

Davita Silfen Glasberg – Deric Shannon: Political Sociology: Oppression, Resistance and the State

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When I was told to review a book on political sociology, I thought it would be another of those classical and boring “introductions” that become “prescribed texts” for undergraduates new to the subject. However, when I saw *Political Sociology: Oppression, Resistance and the State*, I found out that my assumptions had probably not been quite correct. Add to this a cover that shows riot police beating a protester. In one sentence – both the authors and the publisher managed to perfectly harmonize graphical and thematic processing. And when I mention the authors, it is appropriate to write at least a couple of sentences about them.

The publication is a result of cooperation of two authors. The first is Professor Davita Silfen Glasberg who is the head of Sociology department at the University of Connecticut. Within her research, she deals with topics such as human rights, power, inequality, oppression, and political economy as well. The second author is Deric Shannon who obtained his PhD in sociology in the same academic workplace, and within his research he specializes in radical political traditions, among much else. This is documented by the fact that D. Shannon is, among others, co-author of the publication *Contemporary Anarchist Studies* that is an introductory anthology to anarchistic works from an academic milieu.

The book, as its title indicates, deals with political sociology. This sociological sub discipline focuses on the study of social aspects of politics or, in other words, of the relation between society and state. One of the central points of interest of political sociology and of politics in general is the problem of power. This modern understanding of politics as a struggle for power is derived in history of political thinking from the work of the Italian renaissance philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli. Machiavelli’s concept of politics replaced the hitherto applied classical understanding of politics known for instance from the works of Plato and Aristotle that had sought the most suitable form of government. The problematic of power was later dealt with by Max Weber who is, with his work *Politics as a Vocation*, considered as one of the pioneers of political sociology. That much as a short introduction concerning the problematic of power in politics that explains why also the reviewed book works with power as an elementary concept that is followed by other themes that are dealt with in the book.

The book describes “the interplay among power, inequality and multiple oppressions, ant the state” (p. XI) as its central theme. While power, inequality

and the state are quite clear and familiar concepts, the problematic of multiple oppression requires some sentences as an explanation. The authors proceed from the understanding of oppression as it was sketched by Karl Marx in his works. It is characterized as a relation where one group of people is subordinated and exploited, while another one profits from this mutual relation. But to which group of people will the person belong is not a result of its effort and work. On the contrary, it is the accident of birth that predestines him to belong to one of these groups. The book follows Marx' concept of class oppression that is designated as the basic oppression. To the other concepts that co-create the multiple oppression belong racism, patriarchy and heteronormativity (heteronormativity is a term describing persuasion anchored on a society-wide level that heterosexuality is the only normal sexual orientation). The individual forms of oppression do not act independently, on the contrary, they act in a mutual harmony and co-create "a matrix of domination" (p. 172). Right at the beginning, the authors reflect whether it is possible to use the concept of class oppression also with its other forms, or whether it is necessary to re-evaluate this concept and develop another one that enables us to better comprehend a multiple oppression. They are of the opinion that Marx' concept of the class oppression reacting to the living conditions of the working class during the period of the early capitalism of the 19th century needs to be modified in order to correctly reflect the living conditions of the groups trying to emancipate from the beginning of the 20th century (the women's struggle for voting rights at the beginning of the century, a civil rights movement reacting to the unequal position of the Afro-Americans in the USA in the 1960s, and the problematic of sexual minorities that became self-aware in the 1970s) up to the present. At the end of the book, they explain how to create a correct analytical concept to cover the relation between the state, society and oppression.

The authors also contemplate how it is possible that the subordinate members of society who come to realize this unequal division of power usually follow and accept the rules of the dominant people. In their view, the answer is offered by the process of oppression and political socialization. Socialization is defined as "the general process by which members of society learn what is expected of them and what they can expect from the world around them: They learn their rights, privileges, responsibilities, and obligations" (p. 47). Both the political socialization and socialization of oppression are designated as particular forms of the general process of socialization "whereby individuals develop understandings of power and political structure, particularly as these inform perceptions of identity, power, and opportunity relative to gender, racialized group membership, and sexuality." (p. 47). How individuals socialize depends, according to the authors, upon the basic political values and

ideologies they adopt. In the capitalist system, where governments adopt the laissez-faire position, individuals are thought to be responsible for their own welfare. As the authors mention, the economic success and failure is attributed to the results of individual effort and competitiveness. If somebody fails, it is interpreted that they simply did not deserve to succeed. The ideology of free market origins in the dogma of “equal chance” (p. 49) that, according to the authors of the publication, forgets the fact that each generation profits from the wealth of the preceding generations and thus ignores the fact that one team can go in a match with a considerable advantage. According to Glasberg and Shannon, with these economic ideologies are connected also ideologies excusing patriarchal organization, white supremacy, and heteronormativity. The authors support their assertion with interesting examples. As for the patriarchal organization, they mention for instance that persuasion that women are citizens of the second category was strengthened by the fact that they could not vote or own property, and they were treated as goods. According to them, it is evidenced by the social tradition that a woman accepts her husband’s name. Thus her identity is buried and it is clearly declared to whom she belongs.

Other interesting examples are shown in connection with political socialization where media, schools and state play an important role. The authors refer for instance to the fact that fairy-tales and films showing the Arabs as violent robbers contribute to almost every terrorist attack being from the very beginning labelled as a work of Arab terrorists. After all, we could see it during the terrorist attack in Norway. Another example of political socialization, this time in the school system, is offered by American schools where a school day begins with reciting of the Pledge of Allegiance. The same effect is produced by singing the national anthem during sport events. According to Glasberg and Shannon, society instils nationalist values in the citizens in this manner. But if these pre-emptive socialization methods fail, the state has always a possibility to silence the opposition by way of a hard repression (i. e. by deploying repressive state forces – police and army), or of a soft repression (e. g. public derision or social stigmatization). But as the authors remark, the use of force by the state can result in provoking people to join the resistance. Such examples are given to us by events from France, Greece or Britain, where the use of force triggered mass protests of the youth.

Glasberg and Shannon mention that “understanding oppression begins with an exploration of the notion of power” (p. 15), and besides dealing with oppression, individual theories of power structures are introduced in the publication as well. They are pluralism, elite theory, class dialectic theory, and concisely is introduced also the post-structural theory of power connected with the name of the known French intellectual Michel Foucault. Besides the fact that the book describes for the reader individual contrasting models of how

structures of power work in democracies, at the same time these models, that have dominated the sociology in the last half-century, are being mutually opposed and their strong and weak sides critically analyzed. The authors do not suggest that any of these concepts are correct and any not, nor that these concepts exclude each other. They are rather of the opinion that each of the models can be used depending on the studied problematic.

The book also familiarises the reader with some theories of the state, such as the Marxist state theory (capitalist state structuralism and instrumentalism/business dominance theory), that understand a state either as a player in the capitalist system, or they directly consider it as a capitalist state. The other introduced theories of the state are state-centered structuralism, according to which a state is a bureaucratic political power, and the anarchist state theory which considers a state as an illegitimate institution based upon hierarchy and control. Chapters dealing with elections and social movements react to what possibilities there are of articulating the interests of the masses within a state. The authors try to answer the question why people do not vote. The readers can also acquaint themselves with anarchist objections to voting. Their persuasion that elections are no tool of social transformation is probably best documented by a statement of known anarchist Emma Goldman, "if voting changed anything, they'd make it illegal" (p. 114). We learn in this book of the anarchist alternative to elections, which is direct action. This, according to its advocates, should teach people and groups that they are able to solve their problems independently, without intervention of the government and authorities, and is also a model for social movements that shows how to realize power "from bottom up".

To conclude, this book, published in 2011 by Pine Forge Press – an imprint that specializes in Sociology – offers, throughout its 248 pages an interesting and complex view of the problematic of power and oppression in society. The book is clearly divided into seven continuing chapters. Frequent tables and diagrams help the reader to better comprehend individual problems, and the popular scientific style of the book is also helpful to the reader. The book's only drawback for a foreign reader is that it is intended primarily for American students. For this reason many of the examples given by the authors may not be well-known to foreigners. However, the book can enrich students, in general, with often ignored theoretical perspectives. Teachers can be inspired, among much else, by questions for discussion that are at the end of each chapter. In all, *Political Sociology: Oppression, Resistance and the State* can be judged positively and it can be recommended for the study for students of political science and sociology.

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