Book Review/ Compte rendu

Hearn, Jonathan. *Theorizing Power.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 251 pp., $40.00 paper (978-0-230-24657-7).

Echoing the British philosopher Bertrand Russell's argument that "the fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics" (3; Russell 2004), Hearn makes a compelling case that this indeed is so. He offers a provocative engagement with highly influential ways that "the social constitution of power" (6) has been conceptualized in sociology, the social sciences, and social theory more broadly. Hearn certainly pulls no punches, rejecting Latour's claim, for instance, that the concept of power should be abandoned (94-95), and cautioning against Steven Lukes' attention to the hidden dimensions of power given how doing so displaces the analysis of power into the analysis of knowing (80).

The range of theorists discussed is impressive, covering main figures in classical social and political thought, such as Weber, Dahl, Foucault, Michael Mann, Carol Pateman, and post-colonialists. Uniquely, while the book covers a remarkably comprehensive array of theorists, the sustained focus on power differentiates it from both recent major social theory surveys (e.g., Elliot 2009), and more narrowly focused arguments as one finds with Steven Lukes' 2005 touchstone intervention. The book is helpfully organized into three parts; the first, "Conceptualizing Power" being the most abstract, includes a careful analysis of debates about domination, authority, and legitimacy. Part II covers major approaches to how power is theorized, and Part III puts the first two parts to work on empirically oriented discussions of liberalism; religion and morality; gender, power and patriarchy; and identity and personhood, before concluding. Throughout, Hearn explicates reasons for his approach to theorizing power.

Hearn's own argument is that the critical assessment of theories of power should draw on the distinction between "power to" and "power over" (6-7; 73). "Power to" means "the capacity to realize ends" (6), whereas "power over" refers to relations of domination, inequality, hierarchies, and even the very societal structure, all of which variously affect agents in their attempts to achieve goals. He contends that power is fundamentally a "dispositional concept, one that identifies the general

propensities of an object (person, group, organization) to have certain effects, to be able to make a difference in the world, leaving the specifics of power relationships an open question" (73).

Hearn admirably situates the theorizing of power in metatheoretical positions such as "*realism, naturalism* and *nominalism*" (3), showing sympathies with a Weber-inspired nominalism because, "[i]t is a call to be vigilant about the fact that the language and concepts through which we do social science, which must generalize and abstract from particulars, is ever prone to misrepresenting reality" (x). Hearn's nominalism also implies a weak ontological realism about the social world (ix-x; 224). However, the author fails to reconcile this nominalism-realism with an ontological idealism tied to the idea that any adequate theory of power, in his view, must address its being *intentionally* exercised by a social actor (16) and is reliant on the human agent's consciousness and ideas. Hearn's account of various debates about power are discussed in light of a general sociology of modernization, characterized by the breakdown of traditional authority, secularization, the valorization of individual liberty, and the impasses of the "is-ought" problem (insightfully discussed throughout).

The book is very conventionally *sociological* in its theorizing as evinced in Chapter 6, "Evolutionary Approaches." This chapter offers generalized statements about societal complexities, and the dynamics of major social changes. *A propos* of this focus, Hearn discusses theorists such as Gerhard Lenski and Michael Mann to highlight how various changes to economic regimes, population growth, the development of the state, war, knowledge, and military power, shaped the emergence of modern complex societies. Key here is how the stratifications found in agrarian states are transformed to become a system of "competitive and escalating patterns of production and consumption, housed increasingly in a network of constitutional states internally stratified by markets (130). Chapter 7, "Domination, Authority and Legitimacy in Liberal Society," is suffuse with carefully elaborated critical insights on how "liberal society has prevailed so far through its ability to generate a greater aggregate of 'power to' by loosening the hold of 'power over', that is, the suppression of alternate bases of power from the political centre" (151), and is well worth reading.

While Hearn helpfully states his arguments and biases clearly, these at times demonstrably affect the quality of his exegesis, especially of those positions to which he is unsympathetic. For instance, his criticisms of "epistemological" approaches, including those of Foucault and Bourdieu, depend on Hearn's inadequate explication of Foucault, claiming, for instance, that Foucault's work "[flattens] everything into discourse

for the purposes of study" (103). Missing here is the central genealogical concept of "*dispositif*" that exactly highlights the articulation of the "said as much as the unsaid" (Foucault 1977/1980: 194). Indeed, readers of Foucault will find much that is unpersuasive, with the exception that Hearn concurs with Foucault that contemporary social life is markedly shaped by liberal governmentality with its characteristic way of exercising power as "action upon and action" (90). Similar arguments could be made about the author's commentary on Durkheim, incredulously claiming that Durkheim has "a fairly static model of society" (100). While Weberian approaches receive their just due (especially in Chapters 2 and 7), it is unfortunate that Habermas receives little attention, and Axel Honneth and Slavoj Zizek none at all, and hence major recent contributions in Critical Theory are neglected.

Readers will likely find the author's sanguine conclusion puzzling. He states that "[…] humanity must live with the extreme levels of power that we have today, and probably even greater levels in the future. To cope with that situation, we must on some level reconcile ourselves to it. […] this does not mean that we have to acquiesce, or take no stance in regard to power. But it does mean that we have to let go of dreams of ultimately transcending, resolving or outwitting the burdens of power" (217). The irony here is that contemporary structures of inequality bear the impress of the dreams and schemes of a small number of economists and liberal political theorists (the brain trust of "neoliberalism") whose ideas found the earnest politician's ear in the 1970s, a period of social stagnation (cf. Brown 2015): we today are dealing with a world in which "neoliberal" "theory" clearly has had an influence. Why not then, return the gesture? I see little reason why sociologists theorizing power shouldn't reject Hearn's resigned tone and continue to argue for alternative, more democratically and substantively egalitarian dreams and schemes for coordinating social life as part of the remedy to our own era of political economic sclerosis.

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References

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