

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Baehr, Peter. *Unmasking Style in Social Theory*. New York, NY, USA: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2019, 173 pages, paper, (9781138091764).

In this short book, Baehr pursues three objectives: (1) to define what the unmasking style is; (2) to trace a quick history of that style before and after the rise of sociology as an academic discipline; (3) to interest the reader in other options. We can agree to say that the author achieves the first two of these objectives. As for the third one, while the author comes up with concrete alternatives, the value of these will largely depend on the reader's own tastes. If partisanship or "subjectivity" becomes unavoidable at this point, this reviewer confesses that he views the author's suggestions favorably.

The concepts of "unmasking" and "unmasking style" refer to theories that depict society or social order as breeding systemic inequalities, injustices or some kind of evil, with individuals or members of social groups remaining oblivious to their own conditions. Unmasking is the practice of shedding light on this state of affairs, by revealing and detailing what others have failed to understand by themselves. Insofar as this practice is carried out through the dissemination of discourses, it consists formally in the application of handful of rhetorical tricks. Baehr lists the followings: weaponization, reduction and positioning, inversion, deflation, emancipation, and hyperbole. As an exercise in naming, I find this list very useful and I would recommend reading the book if only for it.

The history of the unmasking style is offered as evidence for Baehr's modelling of it. Predictably, Karl Marx's intellectual works make up an important moment of that history. Yet the timeline begins earlier with European Enlightenment's philosophers who considered religion as a set of irrational beliefs and then society as a realm of shallow conventions and mere appearances. At the other end, i.e. in the twenty-first-century, Marx's spirit lives on in many sociology departments, which makes for a direct connection between sociology and the unmasking style. This connection remains ambiguous though: many sociologists avoid the unmasking style altogether (e.g. Erving Goffman, Harold Garfinkel and more recently Andrew

Abbott, Jeffrey Alexander and Randall Collins to name a few); others practice it without embracing the Marxist faith (e.g. Raymond Aron and Christin Smith). Overall though, it is fair to say that the unmasking style attracts numerous sociologists (e.g. Pierre Bourdieu, Peter Berger and Luc Boltanski).

The unmasking style as Baehr talks about is of course reminiscent of the otherwise better-known critical tradition in sociology. However, these two are not strictly identical, since the unmasking style happens to be practiced by commentators from the political right as much as from the political left. Accordingly, the author is not targeting a political position or program, but a style *sensu stricto*. In Baehr's account, the unmasking style leaves one prone to many excesses: over-determinism, totalization, simplification and over-moralization (perhaps even sadism!). What is neglected as a matter of principle is any appreciation for nuance, ambivalence, fuzziness, etc.

Baehr's remedy is threefold. First, he encourages us to learn from great novels (e.g. Austen, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, etc.) and to emulate them. At their best, novels show the complexity of human characters, that "good guys" can be flawed and may even fall out of grace or that "bad guys" can redeem themselves unexpectedly. If a general principle can be formulated in this regard, it would be that of the opacity of human life (114). Indeed, one cannot determine the true nature or ultimate worth of a person as anyone can change over the years while in the meantime his or her actions will continue to bear more and more consequences with various effects. Human interactions are not the matter of immutable causal laws, but the stuff of collective storytelling (and re-telling, and re-telling, etc.), whilst Baehr remind us of the fallacy of the latest word (142).

Second, Baehr waves toward humility and skepticism as philosophical attitudes through a (very short) selection of quotes from Albert Camus, Michel de Montaigne, Simon Weil and François-René de Chateaubriand. The message here is that there is a virtue in admitting and keeping in mind one's own limitations, be it in terms of knowledge or in terms of control or both (137, 142). The word "wisdom" comes to mind.

Third, Baehr favors conflictual pluralism as a model for politics. By speaking of class conflict as the central problem to be solved, Marx sought to neutralize politics as a whole, or to bypass it, by suggesting the possibility of a society cleansed of all conflicts (63, 134). This is class conflict as the war to end all wars. On the contrary, conflictual pluralism sees conflicts as integral to life in society (Baehr mentions the works of Max Weber and Isaiah Berlin among others).

You can destroy your enemy, but you cannot destroy conflict itself as a fundamental dimension of social life. The best outcome you can hope for is learning to live with your adversaries rather than seeing their destruction (135). After all, conflicts need not be necessarily brutal and vicious (129, 143).

As a sociologist, Baehr is drawn toward classical literature, history and philosophy. His writing is concise and elegant. He remains committed to clarity and simplicity. Strangely enough, these qualities also explain some of the frustrations I had as a reader. I believe the book is indeed a timely publication in that it brings back to our attention a set of ideas – Baehr’s threefold remedy to the unmasking style – that have fallen out of fashion for some time (unless there never was a time when they were even remotely fashionable...). While easy to enunciate, these ideas remain difficult to apply in one’s life. Perhaps a parallel can be made with a certain revival of ancient stoicism outside of academia (Pigliucci 2017). What I find lacking is not the conclusion, but the demonstration. For example, when discussing the opacity of human life, Baehr is actually dismantling, or at least relativizing, a core conviction of most, if not all, professional sociologists, namely the notion that we can uncover trends relating to social groups by deploying research methodologies. By stressing unpredictability (136), Baehr introduces doubts in this vision. Without even disagreeing with him on this issue – I was reminded of Niklas Luhmann’s diagnostic of social systems as unreliable (e.g. 2002: 103; see also Vanderstraeten 2019) – I simply regret that he did not see this as an opportunity to engage in more muscular, self-assured theorizing. But I guess this is not Baehr’s style.

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