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Apprehending the “Social”

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Outhwaite, William, ed. (2006 [2003]). *The Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Social Thought*. 2nd edition. Advisory editor Alain Touraine. Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.

Sica, Alan, edited and with introductions (2005). *Social Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Present*. Boston: Pearson Education.

The two books reviewed here are different efforts to embrace the vast subject called “social thought.” The second edition of *The Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Social Thought*, edited by William Outhwaite with Alain Touraine, contains numerous updates; yet it also has some disadvantages compared to the first edition. *Social Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Present*, edited by Alan Sica, is a bold but controversial attempt at gathering in one anthology as many social thinkers as possible.

Keywords: “social”; social thought/theory; William Outhwaite; Alan Sica; explanation

These two books may be considered together for a few good reasons. First, they treat the same subject, sweepingly described as social thought. Second, in doing so, they complement each other: one is a comprehensive dictionary, which however does not include entries on individual authors; the other is a bulky anthology of short fragments from numerous social thinkers accompanied by brief biographical profiles. Third, both address the meaning and scope of the term “social.”

In its broadest sense, “social” describes virtually any aspect of human, and often animal, interaction. In academic literature, an implicit (though not universal) agreement also seems to exist regarding a more narrow meaning of “social,” differentiating it from the “political”; this distinction is vivid in countless textbooks and course titles like “social and political philosophy/theory.” In this more narrow sense, “social” usually relates to descriptive, explanatory,

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and methodological aspects of the study of human interaction, and to questions concerning organization and coordination of human interaction; probably the best candidate for a term to unite these aspects would be “sociological.” “Political,” as opposed to the narrow “social,” designates normative aspects of interaction. These terminological conventions apply in particular to the two volumes discussed here.

“Social thought,” even limited by the term “modern,” is a boundless subject which is easier to divide than to define. Furthermore, “thought” is not less evasive than “social” and is effectively interchangeable with “theory”; as James Coleman writes, “‘Social theory,’ as taught in the universities, is largely a history of social thought” (Coleman 1990, xv). But “theory” itself is far from clear: Robert Merton remarks that “Like so many words that are bandied about, the word theory threatens to become meaningless. Because its referents are so diverse . . . use of the word often obscures rather than creates understanding” (Merton 1968, 39). In addition, “social theory” in turn is almost pervasively identified with “sociological theory.” In spite of, and partly because of, these conceptual difficulties, the broad subject called social thought/theory has grown into a genuine cosmos of ideas, and like the actual universe, it continues to expand rapidly.¹

The Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Social Thought was first published in 1993 (as *The Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Social Thought*), edited by William Outhwaite and Tom Bottomore; its advisory editors were Ernest Gellner, Robert Nisbet, and Alain Touraine. When the new edition appeared in 2003, Bottomore, Gellner, and Nisbet had passed away, and Outhwaite dedicated the updated project to their memory.

Outhwaite and Bottomore begin their “Introduction” with an observation that may sound unbelievable today: “At the end of the nineteenth century the term ‘social’ was still a relatively new one, as was for the most part the concept of distinct ‘social sciences’” (p. xv).² Less than a century later, Friedrich Hayek discusses in his *The Fatal Conceit* overuse of the term and counts 160 sundry nouns characterized by the pliant word “social.”³ Outhwaite’s volume is a rich source to supplement Hayek’s list.

How is one to approach the enormous realm of social thought? Outhwaite and Bottomore tackle the issue as follows: “Social thought, as we both conceived it, is empirical as well as normative or speculative, cultural as well as economic and political” (p. 6); they specify further:

In compiling the present work, we have tried to encompass this vast field by commissioning entries on three themes: first, the major concepts which

figure in social thought; second, the principal schools and movements of thought; and third, those institutions and organizations which have either been important objects of social analysis, or have themselves engendered significant doctrines and ideas. (p. vii)

Unfortunately, the volume does not include a fourth theme, that of social theorists, which is present in similar comprehensive dictionaries.⁴

All sources cited in the *Dictionary* are collected in a massive 90-page long bibliography; and all of its entries are supplemented by a short list of suggested readings. The new edition updates some 200 entries and includes new ones. In spite of additions, the updated *Dictionary* has shrunk: it has dropped a short Biographical Appendix and most inexplicably—and regrettably!—the Index, which graced the 1993 version. This latter is perhaps the biggest shortcoming of an otherwise solid and comprehensive project.

The *Dictionary* includes not just “major concepts” but also concepts commensurate in their scope to the realm of social thought: aesthetics, economics, sociology, and philosophy; ethics, morality, and values; theology and social thought of the world religions. Some entry subjects are so wide indeed that they embrace social thought itself: civilization, culture, history, language, literature. On the whole, the volume plentifully illustrates the idea that any object of thought may be categorized as, and after all is, “social.” (Ironically, there is no entry for “social.”)

Entries covering scholarly fields are, of necessity, short outlines of these fields’ recent history. Thus the entry on history, by prominent historian and historiographer J. H. Hexter, is a concise, sweeping, at times passionate and figurative history of the short (1914–1989) twentieth century. After surveying the radical changes in modern historiography, Hexter foregrounds Marxism and the attempts at its realization as shaping both modern history and modern historical science:

the shorter twentieth century was the Marxist Century. For 75 years the Soviet Union, of which Marx and Lenin were the official icons, presented to humankind the first “acting out” of socialism on the world stage. . . . For nearly the whole of the twentieth century the Communist Revolution and the success or survival of the Soviet Union were the decisive events in colouring the imagination of professional historians. (p. 275)

Contrary to what some social science seers claimed, the short century’s end was rather sudden: “Until 1989, no one—no layman, no expert—foresaw the end of the twentieth century as it actually happened: the implosion of the Soviet power structure and along with it of the ideology to which it was

committed” (p. 276). A social theorist may remain unconvinced, and it is appropriate to mention the view of another celebrated historian, Eric Hobsbawm:

since 1989 it has become common among many observers, especially economists with a better understanding of market theory than of historical reality, to think of the Soviet and similar economies as a complete field of ruins, because that is what they became after the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the Soviet Union. In fact . . . they were in their own way a working economic system. They were not on the verge of collapse. (Hobsbawm 1997, 234)⁵

Hexter concludes “History” with a melancholy report:

Already in the past 30 years, as the credit and credibility of the Soviet experiments slumped, historians who had most of their intellectual assets invested in communism have looked for ways to hedge their bets. Only rarely did a Marxist historian say, “I have spent all my life digging my way into a dead end.” (p. 276)

Personal sentiments notwithstanding, the volume abundantly proves that Marxism in social thought is alive and well. This is seen in numerous entries, in particular in Bottomore’s entry on Marxism, or in Ernest Gellner’s on psychoanalysis: “As one of the most significant intellectual movements of the twentieth century, it is arguable that psychoanalysis is second only to Marxism in the range of its impact on the thought and language of the Western world” (p. 536).

“Explanation,” as it is explained in this volume, perpetuates the tradition of anachronistically attributing the deductive-nomological (D-N) account of explanation to Hempel and Oppenheim.⁶ After discussing the controversies surrounding the D-N model, the entry intriguingly concludes by reproducing, perhaps as the last word in explanation debates, frayed mantras of postmodernists: they just “turn away” from these debates, calling them part of the “mistaken modernist project concerned to progressively subjugate [*sic*] the natural and social worlds to universal rational enlightenment”; instead of searching for general accounts of explanation, they prefer “to celebrate the diversity of local practices—in the sciences and in everyday life,” the pragmatic advantage being that “the local circumstances . . . enable people within them to ‘see’ particular explanations” (p. 227).

This account clouds the issue. If one just dismisses the problem of explanation, why mention that position in an entry on “explanation”? If, however,

the author meant that this pomo-position *is* relevant, he did not show what it contributes to the subject; it is not enough to say "seeing is (better than) explaining." For instance, many Torontonians are fond of watching ice hockey, eating fast food, camping, gambling, smoking hemp, sharing pirate files, going to gyms, and attending theaters. One wonders how participating in and "seeing" these locally celebrated practices explains them; or how, if successful, such explanations would un-subjugate the natural or the social world; or whether these explanations will not be nomological as well. A dictionary entry does not fulfill its function by giving the reader bare formulas, like "the modernist project is mistaken." Why is it mistaken? Many authors, some in this same *Dictionary*, amply testify that the project has been an impressive success.

One of the chief conveniences of reading a comprehensive dictionary is that needed references are often found in the same volume. When Hexter writes, "Structures of ideas are far more durable than structures of institutions," one may wonder if institutions are not made of ideas. Yet, on looking for an entry for institutions, one fails to find it, although the volume contains other basic sociological categories (group, class, crime, socialization, stratification). This only suggests that there is still a bit of room for further constructive growth of the *Dictionary*. As with any effort of this kind, there is inevitably indefinite room for disagreement, misinterpretation, and constructive criticism too.

In a recent review, William Pawlett-Grey (2004) notes the overall scholarly nature of the *Dictionary*, but immediately complains that its tone is often "scholastic," "technical" (what did he expect?), and "self-aggrandizing"; he claims, somewhat indiscriminately, that contributors were not "struggling to comprehend contemporary issues but were describing and interpreting long-established themes and concepts" (Pawlett-Grey 2004, 1057-58); he finds deficiencies in some individual entries while praising others. His biggest frustration is that he had not found an entry for postmodernity, or anything on poststructuralism, sexuality, and otherness.

Unfortunately, Pawlett-Grey was looking in the wrong places, for all these items are in a large joint entry "modernism and postmodernism." In fact, the unification of the two concepts in a single entry makes perfect sense. First, sociologically speaking, not everyone, even within academia, believes that they live through a distinctive epoch called "postmodernism" that is clearly distinguishable from modernism. Second, the entry helps to highlight an important anti-intellectual continuity between modernism and alleged postmodernism: the widespread bad habit among some literati of holistically confusing sundry institutions, most patently, arts and politics.

Compare two passages revealing such a jumbled mode of political reasoning. One summarizes the thinking of modernists: “Such is the project of . . . futurism, which celebrates the vast energies of contemporary science and production . . . Such an aesthetics, clearly, at once implies a revolutionary politics” (p. 402). The other quote is that of postmodernists: “But if we can no longer appeal to Nature or the unconscious, to authentic Lawrentian sexuality or Third World precapitalist enclaves against the image-ridden First World in which we live, what now *is* the basis of political critique . . . ?” (p. 404).

By his failure to locate what he was looking for, Pawlett-Grey unwittingly makes a point: a dictionary, especially such an ambitious one, *does need an index*. A list of entries would be of much use as well.

As far as academic disciplines are concerned, *The Blackwell Dictionary* bountifully covers topics in economics, psychology, history, politics, sociology, and philosophy. “Philosophy” by Peter Manicas is an extensive account of twentieth-century philosophy; he lists all major figures and trends, though he does not emphasize social philosophical thought (apparently because this is the function of the whole volume). Entries on several significant philosophical topics—ontology, naturalism, empiricism, philosophy of social science, truth, realism, determinism—are authored by Roy Bhaskar, and allot a lot of space to his own philosophy, known as “critical realism.”

Overall, the *Dictionary*, with all its unavoidable minor flaws, has proven to be a helpful guide to the most significant social ideas. As David Downes wrote in his review of the first edition of the volume, it “fulfils its promise with admirable clarity and expertise” (Downes 1995, 158). For balance, one should once more mention Pawlett-Grey’s exacting, though not entirely consistent, opinion: “I found the dictionary less than satisfying and wonder where it will find a significant readership, yet there is much fine material on offer including rich historical and conceptual detail” (Downes 2004, 158). Margaret Archer disagrees; her opinion put on the back cover of the *Dictionary*’s second edition is straightforward: “This is still the best dictionary around . . . Students could abandon their textbooks and follow this reference trail.” (One wonders what she might have suggested had she reviewed Wikipedia.)

If some professors happen to take Archer’s suggestion to abandon textbooks seriously, they still might consider Alan Sica’s volume as complementary to Outhwaite’s. Yet, some precautions must be taken.

Sica reports that his initial manuscript embraced the whole of written history, from the ancient Egyptian inscriptions to our century, and included as many as 185 (!) authors. The publisher cut the volume’s length in half, but the remainder is still impressive: *Social Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Present* squeezes into a single volume, edited by a single person,

fragments from 144 authors. These numbers and ratio alone (1 to 144) pre-determined two kinds of pressure: on the editorial job of making selections and writing scholarly comments, and on the length of selections. These pressures, accordingly, have caused the main problems with the volume.

In the Preface, Sica says that the aim of compiling the anthology was to give the readers a sense of the history of social thought without getting them sunk in the flood of electronic and printed information easily available today. He too asks,

What, precisely, is "social thought"? One can easily answer what it is not and then hope for the best implication. It is not for the most part philosophy proper, since that discipline must take in logic, epistemology, aesthetics, some linguistics, and other subfields, none of which is exclusively or mainly concerned with social life in its larger sense. So, for instance, when including John Locke, most sections of his more formally philosophical writings (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*) might be left aside, while his essential commentaries on the best form of government warrant inclusion. (p. 1)

This passage is remarkable for a few reasons. It betrays the common difficulty of defining the social, as social thought is circularly defined through "social life." Meanwhile, Sica's sense of "social" is different from Outhwaite's and Bottomore's: the disciplines he excludes from the social are all richly represented in their *Dictionary*.⁷ Finally, the reader will be stunned to see a few pages later, in the anthology's very first entry on Locke, the opposite to what Sica argues in his introduction: the selection does include a passage from Locke's *Essay*,⁸ as well as another short fragment from his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, but nothing on forms of government as was promised.

The first explanation that comes to mind for why this blunder has occurred is the enormous pressure that an editor must face because of the sheer amount of work such an ambitious project involves. This surmise is supported by other odd choices and comments in the collection. Apparently, some poor choices and errors are not Sica's own; for it is nearly impossible to have deep knowledge of hundreds of social theorists, and collectors of major anthologies have to resort to their predecessor's aid. As he describes his way,

I formulated this list [of authors] through the pedestrian, empirical method of examining about fifty histories published during the last half-century on political and social theory, philosophy, and comparative religion, in an effort to identify those writers who have been most consistently regarded as essential to the ever-changing canon. (p. 2)

Unfortunately, this “empirical method” often involves borrowing from compilers of past collections their oversights—and this is a second, institutional source of errors.

All entries in the anthology have uniform structure: a biographical note on an author and her works is followed by a selection ranging from two to nine pages. Many of the editorial notes on the authors invite objections. Some omissions are just technical; for example, Sica, or whoever “assisted” him, correctly dates Hannah Arendt’s birth and death as 1906–1975, but miscalculates her age at death as 66 (p. 599). In this case, undergraduates, who are the target readers of the anthology, can easily detect the error. In other cases, however, when Sica condescendingly writes, say, about Popper’s “notorious and in some ways amateurish attacks on Plato, Hegel, and Marx in *The Open Society*,” most students will be unlikely to question the author’s authority.

Had the editor asked his colleagues for more feedback (or, what is called today “division of cognitive labor”), they might have suggested to him that Popper’s attack on historicism and totalitarian tendencies in Plato, Hegel, and Marx have been one of the formative influences on philosophy of history and philosophy of the social sciences after World War II. His selections from Popper then would be less unfortunate as well; the two fragments from *Conjectures and Refutations* mostly concern personal attitudes toward violence and reason, and his optimism. These essays are not representative of Popper’s social thought, whatever one means by the expression. In the same *Conjectures and Refutations*, one can find better choices for a social thought anthology, namely, “Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences,” “Public Opinion and Liberal Principles,” or “Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition.” Most surprisingly, Sica mentions Popper’s *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society*, but somehow does not make use of them.

Sica drafts certain standards of what is and what is not a social idea, so one may speak of some unfortunate choices in his own terms. He admits: “I do not have any formal definition of ‘social thought,’ and generally regard eclectic catholicism as the best guide” (p. 2). He has, however, a criterion for more-or-less-social authors and writings: “Bright people who wrote insightfully about human relations in fairly direct terms—Heidegger did not, for instance, and so cannot properly be thought of as a social theorist” (pp. 1-2).⁹ On the other hand, there are paradigmatic writers “who seem to embody ‘social thought’ in quintessential form: John Ruskin, Hannah Arendt, Isaiah Berlin” (p. 1). Using Sica’s own criterion, one can say then that some of Kant’s other writings are more “quintessentially social” than the two selections (“Suicide” and “Duties Towards the Body in

Respect of Social Impulse") chosen for the volume.¹⁰ Otherwise, Sica is not entirely consistent with his criteria: in delineating "social," he leaves linguistics out, yet the selections from de Saussure, Barthes, and Derrida are basically linguistic exercises.

The above are mostly technical and subjective criticisms; after all, any of the numerous authors in the book speak about the social as it is broadly understood. A bigger problem lies in the conflict between Sica's overall pedagogical aims and the project's end result. He cogently says that

For pedagogical purposes some coherence is required, some plausible narrative about the evolution and devolution of social theory, so that the novice can get hold of the arguments before taking on the more taxing questions of which works deserve canonical status and which do not, which retained for the long haul, and which set aside. (pp. 7-8)

The sheer number of authors defies this aim. An average entry in the volume contains four pages of selections preceded by a one-page note on the author. It is unlikely that the reader will be able to grasp the import of major works based on these snippets, or to address onerous questions regarding a thinker's status. What is also unlikely is that any university course on the subject would cover so many authors.

Alan Sica's quite impressive effort suggests that in compiling a major anthology one has to prioritize one's aims. By pursuing the aim of including as many thinkers as possible, one automatically sacrifices educational aims. Even in its present form, the volume, with its very short fragments placed in more or less chronological order and supplied with brief comments, is closer in its structure to a dictionary or collection of quotes than to an anthology—and Sica refers in the introduction to more than 100 authors deserving inclusion, who did not make it into the book.

Like many editors today, Sica is preoccupied with "Refashioning the Social Thought Canon" (as he titles the introduction), which task he discusses at length; yet again, his all-inclusive method simply frustrates his good intentions. He expresses sympathy for the concerns of feminist and non-European authors; still, the collection contains almost exclusively European and North American male thinkers—perhaps because his collection of authors was already too large.

The last critical remark, too, concerns the related questions of "canon-building" and volume structuring. Students reading the anthology may acquire a very artificial notion of the significance of many social thinkers from the space they were allotted in the book. The fragment from Paine, for

instance, is a meager one-and-a-half pages, and Engels' barely exceeds one page—even though both are hailed in introductory notes in superlative terms. In contrast, our fashionable contemporaries Derrida and Baudrillard are represented by selections of eight and six pages respectively. Frazer's selection is less than two pages, Bataille's is seven; Weber is given as little as five pages, which is as much as what Fromm or Trotsky get, and so on. Sica takes issue with postmodernists' outright relativism somewhat halfheartedly; the way he represents thinkers tends to trivialize the efforts of generations of social scholars, and eventually the value of social thought as such.

The conclusion that can be drawn from Sica's attempt is that, given the educational goals he pursues, his method of "eclectic catholicism," as he puts it, is not really the best guide. There are some more modest in scope but thematically focused collections which better serve the aims of teaching and of preserving the continuity of social thought.

Notes

1. The considerable overlap of these related concepts is revealed, for example, in comparison of the contents and editorial introductions to the three sister volumes in the Blackwell Companions series; see Robert Simon (2002), Bryan Turner (2000), and Stephen P. Turner and Paul A. Roth (2003).

2. See also OED.com, which documents English quotations with "social" going back to the sixteenth century. Incidentally, the term was not uncommon in the early eighteenth century; e.g., the often quoted passage from Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man* (1965 [1734]) uses "social" in the meaning familiar to us: "Thus God and Nature linked the gen'ral frame, And bade Self-love and Social be the same" (p. 40). Shortly after, Hume is using "social" throughout his first major work, the *Treatise* (1739–1740), as do many of his contemporaries.

3. In the section, The Weasel Word "Social," he writes: "The noun 'society,' misleading as it is, is relatively innocuous compared with the adjective 'social,' which has probably become the most confusing expression in our entire moral and political vocabulary. . . . ['Social'] also has acquired the power to empty the nouns it qualifies of their meaning" (Hayek 1988, 114–16).

4. See e.g., Adam and Jessica Kuper's (1985) *The Social Science Encyclopedia*, a volume akin to *Dictionary* in size and, to a great extent, in content. It contains entries on major social thinkers from antiquity to the present, including (then) living ones.

5. Elsewhere, he writes: "There is no sign that the U.S. government expected or envisaged the impending collapse" (Hobsbawm 1994, 249). This account may also be instructive (especially for "systemists") in that the self-professed Marxist historian gives an explanation of the collapse in terms of "superstructure" and individualism: "we must revert [in the discussion] from the economics to the politics of 'really existing socialism,' since politics, both high and low, were to bring about the Euro-Soviet collapse" (Hobsbawm 1994, 475). He cites the soaring corruption and incompetence of the Communist Party bureaucracy; "acute political and cultural ferment among the Soviet elite" (which adds plausibility to Plato's theory of the elite's decay); the nearly universal loyalty of the people, and the actual source of reforms: "the

pressure to change came . . . from the top. . . . If any single man ended some forty years of global cold war it was he [Gorbachev]" (Hobsbawm 1994, 478-79).

6. The readings for the entry include G. H. von Wright's *Explanation and Understanding*, where one can read: "the 'Popper-Hempel' theory of explanation had been something of a philosophical commonplace ever since the days of Mill and Jevons" (Wright 1971, 175). Popper, who had outlined the D-N model prior to Hempel, himself later acknowledged this in his autobiography: "In section 12 of *Logik der Forschung* I discussed what I called 'causal explanation,' or deductive explanation, a discussion which had been anticipated, without my being aware of it, by J. S. Mill, though perhaps a bit vaguely (because of his lack of distinction between an initial condition and universal law)" (Popper 1993 [1974], 117). Remarkably, unlike the entry's author, Outhwaite does acknowledge the earlier origin of the D-N model elsewhere: "A more robust response to the problem of induction, and one which was more influential in the philosophy of science, was offered by the so-called hypothetico-deductive or deductive-nomological model of explanation, which recalls Stanley Jevons's (1832-82) critique of J. S. Mill's inductivism, but which was popularized in the mid-twentieth century by C. G. Hempel and Paul Oppenheim. . . . Hempel's article, 'The Functions of General Laws in History,' . . . followed Popper in its unified naturalistic conception of explanation" (Outhwaite 2000: 53-58).

7. Sica also excludes from the "social" further on "pure economics," psychology, and art theory, which are found in the *Dictionary*.

8. *Essay* indeed is a work "formally philosophical," as Sica says, dry, technical, and having nothing to do with "social life"—not directly, at least. Yet some interpret the book as an aid in resolving legal and religious quarrels, especially severe in Locke's time. Professor Jagdish Hattiangadi gives this reading of the book in his lectures on modern philosophy: *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, though formally epistemological, provides conceptual underpinnings needed to tolerantly settle our disputes using a source equally valid to all parties, independently of their religious beliefs. (Interestingly, the idea is as foreign to some contemporary thinkers as it was to seventeenth-century clerics.) This interpretation might usefully supplement Sica's note on Locke.

9. He also qualified earlier that the chosen set of authors seemed "to cohere around the big questions: of what are human beings capable, and what kind of life should they live?" (p. xxi).

10. Good candidates for selections of Kant's social/political writings can be found for instance in Hans Reiss 1995 [1970].

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