal of a ‘natural aristocracy’ selected by talent, to meritocracy where only talent not privilege is the supposed route to success? He notes that the US, committed to meritocracy, has recently seen a dramatic growth in the gap between the richest and the poorest. Between 1967 and 2008 the income of the richest 1% of US households increased by 323% and that of the richest 0.1% by 492%, compared with 25% for average household income (p. 5).

As a microcosm of the wider world, the same question is asked of St. Paul’s. While the school was invested in a meritocratic ethos based on recruiting only the best pupils, why did the best always seem to be wealthy? Thus, the opening up of elite institutions such as St. Paul’s and a shift from the exclusivity of old wealth has not created a levelling out of inequalities. The paradox that Khan seeks to unravel is that the most elite institutions, those that guarantee access to the higher echelons of society, have started to open their doors to previously excluded groups while general levels of inequality have dramatically increased. A new elite has been created and sustained, access to which is limited in more subtle ways.

Through close observation of the backgrounds and interactions of St. Paul’s pupils, Khan reveals the new elite. By replacing old wealth this elite group
appears to be more open, but closer inspection uncovers secret mores with which only some are acquainted, disadvantaging those who do not learn them. On the basis of outward meritocracy, he notes that there has been a shift in the nature of the elite away from that based on entitlement (through family connections or ‘breeding’) to privilege (supposedly associated with success achieved through sheer application and talent). So strong is St. Paul’s commitment to meritocracy that those students who enter through entitlement are (like Blacks and Asians before them) sequestered and ghettoized. Their peers regard them as unfortunate hangovers from old wealth, undermining the school’s reputation. Commenting on one such student, an informant tells Khan ‘That guy would never be here if it weren’t for his family . . . I don’t know why the school does that. He doesn’t bring anything to this place’ (p. 20). There is an implicit assumption of ‘positive discrimination’ – by family wealth if not by affirmative action – which is frowned upon by those who believe they won their place through merit.

Despite its commitment to equality and diversity, the school has a closely observed hierarchy which is entrenched by a series of rituals that instil in a pupil their place in the hierarchy. Transgression of these rituals is punished, sometimes brutally but often subtly. Illustrating this, Khan tells the story of the use of space in the senior common room where unwritten but strongly enforced rules determine who does and who does not have the right to sit on the only sofa in the room. The sofa is reserved for ‘seniors’ and ‘juniors’ are careful never to transgress this rule. They regard the sofa with awe, star-struck by the knowledge that they will eventually earn their right to sit on it. When Khan deliberately challenges the code by sitting on the sofa and inviting others to join him he was confronted with bewilderment and unease from those who knew they had no right of access and a polite but firm challenge from those who owned the space.

Khan is chiefly concerned to expose how the narrative of meritocracy obscures the formation of new elites whose rise to the top is not determined by talent but by learning the requisite interactional skills for success. He concludes that ‘Part of the way in which institutions like St. Paul’s and the Ivy League tell their story is to look less and less like an exclusive yacht club and more and more like a microcosm of our diverse world- albeit a microcosm with very particular social rules’ (p. 14).

The ease of privilege has overtaken entitlement as the path to success. Khan identifies three principles that underpin privilege. First, an open society is not a level one: it remains hierarchical, but opportunities for climbing the ladder are free to all. Second, to climb the ladder it is essential to learn a particular mode of being or demeanour, which carries far more weight than heritage. Third, the ability to learn how effortlessly to carry yourself in diverse social situations and to switch between modes is critical. Thus, it is the omnivorous culture of the new elite that distinguishes them and prepares them for success in the wider world. At St. Paul’s, says Khan, the students who can switch between Beowulf and Jaws, that is, between high-brow and low-brow cultural
activities, have the advantage over those who cannot. This process of social closure, which on the surface appears to undercut the elite’s monopoly over success, is far from natural.

Thus, the key characteristic of the successful elite is an appearance of effortlessness despite the emphasis on hard work in the name of merit. The ability to present oneself as at ease is not held equally by the pupils and is a source of significant tension for some sub-groups, including ethnic minorities, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and girls. In a chapter on gender, Khan shows how this tension is exacerbated through a discussion of sexuality. He demonstrates how sexuality, displayed through dress, marginalises some girls, those who do not have the requisite social and sexual process. But it is also a double bind for those who do. While the boys’ sexuality is deemed to be natural, the girls are considered capable of controlling it and using it to control the boys. They are placed, as a result, in the difficult position of being invited to be at ease with their sexuality but also condemned for it.

This is a compelling book in several ways. The reader is struck by the insightfulness of the author, his curiosity and empathy with those with whom he engages. His stance is critical but non-judgemental as he digs deep behind the ways the self is presented. He uses theory, derived from Bourdieu and Goffman, with a light touch, making the study an accessible read. Above all, he provides a riveting and original analysis of why, when old wealth seems dead, privilege continues to sustain itself in a way that is socially constructed, convincingly undermining the myth of meritocracy.

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The Politics of Proximity: Mobility and Immobility in Practice

Mobility is a hot topic, at least according to those propagating a ‘mobility turn’ in the social sciences. This edited volume, which is the outcome of a session held at the 2008 IIS Congress of Sociology in Budapest, is part of this school of thought. It centres on mobility as a concept ‘which fosters both a powerful discourse in multiple settings and a renewed perspective in looking at socio-political transformations in the twenty-first century’ (p. 2). The main scope of the book is ‘to analyse patterns of mobility in relation with new possibilities to organize space, time and proximity to others’ (p. 10). The eight chapters cover phenomena as different as automobility, diaspora, urban mobility and mobile work. The introduction nicely sets out the shared conceptual framework. Editor Giuseppina Pellegrino, a lecturer in sociology at the University of Calabria (Italy), sums up the key elements she sees as holding the various contributions together: (1) the intrinsically political character of proximity and mobility; (2) the importance of proximity (and distance) in any analysis of mobility; (3) the dialectics between mobility and immobility (conceived of as...
a relational continuum); (4) the sociotechnical mediation of mobility; and (5) practice (the situated locus of action that shapes relationships between proximity, mobility, and immobility).

The book is divided, somewhat artificially, in three parts. The first one offers more theoretically grounded analyses of space, mobility and proximity. Maria Cristina Marchetti reviews some of the vast sociological literature on space, time and place, arguing that contemporary mobilities imply a ‘redefinition of space as a frame for social action’ (p. 17). Kjell Engelbrekt offers a life-world phenomenological perspective to enrich John Urry’s imaginative sociology of mobility. To enhance the analytical potential of both approaches, he creatively links Urry’s concept of ‘potential movement’ to Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann’s ‘world of attainable reach’ idea. Carmelo Buscema draws on the work of Karl Marx, Carl Schmitt and Michel Foucault to discuss the notion of proximity/mobility in the framework of a critique of capitalist society, and its impact on the organization of work.

The second part offers two ethnographically oriented case studies. Chaim Noy semiotically and discursively analyses the meaning of ‘textual (im)mobilities’ in the Israeli car transport system. By focusing on bumper stickers and roadside death monuments, he convincingly shows how ‘mobilities are discursivized and socialized’ (p. 79), hereby strengthening his argument that discourse and mobility are interlinked and are mutually informative. Eva Gerharz’s research on northern Sri Lankans who meet again after a long period of segregation empirically illustrates the ‘process of re-positioning and re-adjusting belonging which is embedded into the dynamics of (im)mobility’ (p. 84). Although I find her definition of immobility as ‘dwelling in locality’ (p. 87) too narrow, I take away from her inspiring analysis of identity as emerging from enforced proximity or isolation the argument that, despite the increased mobile means of global communication, ‘proximity can only be achieved by corporeal travel’ (p. 99).

Part three of the book emphasizes the danger of inequalities, asymmetries and human costs in accessing mobility as a resource or a boundary. Laura Gherardi scrutinizes the mobility of middle and top managers of multinationals. The low level of freedom these people have in organizing their own time and space illustrates ‘the problematic nature of romantic mobility in advanced capitalism’ (p. 117). Such involuntary mobility is in marked contrast with the economic élites of long standing ‘which financial capitalism has liberated from all spatial constraints and which, therefore, produces the only social group able to choose freely between mobility and immobility’ (p. 108). Matteo Colleoni presents a mobility survey conducted in four European metropolitan areas (Barcelona, Bologna, Lyon and Vienna). The results show the need to increase not only mobility but ‘to improve its quality, by increasing both the individual and urban access resources constituting the mobility capital they have’ (p. 130). Finally, Paola Jirón shadowed various people in their urban daily mobility patterns around Santiago de Chile to illustrate urban inequality from a mobility point of view. Her ethnographic findings point to the importance of
‘bearing in mind how people use the city instead of imposing ways of using it’ (p. 149).

_The Politics of Proximity_ mainly draws on sociological frameworks, occasionally including insights from anthropology, geography, organization studies, transport studies and science and technology studies. Although the contributions cover various continents, the perspective remains disturbingly western-centric. Moreover, the tremendous (im)mobility challenges in Africa are totally ignored. These are two serious weaknesses this volume shares with many other recent mobility-related publications. I also would have liked to see more in-depth discussions of the methodologies used to study various forms of (im)mobility. Finally, the lack of a concluding chapter leaves the reader somewhat unsettled after finishing the last contribution. What should be retained is the idea that ‘proximity, and social relationships stemming from it, embody political meanings, which are performed through extensive sociotechnical systems of mobility and immobility’ (p. 11). Indeed, as much of the sociological, geographical and anthropological research of the last decades has aptly demonstrated, proximity is the result of complex choices, negotiations and practices carried out in different settings.

Despite the points of critique mentioned above, this edited volume offers an interesting sample of contemporary studies on the intricate relationship between social relationships (proximity) and new forms of (im)mobility. The writing style of the various chapters is not equally fluid (probably because most contributors are non-native English speakers), but jargon is generally avoided. The book will certainly please scholars and advanced students interested in mobility, organization studies, transport and urban studies. Anybody reading it will be easily convinced of the dire need for more critical mobility studies in order to understand the plethora of (im)mobilities across the globe and the often conflicting societal and personal meanings attached to them.

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_Emotion, Identity and Religion. Hope, Reciprocity and Otherness_  

The prevalence of instrumental, economic and ‘impact’ agendas in the social sciences has made it all too easy to forget that sociology has, from its origins, been concerned with socially and culturally patterned responses to fundamental existential questions regarding the human predicament. Returning to these concerns from an interdisciplinary perspective encompassing anthropology and philosophy, as well as sociology and theology, Douglas Davies provides us with a welcome revitalization of Daniel Bell’s argument that the starting point for the analysis of culture should be the relationship between human finitude and the search for meaning. In so doing he reminds us forcefully of the central
importance of religion to this analysis; something that has long been evident in
the sociological heritage, despite the attempts of certain contemporary soci-
ologists to reduce the subject to easily measurable surface appearances such as
church attendance and survey gleaned expressions of religious affiliation.

This is the background against which Emotion, Identity and Religion investi-
gates how religious traditions prioritise, stimulate, pattern, organize and
make meaningful, at both individual and community level, specific and con-
trasting sets of emotional being in and being towards the world. At the core of
Davies’s analysis is an interest in how these emotions are harnessed to values
and incorporated within embodied subjects, and how this process of incorpor-
ation might help generate a sense of salvation from ‘the human drive for
meaning’. It also addresses these concerns within the classical sociological
concern with the problem of order.

Davies’s argument is grounded in and structured around seven key con-
cepts. ‘Emotion’, ‘identity’ and ‘religion’ set the parameters of the study.
‘Meaning’ and ‘hope’ provide a direction for analysis, as well as standing in
close interrelationship with each other, while ‘otherness’ and ‘reciprocity’ are
used to explore human awareness and social behavior (and provide us with a
two-way bridge from this-worldly to other-worldly phenomena). This frame-
work promises to contribute to a growing literature in religious studies that
advances the subject by integrating into their analyses traditional and contem-
porary writings on emotions and the (sensory) body.

Emotion, Identity and Religion is a valuable, if somewhat unruly, contribu-
tion that is full of interesting insights and promising leads for further inves-
tigation. Moving across various disciplines, taking in issues from cyber-worship
to menstruation, and incorporating chapter length discussions that range from
‘Identity depletion’ to ‘Sacred place, worship and music’, there is much to hold
the attention of the reader. While the study itself is ordered thematically
around its seven key concepts, however, it does not provide a fully analytically
integrated account of emotions and the embodied nature of religious identity.
There are, I think, two main reasons for this.

First, despite their importance, concepts such as emotion and embodiment
tend to slip and slide, ontologically and epistemologically, between and some-
times within the various chapters. In the case of the former, for example, we
are told that emotion refers to ‘focused feeling states of limited yet intense
duration’ (p. 4), possessed of biological and cultural aspects (p. 29), but else-
where that emotion is ‘retained for the names a society gives to selected
feelings’ (with feelings being separate from emotions and referring here to ‘the
many sensations and experiences that individuals have each moment of their
life’) (p. 18). This elision of distinctive approaches to emotions is repeated in
the case of embodiment. Davies suggests that his concerns unite ‘in a general
theory of embodiment’ as evident ‘in terms of various scholars in the following
chapters’ (p. 19). A problem here, though, is that the specific body relevant
theories constructed by traditional and contemporary scholars ranging from
Durkheim to Csordas are minimally distinctive and often incompatible.
Davies recognizes these differences, and his discussions are always insightful, but I was left thinking that a more explicit engagement with a wider range of body studies literature – one in which his own position was carved out more explicitly – would have enhanced the overall coherence of his study. Embodiment has stood as a label for many distinctive aspects of the human subject in recent years, yet the plethora of competing approaches and conceptions to the body-subject’s generative and receptive capacities calls out for an approach that clarifies its stance on these issues.

This is related to the second reason the study does not achieve a higher level of integration. Fascinating though they are, the individual chapters sometimes threaten to get overrun by the numerous, contrasting and sometimes opposed approaches to the body, emotions, identity and religion evident in the examples, and adopted by the writers, under discussion. These discussions are linked together in terms of their relevance to the concepts set out in the book’s openings, but a stronger theoretical framework would have enabled the reader to be steered through its distinctive parts with a clearer sense of what these phenomena were, how they should be investigated, and how they were related to each other.

These issues should not, however, be allowed to detract from the considerable strengths and ambitions of this book. In an era in which conservative specialism is harnessed so often to what C. Wright Mills referred to as abstracted empiricism, Davies’s concern with the emotional and embodied elements of religions is refreshing. From the contrasting corporeal organization and expression of distinctive forms of Christianity, to the example of Mormons and body control, and the contrasting case of the Indian dance traditions of Kerala, Emotion, Identity and Religion provides us with a wealth of fascinating discussion about what we might refer to as the embodied or body pedagogic means, experiences and outcomes of contrasting religious traditions.

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In recent years, a number of major works by Luc Boltanski have been translated into English – principally Distant Suffering (Boltanski, 1999), The New Spirit of Capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) and On Justification (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006). Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and more widely on Anglo-Saxon sociological traditions (such as the dramaturgical approach of Erving Goffman), Boltanski has produced an impressive body of work that addresses a range of fundamental sociological problems such as the question of value neutrality, the micro-macro problem, the nature of ideology, the role of emotions and the problem of values. His approach pre-
eminently concerns itself with the question of justice not only in an abstract philosophical sense but from the perspective of the everyday trials and tribulations of ‘ordinary’ people. While he is critical of much of the legacy of classical sociology, this oeuvre is clearly sociology on a grand scale.

Boltanski’s overriding theme is that social actors are not supine, confused or deluded agents, but conscious of the everyday injustices of capitalist societies and they are driven by a deep sense of the indignity they suffer as a result of the unequal distribution of resources in a market-driven environment. Their indignation is real and they do not suffer from any illusions resulting from a seamless dominant ideology. As a consequence the major institutions of society have to engage in a more or less continuous justification of inequalities and injustices aiming thereby to confirm the rightness of existing social arrangements. In *On Justification*, Boltanski and Thevenot spelt out the historical range of such justificatory regimes or polities. These basic observations of course leave open a number of fundamental questions such as firstly when does indignation boil over into rage and coordinated political action, and secondly what is the epistemological and normative relationship between sociological knowledge and commonsense understanding of social reality? *On Critique* sets out to provide the foundations whereby these questions (and related issues) can be given satisfactory answers.

*On Critique* is a translation and elaboration of three ‘talks’ as he calls them (p. ix) that were given at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt in November 2008. These three Adorno Lectures have been supplemented by further work producing the six segments that form the new work. These lectures are in many respects more abstract, theoretical and programmatic than his other major works in English. The overarching theme of the new book is the sociology of domination which, starting with Max Weber’s ‘modes of domination’, ‘serves to identify and condemn manifestations of power deemed extreme and abusive’ (p. 1). This analysis of domination, as with his earlier analyses of indignity and justification, starts with the basic premise that human beings do not simply behave but rather they are capable of reflexivity and consequently engage in moral judgements about their social circumstances. Sociology if it is to engage in an adequate critique must respect this fundamental dimension of human consciousness. Unlike the natural sciences, sociology cannot avoid the problems of human volition and judgement, and it cannot easily hide behind the professional pretense of neutrality. It has to conduct its research in the first person singular.

Boltanski identifies two different traditions of social criticism. In the 1960s and 1970s there emerged a critical sociology that among other things rejected the legacies of Talcott Parsons and S.M. Lipset, but he argues this development was limited by retaining an asymmetry between everyday knowledge and sociological truths, thereby neglecting the fact that sociological research findings circulate in this everyday world. In the 1980s there developed a pragmatic sociology of critique – partly inspired by the work of Bourdieu and his notion of reflexive sociology – which sought to overcome the assumption of
asymmetrical knowledge and, bracketing explanation, sought better methods for describing the habitus of actors in capitalist society. Borrowing also from the pragmatism of American sociology, the pragmatist turn towards critique required a phenomenology to attend to ‘things in themselves’, especially the role of disputes in everyday situations that begin to disrupt existing justifications. In this social world, agents are to be respected as actors and they are seen to be active not passive. These disputes constitute an endless series of tests that render problematic the justifications by which institutions seek to buttress these regimes or polities of domination. These disputes begin to form a serious challenge to routine justifications when they take on a collective framework. One obvious example is the evolution of women’s disputes into a fully fledged women’s movement that challenged inequalities in pay, patriarchal power relations and eventually subverted the elision of gender and sex.

Having established this conceptual framework, Boltanski in the remaining lectures elaborates some of the underlying assumptions of the basic argument. This elaboration involves a long account of how institutions are fundamental to any exercise of domination, but he wants to emphasize the fact that all institutions are unstable and fragile, because they have to cope with the radical uncertainties and contradictions that social reality throws up and which they seek to manage. This unease within the institutional order fans out into a more profound contingency in everyday life that Boltanski terms the ‘hermeneutic contradiction’ confronting the existence of embodied agents. This radical uncertainty is expressed sociologically in a dynamic between confirmation (justifications of the status quo) and critique (the mobilization of disputes). Many of these abstract ideas are supported by research Boltanski (1990) has already completed such as the research on a sample of 300 letters sent to newspapers involving the denunciation of injustices. These public denunciations can lead towards an unmasking of the pretences of institutions through the mobilization of tests of reality and truth claims. This open challenge to institutional justification involves a struggle with experts whose role is to shore up the defenses of any social order against the unsettling consequences of critique and the subsequent possibility of social change.

This analysis brings Boltanski to a commentary on different types of ‘political regimes of domination’ in chapter five. Observing the obvious fact that extreme forms of domination such as slavery are uncommon in a world dominated by liberal capitalism, he returns to his treatment of social structures from his *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. In the modern world, domination is housed within a system of managerial and market controls that are often difficult to penetrate. The world of naked domination has been replaced by a mode of governance that embraces legal norms to justify the inequalities of the market. However the challenge to this liberal-managerial regime of experts is often brought about, as we have seen with the credit crunch of 2007–10, by major crises that have deep social and economic consequences. He claims that these public disputes often take place between experts who, while appearing to engage in open-ended controversies, nevertheless agree on
Again the credit crunch may be an appropriate example where bankers, academic economists and politicians might disagree about financial reforms in terms of what level of regulation is required, but they never, apart from exceptions such as Paul Krugman, seriously asked questions about the deep causes of the dysfunctions of finance capitalism. The doctrine of market equilibrium is always trotted out as a legitimating device. Boltanski perfectly captures the nature of modern society in one simple observation, namely that we have a reversal ‘from the state as model for the firm to the firm as model for the state’ (p. 141). He concludes in chapter six with what we might call echoing Weber ‘the vocation of a pragmatic sociology of critique’ which is ‘to help society – that is, the people, the people who are called ‘ordinary’ – deliberately maintain themselves in the state of constant imbalance in the absence of which, as the direst prophecies announce, domination would in fact seize hold of everything’ (p. 160).

This series of lectures represents a powerful challenge to professional sociology to grasp the necessity of critique in the face of what we might call routine injustice. With an argument on this scale, there are inevitably remaining questions and possibilities. Boltanski is at his worst when he sounds like Adorno and at his best when he sounds like Boltanski. By this I mean that this work is often frustrating when it appears to be more concerned with establishing a new vocabulary for sociology rather than attending to ‘things in themselves’. Much of the effort in *On Critique* is devoted to spinning out a series of binary classifications that stand in for a reflexive theory of domination. Examples of these oppositions would include: dominant/dominated; reality/world; official justification/unofficial justification; bodiless being of institutions; corporeal bodies of actors; simple domination/complex domination; critical sociology/sociology of critique; confirmation/critique. Then there is the almost unintelligible notion of ‘the reality of reality’ (pp. 33–7) or our radical uncertainty about ‘the whatness of what is’ (p. 55). There is the horrible neologism ‘wol&real’ as in ‘The seizure of the wol&real by the dominant instances does not leave much room for critique’ (p. 137). Boltanski is at his best when he is on familiar terrain such as looking at the social transformations of capitalism for example in his excellent discussion of the relationship between elites and a dominant class (pp. 143–9).

Boltanski ends his discussion with an up-beat appeal to ideas about justice and the deep sense of frustration about daily inequalities, but this leaves open the long-enduring sociological question – assuming a dominant ideology does not function successfully to obscure the injustices of a capitalist market system, why doesn’t indignation explode into collective rage? Why didn’t the repossession of over 870,000 homes in the United States after the mortgage crisis lead to something like a mass protest against the failures of the banking system or more broadly a concerted attack on the financial elites who had profited from the banking collapse? One answer is that unless the individual denunciations of an isolated person can be translated into the denunciations of others thereby assuming a collective character then critique can have little
systematic or enduring effect (p. 36). In more traditional terms, Marxist sociology looked towards the collective action of the working class to make such denunciations stick. Boltanski makes an effort to defend class analysis in chapter six, but it is frankly not convincing and his inquiries in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* suggest that contemporary disputes are not likely to find an adequate collective vehicle around social class. There is another possibility which Boltanski does not explore, namely that in contemporary societies indignation is more likely to end in resentment rather than rage giving rise to Tea Party denunciations of Washington rather than an attack on capitalism as such (Turner, 2011).

Finally, there is in both critical sociology – as illustrated pre-eminently by C. Wright Mills’s *The Power Elite* (1956) – and the pragmatic critique of Boltanski and his colleagues an underling and implicit assumption that critique is always left-critique, but what about another option such as conservative critique where one might refer for example to Robert Nisbet (1953) in *The Quest for Community*? A more telling and troublesome comparison might be made with Berger and Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967). Also working with a hermeneutic and phenomenological tradition, Berger and Luckmann argued that human beings are ‘unfinished animals’ and they must construct a sacred canopy of institutions to give reality some pretense of stability. Humans need some sense of security against the radical uncertainties of existence, but in the modern world the challenge (or disputes) to reality increase and the ‘plausibility structures’ of the everyday world become fragile. This theory of social construction was received by sociologists in the 1960s as a radical challenge to the social order, but as Berger’s own sociology developed it became clear that he derived conservative conclusions from the ‘hermeneutic contradiction’, namely that we need the stability of institutions. This deduction has lead more recently to a reversal of the original secularization thesis to promote the idea of ‘desecularization’ (Berger, 1999). Another example to conclude might be drawn from Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) who starting life as a Marxist returned to Roman Catholicism (specifically to the legacy of Aquinas and natural law) to mount a critique of modern emotivism (specifically the legacy of G.E. Moore) claiming that it is difficult to sustain an adequate critique of social reality without a shared community. It is obvious that critique can come from many quarters, not all of which will suit the underlying political assumptions of the pragmatic critical turn. These quibbles should not detract from admiration of the considerable achievements represented by Boltanski’s comprehensive sociological approach to the question of justice.

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**References**


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**Continental Philosophy: An Introduction**


As David West observes, Kant was the divisive point in the history of philosophy: in one direction he was influential to those who adopted a scientific method and became known as analytic philosophers; and in another, through Hegel, he performed the same role for the continental philosophers who were distinctive for their focus on the social, cultural, and historical conditions of knowledge. West’s approach to introducing the work of this latter group is, in his own words, to sketch a sort of ‘family tree’ (p. 2) of continental philosophers, tracing influences and responses between the key thinkers through history. What we get is not merely a collection of summaries of key texts but a story about philosophy and the social/cultural/political conditions that shaped its articulation by particular clusters of philosophers at various points in time. And so a chapter on the Enlightenment, particularly Kant and Hegel, is set against a backdrop of Weber’s notions of rationalization and disenchantment. A discussion of Marx cannot begin before Feuerbach is covered (in greater detail than usual in classical sociological theory textbooks) and does not end before the Frankfurt School can be shown to have kept Marx relevant. Philosophers crop up outside of the chapters dedicated to them, different aspects of their work brought to the fore only when appropriate. Clear exegeses are marshalled into a compelling narrative with recurring characters and dramatic plot twists: it seems like an obvious approach to such a difficult task as introducing continental philosophy, but only because it is achieved with such aplomb.

West’s ability as a story teller makes this a thoroughly interesting read regardless of one’s degree of expertise in the subject. I found that the philosophers I was less familiar with were rendered easy to understand and, whilst the
accounts of the philosophers I was already comfortable with appeared to me over-simplified, the historical colour and tendrils of influence illuminated were enough to keep it engaging. It is a book aimed at undergraduates, as two of the additions to this new edition confirm: chapter outlines and recommended readings. The former appear designed to make this a more accessible reference book whilst the latter guide the reader towards the easier texts in a given philosopher’s canon. Whilst this book will primarily be of interest to those setting background reading for a philosophy course it should also be relevant for those designing social theory modules. West, in his efforts to show the enduring relevance of the thinkers covered, charts their adoption by social theorists such as Bauman whilst, of course, many of the philosophers covered – such as Marx, Foucault, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Benjamin – are staples of social theory teaching anyway.

Whilst accounts of philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, and Marx show their part in continuing debates in philosophy – various critiques being made of their work but also their enduring legacies – West is somewhat uncharitable to other key thinkers. For example, a considerable amount of space is dedicated to Habermas’ critique of Lyotard and it reads more like an outright dismissal of the latter rather than a move in a debate. Habermas is shown to come out with all guns blazing but West, through omission, has not even armed Lyotard with an account of his The Differend (2007) and so has engineered a fight over consensus/dissensus that is unfair. The reader is left to assume that Habermas is right and that Lyotard is wrong, a form of outcome that does not appear elsewhere in the book, where readers are simply and objectively shown the debates. Curiously, Levinas – who Bauman (1998: 267–8) has described as ‘the greatest ethical philosopher’ of the twentieth century – is afforded not even one-and-a-half pages whilst Habermas, for example, is afforded considerably more and recurs to ambush other philosophers. The other supplements to this second edition add to this impression of a creeping bias. The new, final chapter on Agamben, Nancy, Žižek and Badiou is roughly half the length of the others and West adopts a dismissive tone from the start, questioning ‘whether these thinkers fulfil their bold claims to philosophical originality and political inspiration’ (p. 243). One would be forgiven for assuming that he sees them merely as noisy upstarts, and Žižek is somewhat snootily referred to as a ‘rock star’ and purveyor of ‘radical chic’ (p. 251). The new section on Arendt dropped into the earlier phenomenology chapter offers no real sense of her legacy and yet she is used as a stick to beat the philosophers of the final chapter – particularly Agamben – who are said to offer nothing that surpasses her contribution to political philosophy. Ultimately, West’s claim at the outset of the chapter that it is unclear whether or not thinkers like Žižek and Badiou offer anything of importance is not supported by any subsequent argument. Since this is a book aimed at students, the (presumably) novice reader is going to be left with negative impressions about certain philosophers that, through omission of key parts of their work or the failure to support criticism with argumentation, are undeserved.
Of course, such quibbles are doubtless unavoidable with projects of this kind and we are certainly not looking at anything on the level of Bertrand Russell’s notoriously score-settling *History of Western Philosophy* (2004). *Continental Philosophy* so impressively introduces the reader, in such restricted space, to the philosophers, debates, and environments that formed continental philosophy that a few pot-shots at postmodernists and post-Althusserians should be forgiven. It is an exemplary introduction.

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*Baudrillard Reframed*  

Kim Toffoletti’s book is one of I.B.Tauris’s ‘Reframed’ series, which aims to explain the work of recent European thinkers, (all but Heidegger so far are French) to the ‘visually minded’ and those who ‘think in images’ (www.ibtauris.com). She says that the book ‘sets out to explore the impact of Baudrillard’s work in the visual arts and culture arena’, by ‘unpacking’ and ‘appraising’ his key ideas and approaches (p. 2). The book also aims to remain true to Baudrillard’s ‘spirit’ by encouraging the readers to find for themselves the paradoxes and reversals of their visual experience rather than simply providing a series of Baudrillardian analyses (p. 4). In order to achieve these aims, the book adopts a thematic, rather than a chronological, approach and there are chapters devoted to the image, art, consumption and screens (p. 6).

Chapter One, on the image, uses Bill Henson’s 2008 exhibition of photographs of nude young people which were deemed pornographic and seized by the Sydney police, to explain the idea of the transaesthetic, the ways in which modern culture mixes genres, styles and forms to defy easy classification and render everything ‘aestheticised’. This in turn is used to lead into a logical and clear presentation of the four orders of simulacra and what is meant by the enchantment and seduction of the image. One sense of ‘image’ which is neglected, however, is that in which image is conceived as the private/public visual identity constructed and communicated by what we wear. While fashion and clothing are referred to (p. 76), there is little here that explains what Baudrillard has called the most radical ‘liquidation of values’ that is effected through fashion (1993: 88). This is the way in which fashion, in all areas of
consumption, radicalizes the play of differences, from which meaning is generated, in order to play at communication, producing signification without a message. Beauty, along with ugliness, and the public/private identity that we believe we construct through what we wear and consume, is no more on this account than the product of a fleeting arrangement of elements that will be different tomorrow.

Art is the subject of chapter two, which also begins with an example. This time it is the unfortunate German tourist who chose to graffiti a glacier in New Zealand and who was subsequently ‘required to remove the offending material’ (p. 37). The event raises questions concerning the identity, and the uniqueness or specialness of art. Whether art should be treated and thought about differently from any or all other forms of image-making is pursued through a discussion of Duchamp’s urinal, Warhol’s soup cans and Tracey Emin’s bed. These examples are also used to raise questions concerning the nullity and banality of art: Baudrillard’s argument that art no longer strives towards a higher destiny or purpose that it has imagined for itself and from which it derives meaning but rather presents itself as ‘the sign of its own operation’ (p. 56) is explained here. There is a slight sense in which Baudrillard’s account is ‘singing to the choir’, however, with this selection of artists. The modernist self-referentiality of such artists is present in the work of people such as Andrea Fraser, but it is allied with something like a genuine desire to critique and analyse the place and nature of art and art institutions. Fraser’s ‘Museum Highlights’, for example, knowingly skewers many popular preconceptions concerning art but surely in the interests of a ‘better’ account of art and of its place in society and culture: it is more than the sign of its own operation.

Baudrillard’s account of photography is given a separate section. On his account, Toffoletti says that photography is not primarily documentary, or representational, and it is not primarily concerned with what Barthes called the having-been-there. Instead she says that it is about the absence of what is photographed and the subsequent absence or impossibility of reality (p. 62). However, it is surely rather that photography is about these things in Baudrillard’s account but in a rather odd way. It is as if Baudrillard’s account is a kind of negative, of which Barthes’ account would be the positive print. Where Barthes is concerned with the photograph as a representation of the world, the actual having-been-there of what is photographed, Baudrillard stresses the loss or absence of the referent. Where Barthes is wounded and pierced by the punctum, there is nothing for Baudrillard to be wounded or pierced by, as the referent is absent. Baudrillard’s account also bears comparison with Derrida’s account of photography. Where Baudrillard says that it is not photography’s purpose to document the event (p. 60) and that it is ‘instant’ and ‘automatic’ (p. 62), Derrida argues that photography cannot but be an undecidable interplay of passive document and active creativity and that the ‘snapshot’ is far from the automatic instantané of colloquial French (Derrida 2010: 8ff). For Derrida, the divisibility of the instant means that there is always
duration and if there is duration, then culture and meaning can get in: the photograph is thus always as much a creative transformation as a document.

Chapter three concerns consumption and it is introduced via the example of Keith Richards and his role in Louis Vuitton’s 2008 advertising campaign. It is an image we can all consume, even if we cannot afford either the luggage or a Stones ticket, and it leads into an explanation of Baudrillard’s accounts of advertising and fashion. Advertising and fashion are perhaps the prime ways in which the image is implicated in the processes of consumption and Toffoletti’s account again makes clear and logical progress. Their roles in ‘significatory processes’, as ways in which consumers manipulate signs in order to construct themselves and the products they consume (including their own bodies (p. 94ff)) as meaningful and as different from other consumers and products, are explained in these sections. This chapter also deals with the contradictory and mistaken notion of anti-consumption: Baudrillard argues that there is no escape from fashion or advertising, and that capitalism can always profit from seductively presented ‘anti-consumerist’ products (p. 80).

The many and various screens that we encounter when we engage with mass media and communications technologies are the subject of chapter four. In mobile phones, computers, TVs and cinema, screens increasingly provide the images we have to work with. Baudrillard’s arguments are introduced through the examples of Big Brother, Gulf War television journalism and post September 11th film and they are presented as a radicalization of McLuhan’s catchphrase ‘the medium is the message’ (p. 102). The point here, applying to ‘reality’ tv, tv documentary and journalism, is that these screens do not reflect or record a reality that happens somewhere else outside of or beyond these screens, they are our reality and there is nowhere else: the medium has become (all) the message.

So, despite one’s initial misgivings, generated by the references to the potential market as the ‘visual minded’ and to ‘those who think in images’, this is not a remedial book for ‘practical’ or studio-based art students who may have trouble understanding and using concepts and convoluted logics: it pulls no conceptual punches and is not too shy to present the complexities of Baudrillard’s thought. The role of representation in the image is dealt with clearly, if not to the point at which the role of ‘images’ in thought itself is approached or explained as a form of representation. It can be argued that if images are one thing standing for another thing, and if thoughts and words are also one thing standing for another thing, then representation unites or is common to both. If this is the case, then there is not a separate market or constituency identified as those who ‘think in images’; representation is simply what thought is and as Baudrillard’s account of the image argues, there is nowhere else.

Consequently, if there is no escape from signification and aestheticisation, the only critical and alternative response to the situation is the ‘deconstruction of both the form of the sign . . . and the principle of signification itself’ (Baudrillard, 1993: 99). Although they are not dealt with in any detail, it is for these
reasons that every chapter could have been called ‘The Image’ and it is to Toffoletti’s credit that the differences between the themes are kept as separate as they are: the contents of the chapters do not repeat or overlap, which is always the danger of a thematic approach. Finally, as not all art is visual, so not all of the visual is art. Design is also visual, and it is not clear why there are not more designed objects included here. Fashion and clothing are often identified as design and they are explicitly identified here as objects (p. 76). It is unreasonable and a shame, therefore, to exempt all other designed objects and thereby most of Baudrillard’s (1996) The System of Objects from the intelligent and illuminating account that this book provides.

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References