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Review of *Sociology: A Brief but Critical Introduction*, 2nd edition, by Anthony Giddens

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BOOK REVIEWS

Caution should be exercised in using the prices noted for books. Most publishers have gone to net pricing to bookstores; bookstores then add whatever percentage they wish (typically 20 – 35 percent). A few publishers still use list pricing; the price listed is the student price and the bookstore price is typically 20 percent less. If price is an issue for you (and it seems to be for more instructors), then examine the prices listed carefully. Over the next few issues, we will start identifying prices as net or list where possible. Some publishers have started to refuse to provide prices; such books (and those for which we could find no price) will have no price listed.

Sociology: A Brief but Critical Introduction. 2nd ed. A. Giddens. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1987. 179 pages. \$10.00.

As Giddens announces correctly in the preface, "This book differs from most other introductory texts in sociology in several ways" (p. vii). It concentrates on theory, "the core of theoretical concerns which sociology shares with all the social sciences" (p. vii). Giddens asserts, "I do not adopt the usual view that these issues are unimportant to those seeking to achieve an initial acquaintance with sociology. Neither do I accept the equally common idea that such matters are too complex to be grasped before the reader has a mastery of the more empirical content of the subject" (pp. vii-viii). On the basis of my own experience in teaching this book in freshman-level introductory sociology courses, I am pleased to report that Giddens's assumptions are fully justified.

This slim, erudite volume provides a thoughtful and provocative introduction not only to sociology but also to the critical insights advanced by Anthony Giddens, one of the twentieth century's leading sociological theorists. Giddens's critical perspective (reflected in the book's subtitle) "demands invoking what C. Wright Mills has aptly called the 'sociological imagination'" (p. 13). Thus begins a cogent, updated exposition of Mills's call for historical, anthropological,

and critical sensitivity in sociology (pp. 13–22).

Giddens offers the critical perspective as a clear alternative to predictive, positivist sociology (*à la* Comte and Durkheim) in which we have been asked to "regard ourselves as though we were objects in nature" (p. 11). Although the natural science standpoint has been pervasive in sociology, he continues, "it is one I reject" (p. 11). The core of Giddens's position is a reflective hermeneutic: "We have to grasp what I would call the *double involvement* of individuals and institutions; we create society at the same time as we are created by it" (p. 11; italics in original). For Giddens, the social world is simultaneously organized, malleable, and unpredictable.

"*Sociology is a social science, having as its main focus the study of social institutions brought into being by the industrial transformations of the past two or three centuries*" (p. 9; italics in original). Given this definition of the field, Giddens demonstrates systematically that the major transformations—democracy and industrialization—were radical, unpredictable revolutions which turned existing institutions inside out relatively quickly and restructured the core patterns of everyday life. Thus a key theme emerges: seemingly immutable institutional structures are always tenuous in view of the conjunction of sufficient, often self-determined, often unpredictable social forces.

In the classroom, this perspective opens the floor for unsettling discussions of the potential immediacy of Giddens's thesis. I remind students that few people foresaw the advent or the consequences of the great depression, the two world wars, or the recent worldwide spread of communism. To emphasize the potential for immediate and radical change, I point out that the population explosion in our geopolitical neighbor, Mexico, continues unabated, that the AIDS virus could mutate unexpectedly into even more virulent forms, and that our missiles stand armed and poised for nuclear holocaust. Is it not reasonable, I ask, given an examination of recent history and current circumstances, to assume that a massive, socially dislocating change of un-

known form is likely to occur during the next 50 years? Assuming this probability, I require students to outline a rational basis on which to choose a college major or course of study. For students who have invested heavily in the assumption of controlled, predictable, incremental change, this is a difficult, wrenching, and engaging exercise. The relevance and immediacy of Giddens's critical sociology is established firmly.

Having demonstrated through the above exercise that Giddens's thesis is consequential in terms of students' lives and plans, students are receptive to his open, constructive conception of critical sociology: "As human beings, we are not condemned to be swept along by forces that have the inevitability of laws of nature. But this means we must be conscious of the *alternative futures* that are potentially open to us" (p. 22; italics in original). Stated another way, "As critical theory, sociology does not take the social world as given, but poses the questions: what types of social change are feasible and desirable, and how should we strive to achieve them?" (p. 157). Conceptualizing these potential, alternative futures—and the means to attain them—is a worthy career task not only for sociologists but for any student at the threshold of his or her collegiate studies.

The middle part of the book (Chapters 2–7) surveys a broad range of issues and debates in contemporary sociology. Giddens outlines the status and readiness of the conceptual armory presently available to those who dare to imagine and to attempt to realize desirable alternative futures. This survey takes the reader carefully but concisely through discussion of industrialization, social class, bureaucracy, urbanism, family, and the world political system. These chapters are demanding reading for both students *and* teachers; this is a strong point in favor of Giddens's book. Instructors who are frustrated with typical pabulum-level introductory texts will be delighted to find that Giddens's discussions again require them to *teach*, to formulate insightful, thoughtfully textured responses to students' questions about subtle and complex issues.

Giddens adopts a pragmatic approach to sociological theory: question everything and use what makes sense. He praises the insights of conservative as well as radical theorists as long as their conceptual positions stand the test of critical examination in the cold light of

modern-day social realities. As Giddens reminds his readers, "Critique must be based on analysis" (p. 22). In order to comprehend the book, students must come to appreciate his point that it is fully possible to learn many valuable lessons from Marx without necessarily making an ideological commitment to Marxism. Giddens teaches students to question doctrinaire head-in-the-sand theorizing of any stripe, left or right. He hopes to have "disposed the reader to be suspicious of any theory which is framed in terms of inevitabilities" (p. 42). Insightfully he finds that "feminism may well be more radical in its implications for social life than Marxism" (p. 164).

The possible alternative futures that Giddens invites students to envision offer the hope of reduced class inequality, improved ecological relations with our natural environment, the eradication of racial and ethnic oppression, genuine equality between the sexes, and an end to the continuing propagation of state power, totalitarianism, and mass nuclear violence. The main tasks of sociology, he concludes, lie in 1) critiquing the flawed elements of theories that block our practical conceptualization and realization of these possible futures, and 2) supporting social movements that work to dissolve the present patterns of institutionalized inequality and global danger. Giddens's brief account of sociology is persuasive, articulate, and well argued. It provides rich ground for challenging students to choose college majors that develop their critical skills and prepare them to organize, lead, and support constructive social movements for the purpose of realizing a more humane and more human world.

The second edition of this text, published in 1987, is more finely tuned than Giddens's first effort, published in 1982, but the first edition's admirable scholarly tone has been retained intact. Nonetheless—and interestingly—a colleague of mine, who recently completed a computer-assisted comparative assessment of the difficulty level of several introductory sociology texts, found Giddens's book to have the least difficult vocabulary. There is no instructor's guide, but Giddens's own more comprehensive work, *The Nation-State and Violence* (University of California Press, 1985), provides an expanded review of his recent thinking as well as many empirical examples useful for explicating his ideas in the classroom. *Sociology: A Brief but Critical*

Introduction can be covered easily in the first few weeks of a semester. It serves wonderfully as the "keynote" to a mature, reflective introduction to college sociology that respects the intelligence of both teacher and student.

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Exploring Sociology. M.N. Richter, Jr. Itasca, IL: Peacock. 1987. 300 pages. \$14.95.

Popular textbooks with multiple editions for the introductory sociology course seem to be of two types: large texts, usually having 20 to 22 chapters (for example, Horton and Hunt or Robertson), or condensed versions, usually in paperback, having about 14 chapters (such as Landis or Hedding and Glick). These so-called "best sellers" cover basically the same topics (the paperbacks condense two or three topics from the larger texts into one chapter) and in almost the same sequence. Many textbooks written for the introductory market which deviate sharply from this "same topic-same sequence" pattern have rarely gone beyond a first edition. Publishers who presumably know their market and are concerned with profit are probably reluctant to consider an introductory text, no matter what its quality or "inspiration powers," if it fails to adhere to the time-tested pattern. Publishers as well as many instructors may be developing a mind-set which precludes consideration of other textbook approaches, even if these texts are scholarly, provocative, and relevant to today's student population.

For those willing to deviate somewhat from the norm, one new text to consider is *Exploring Sociology* by Maurice Richter, Jr. Richter begins with the assumption that in an introductory course the reading material (and presumably the lecture/discussion) should not offer students merely an extension of what they already know but should challenge them to explore their "taken-for-granted" assumptions about social life critically and analytically. In this text students are prompted to "unlearn" many of their basic assumptions and their "truths" about familiar social situations, and are encouraged to think about society in an intelligent and scientific way.

Perhaps one of the major strengths of

Exploring Sociology is that throughout the text Richter uses many interesting and unusual examples from diverse times and places to illustrate various points which stimulate reading for both students and instructor. In addition, the author often resorts to other disciplines—physics, ornithology, linguistics, and medicine, to name a few—to provide examples to clarify sociologically relevant points or concepts. The emphasis throughout the text is on stimulating thinking about society and on conveying a sense of what it means to employ a sociological perspective to grapple with an understanding of social behavior.

The text begins with a long preview in which Richter relates some of his own background, his sociological views, and the goals of the text. He divides the rest of the text, some 300 pages, into three main parts, each of which has three chapters. The first two chapters in Part 1, "What Sociology Means," analyze sociology in relationship to other disciplines, and discuss alternative nonsociological theories on social life and the inadequacies of popular beliefs to explain social behavior. Chapter 2 concludes with a summary of the nature of sociological knowledge, stressing the need to unlearn many basic assumptions before an understanding of society can be acquired. In Chapter 3 the author describes the varieties of sociology, how sociologists think, and the various forms of sociological work such as descriptive studies, searching for cause, policy and impact studies, and functional analysis. Part 2, "A Perspective on Human Society," begins with a chapter on types of relationships focusing on competition, conflict, and obstacles to cooperation, with some observations on war. Chapter 5, one of the most interesting chapters in the text, compares and contrasts animal and human socialization, mating, and social behavior. Chapter 6, the last chapter in Part 2, discusses various aspects of culture such as knowledge, beliefs, norms, and values. A strong section on the diversity of culture, cultural change, and innovation/diffusion is presented.

Part 3, "Social Organization," begins with Chapter 7, which describes social categories and groups and intragroup relations, and then elaborates on the structure of the family as a social group/organizational system. Chapter 8 surveys social differentiation, including the division of labor and current occupational