

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Clemens, Elisabeth S.** *What is Political Sociology?* Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2016. 166 pp., \$23.99 paper (9780745691619)

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In “What is Political Sociology?” Elisabeth Clemens undertakes the challenging task of surveying an entire field of study. The end result is a formidable text which undoubtedly captures the complexity of the questions asked as well as the analyses provided. The dense material covered in this book need not deter those unfamiliar with political sociology. On the contrary, the book’s discussions are accessible and thought-provoking to all students interested in questions of power and politics.

Chapter 1 begins with a concise reminder of what differentiates political sociology from political science. The former’s more expansive understanding of power and its consequent framing of questions which goes beyond an examination of formal political institutions sets the tone of the text from the very beginning. The chapter continues with a brief yet useful conceptual discussion of power. Clemens unpacks this complex and abstract concept with some help from both classical and contemporary scholars in the field. The chapter also includes a discussion of two more concepts – social closure, and social caging – both of which form the conceptual thread of the entire text. Another critical mention here is of Albert Hirschman’s “exit, voice, loyalty” which Clemens also deploys to weave her main arguments together.

Clemens draws the general framework of the book expansively, yet lucidly. A significant portion of the substantive chapters is devoted to discussing how the existing political structures impact individual and group decision-making, and how they influence on social processes. This emphasis, which follows the predominant trend in the literature, is complemented with her outlining of the emergence of these structures. Hence, and in Chapter 2, Clemens masterfully surveys the rich comparative-historical literature on the rise of the modern state. The following two chapters concentrate on the emergence of democratic societies, and the citizen body respectively. Chapter 3 poses some of the central questions on the relationship between political processes and social change: In what ways do political processes influence or drive social change? How can we explain the emergence of a variety of political orders? Here, Clemens’ insightful discussion reminds us that in understanding

why political trajectories differ across cases, and how they change over time, we must pay attention to the timing and sequence of events as well as shifting alliances. Her discussion further incorporates how, while the processes of social caging and social control sustain particular “relations of domination as well as the provision of social goods” (57), these structures also have embedded in them the possibilities for fast and radical transformations – and sometimes in ways to completely revolutionize existing political structures.

In Chapter 4 the focus slightly shifts to how citizen bodies are constituted, reproduced and how they change. It further examines under what conditions citizens act/participate in movements inside the political domain. For instance, why, Clemens asks, individuals “who are likely to benefit from increased government spending be inclined to vote for the party committed to lowering tax rates for the wealthy and cutting of government programs?” (99). Some of the questions posed in this chapter are echoed and further scrutinized in Chapter 6 where Clemens provides interesting empirical cases demonstrating how, for example, individuals often become activists not because of their strong beliefs, but through organizational and relational ties (114). Finally, Chapters 5 and 7 tackle state-society relations, and the forces of globalization and their possible impact on the future of states respectively. Chapter 5 pays specific attention to “feedback effects”: How do existing political structures shape individual choices? And how do these choices in turn shape the direction of politics and policies? In the final chapter, and without indulging in unnecessary speculation, Clemens invites us to reflect on the possible ways that the political domain in general, and the state in particular, could evolve as a result of changes in global networks and power relations.

Clemens’ text is packed with both classic and recent empirical studies that illustrate the puzzling questions political sociologists address, as well as the path we have trodden in furthering our grasp over power in general—and over state power, in particular. These empirical studies, especially in the opening chapters of the book, demonstrate the strong comparative bend of the field as well. Clemens’ examples range from the Roman Empire to the Ottomans, from Japan to Spain. Yet, as the text unfolds, the empirical cases progressively become more and more focused on the United States, at the expense of the rich canvas of research on other cases and on the very issues of citizenship, social movements, and the evolution of the modern state.

Another point which should be mentioned is the relative neglect of the geopolitical dimension. With the exception of the concluding chapter, and the discussion on the emergence of the modern state and its link to war-making, Clemens limits her discussion strictly to the national

domain. As a result, cutting-edge analyses in the literature which, for example, explore how external factors, and state behavior at the international arena impact on politics and society inside the national boundaries are neglected.

Overall, however, the brevity of Clemens' book is its strength and not its weakness. As the text progresses, we read through a sophisticated exploration of the processes of how political power is distributed, exercised, multiplied, monopolized, and challenged. The questions asked, and debates introduced certainly give an extensive view of the field and how it has evolved over time. It equally inspires and encourages the readers to ask questions for further inquiry. *What is Political Sociology?* is thus a must read for both the initiated and the uninitiated to the field.

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