



## Reviews: Social theory

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Filipe Carreira da Silva and Mónica Brito Vieira,

*The Politics of the Book: A Study on the Materiality of Ideas*, The Pennsylvania State University

Press: University Park, PA, 2017; 249 pp.: ISBN 9780271083421, US\$89.00 (hbk)

**Reviewed by:** Daniel Davison-Vecchione, *University of Cambridge, UK*

### Keywords

Canon, classics, history of the book, intellectual history, social theory

With a sociological sensibility, Filipe Carreira da Silva and Mónica Brito Vieira's *The Politics of the Book: A Study on the Materiality of Ideas* sharpens the tools of the history of the book and brings them to bear on six classic works of social and political thought. It foregrounds the significance of the book itself as site of struggle. *The Politics of the Book's* key theme is how many different hands are involved in shaping books. These include the editors, publishers, commentators and translators. All this is part of the process of meaning-creation, but this often goes neglected in approaches to social theory and the history of ideas that presuppose a straightforward relationship between a discrete, contained book and a single identifiable author.

More specifically, *The Politics of the Book* concerns 'the politics of bookmaking' (p. 1). It focuses on 'books as material forms mediating and constituting meaning – books as objects to which, and through which, things can be done to shape possible future uses' (p. 1). In doing so, it highlights the curious way in which a text's form can possess 'agential qualities', although these qualities mostly derive from human agency, in this case 'the problem-solving capacity of the human actors involved in the production, circulation, and interpretation of texts . . . which can be more oriented towards the past, the future, or the present and involves the continual development of their reflective intelligence' (p. 1).

As the book's subtitle indicates, the authors' approach also takes seriously the embodied nature of texts, centring the significance of the book 'as a specific material form of textual transmission' (p. 3). The textual object itself is worth enquiring into because, '[f]irst, given the interplay between form and content, the textual object can provide privileged access to thinking or theorizing as an activity rather than as a thing', and '[s]econd, given how form impacts textual meaning, analysing the textual object can open a door to multiple ways in which form can be deployed to construct meaning, thus providing parameters within which the book can be understood' (p. 4). Other significant

dimensions Carreira da Silva and Brito Vieira consider include paratexts (that is, the ‘outside’ frames through which the main body of text is viewed, both within and beyond the printed book) and translation.

With this theoretically and methodologically sophisticated framework, *The Politics of the Book* analyses six classic texts in social theory: Émile Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, GH Mead’s *Mind, Self, and Society*, Karl Marx’s *1844 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, WEB Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*, Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, and Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*.

The best way to demonstrate the strengths of Carreira da Silva and Brito Vieira’s approach is through what they highlight about each of the classic texts they study. We learn how Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms* ‘became a totem for interpreters keen to use Durkheim’s legacy to push for certain research agendas and disciplinary projects’, often ‘[f]ounded on mutually incompatible epistemological assumptions’ (p. 41). One sees this in the emergence of the ‘cultural Durkheim’ in the late 20th century, with new editions of *Elementary Forms* aligning with different intellectual approaches and academic commentators playing a significant role in setting the frames through which the text is read.

We come to understand Mead’s *Mind, Self, and Society* as a ‘classic with no author’: a text that has ‘no discernible relationship with George Herbert Mead apart from the fact that it originates from his lectures’ (p. 60). *Mind, Self, and Society* was key to Herbert Blumer’s efforts to give authority to his symbolic interactionist programme as a viable competitor to Parsonian structural-functionalism and has served to introduce Mead to the sociological canon. Nevertheless, it cannot serve as an access point to Mead’s theorising and continuing to rely on *Mind, Self, and Society* only serves to ‘obfuscate the true scope of his contributions’ (p. 59).

We receive a detailed look at how fashioning Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts* as a standalone work required creating the manuscripts ‘as if they pre-existed their own editorial creation’, which ‘involved erasing most traces of editorial construction that made the manuscripts into one object’ (p. 75). This set of tentative, unpublished materials drawn from Marx’s notebooks unexpectedly became a central point of reference amongst left-wing dissenters to ‘Marxist-Leninist’ orthodoxy and in competing attempts at realignment within and around the official Communist Parties after 1956. Typically, these attempts meant either seizing on the *1844 Manuscripts* as authority for alienation’s centrality to Marxist thought (e.g. Marxist humanism) or dismissing them as immature and ‘pre-scientific’ (e.g. Althusserian structural Marxism).

We see how Du Bois’ *Souls of Black Folk* was ‘the brainchild of its editors’, who wanted something more limited than a scholarly monograph that could be marketed to a popular audience (p. 100). Du Bois himself held serious reservations about the project, since it was an anthology of ‘methodologically diverse essays, written at different times, for radically different purposes’ (p. 101). Carreira da Silva and Brito Vieira underscore the importance of Du Bois’ ‘Forethought’ and ‘Afterthought’ in integrating the collected writings into a single book and framing the book’s purposive significance in different historical contexts (p. 130).

We come to appreciate the importance of Talcott Parsons' doctoral dissertation at the University of Heidelberg in his efforts to produce the first English translation of Weber's *Protestant Ethic* (p. 138). In particular, the time Parsons spent revising his German dissertation for submission while he was teaching at Amherst in 1926–1927 was 'the crucial juncture when Parsons . . . for the first time articulated his mature vision' of sociology (p. 154). This process was strikingly dialectical: translating *Protestant Ethic* while revising his dissertation helped Parsons reach a new stage in his own theory building, but this new stage in Parsons' theory building also influenced Parsons' more controversial translation choices for *Protestant Ethic*, including the expurgation of Weber's references to Nietzsche (pp. 154–155).

Finally, we are given new perspectives on the duelling introductions and translations of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, which position themselves along both political and disciplinary lines. The divisions are especially noticeable between Tocqueville's progressive and conservative curators. In JP Mayer's hands, Tocqueville 'is a perceptive sociologist engaged in cultural criticism', whereas in Harvey C Mansfield's hands, Tocqueville 'is a political philosopher serving the logic of ideas' (p. 200). In other words, 'Mayer's and Mansfield's secondary authoring of Tocqueville's work through commentary, editing, and translation results in two very different books and two very different Tocquevilles' (p. 200).

Carreira da Silva and Brito Vieira's approach demonstrates the instability of the classics within the sociological canon. This is not only in terms of whether these books are counted in the canon, but also in terms of their very constitution as self-contained works treated as points of access into the author's mode of theorising. Although *Politics of the Book* focuses on sociological classics, one could productively adopt the same approach to the canon of nearly any discipline. Moreover, *Politics of the Book* shows how the properties of the physical media through which texts are disseminated provide important frames of interpretation, making them significant instruments and outlets for struggles over meaning. This provides a refreshing break from genealogical approaches that limit their analysis of interpretive struggle to primarily textual questions of discourse-formation. In addition to demythologising several of the discipline's classic texts, Carreira da Silva and Brito Vieira's analysis opens doors to suggestive reinterpretations that could inform future theoretical enquiry.

There are, of course, places in the book where one might be left wishing for more. For instance, as a scholar of Weber and Simmel's Anglophone reception and canonisation, I would have liked to have seen more of how Parsons' use of Weber and other theorists changed as his career progressed. Did he shift his reading of Weber without acknowledgement to fend off different rivals, or did he remain within the basic interpretive framework he set when he translated *Protestant Ethic*? Still, the inevitable issue of the reader's personal interests does not detract from the considerable value *The Politics of the Book* holds as a work of historical and sociological scholarship. It should find a welcome place on the bookshelf of anyone interested in social theory, intellectual history and the history of the book.

## Author biography

Daniel Davison-Vecchione is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Cambridge. His main research is on social theory and the history of sociology. More recently, he has begun to explore the intersection between social science and speculative literature. *Address:* Selwyn College, Grange Road, Cambridge, CB3 9DQ, UK. Email: d.davisonvecchione@gmail.com

Nikolai Genov,

*Challenges of Individualization*, Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2018; 254 pp.: ISBN 9781349958276, US\$79.99 (hbk), 9781349958283, US\$59.99 (eBook)

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## Keywords

Analytical concept, challenges of modern world, global trends, individualization

Nikolai Genov starts his book *Challenges of Individualization* by saying that his aim is to ‘contribute to the sociological diagnosis of our time’, which is marked by the enormous rise of the rights and responsibilities of individuals. With individualization one’s life becomes its own project, carried out under its own will, more now than ever. Nevertheless, after reading this book, the reader cannot deny that the phenomenon of individualization has been known for centuries, it is just gaining more and more importance. The author shows very clearly that there have been continuities and discontinuities, breaks, and qualitatively new starts of individualization in history. This is a very innovative and persuasive explanation of individualization, which is understood by Genov as one of the main global trends – together with upgrading the rationality of organizations, the spreading of instrumental activism and the universalization of value-normative systems.

As one major obstacle to a cumulative understanding of individualization the author sees the plurality of individualization concepts. Usually, when talking about individualization, it is not always clear what is the subject of discussion. The author’s aim is to present a generalized concept of individualization. We can say that he succeeds in doing this. The author views his analytical concept as a universalized framework of cognitive parameters developed and applied for the systematic description, explanation, forecasting, and the management of structures, functions and processes in social reality.

The analysis and argumentation in this monograph is guided by the understanding of individualization as upgrading individuals’ capacities for autonomous and efficient problem management. Framed in this way, individualization has two dimensions, of structure and action. The first is linked to the changes of social spaces available for the autonomous and efficient orientation, decision-making and action of individuals. The action dimension of individualization refers to the improvement of the abilities of individuals to become oriented, make decisions, and act in an autonomous and efficient way. This