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Beyond the Enlightenment: Lives and Thoughts of Social Theorists

Roger A. Salerno

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Review by:

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Beyond the Enlightenment is a book intended, as declared by author Roger R. Salerno, to provide a very brief overview of the perspectives of theorists of social life, the times in which they lived, and how these two are intertwined. It is intended as a preface rather than a text on social theory, because as he acknowledges, that would be a “quixotic venture” (p. ix). He also metaphorically relates his work to *hors d'oeuvres* rather than a full meal, preferring to attract inquisitive customers rather than regular guests who “come hungry” for a heavy dose of social theory. It aims to be several things--an introductory text in social theory, an adjunctive tool to such a text, an introduction to the ideas and concepts of important social theorists, and a resource for laypersons who simply want to increase their understanding of social thought and often discussed theoretical concepts. It is also a text on history, specifically the history of ideas.

Salerno jumps into his discussion of social thought without providing a definition of social theory. This is understandable due to the fact that Salerno is a professor of

social theory and to experts in the field, discussing theory is similar to breathing. However, since the book is intended for novices as well as sociology instructors, this would have been a good starting point. However, this is not an easy chore--consider this definition of social theory from an early text by Chambliss (1954: 4): "Since thought arises in social experience, finds expression in social symbols, and endures only as it becomes a part of the social heritage, it might be claimed that *all* thought is social thought" (italics mine). Or this one by Bogardus (1960: 3): "Social thought is the product of thinking together of socii or associates...social thought is abstract". Abstract indeed. Even with the obvious problems of trying to describe such as abstract concept, any attempts to do so are probably beneficial to the reader. Even the somewhat capricious definition provided in Lemert's mammoth work (1993: 2) on social theory offers a starting point for discussion: "...social theory is the normal accomplishment of social human creatures figuring out what other creatures of the same sort are doing with, to, or around them". Often an understanding of the author's perception of a concept provides an important foundation to the work, from the reader's perspective.

Salerno's book offers a social history of the period following the enlightenment, from the early nineteenth century to the present. Beginning with the thought of G.W.F. Hegel, the work evolves to the work of Anthony Giddens. Most of the social theorists reviewed were sociologists and philosophers; however the social thought of psychologists (technically, *psychoanalysts*) Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud, anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss, and popular writer bell hooks were also included.

In the opening chapter, Salerno briefly describes the predecessors to the post-enlightenment theorists, especially Immanuel Kant and the philosophes. He explains how

the concepts of empirical science and reason came to replace religious thought but social philosophers still tended to see the world through their own biases. Prejudice, racism, sexism, and class prejudice was prominent during the enlightenment period, despite its name.

The proceeding chapters provide a quick glimpse into the lives of the social theorists picked for us by the author. Each chapter begins with an introductory paragraph, followed by a short biography, then a description of the theorists' thoughts and works. Each chapter then concludes with a discussion of the thinkers' last years, followed by a brief recap. The method is successful in its attempts to provide a morsel of information but at the same time gives a sound overview of the theorists and their ideas.

Salerno explains how the early post-enlightenment thinkers Hegel, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and Harriet Martineau provide the passage for Enlightenment thought to more modern views of society. Hegel's concept of the dialectic appears again and again throughout the text, to be revisited as dialectical materialistic under Marxist thought and later, binary oppositions in the postmodern era. From Comte foreword, we have a focus on positivism and a grounded, empirical approach to social theory.

The next thinkers reviewed are what are often termed the trinity of classical sociology--Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. Their influence can be seen throughout the perspectives of the rest of the theorists covered in the book. It should be obvious that Marx was a seminal thinker and most of the other theorists, save for Talcott Parsons, reflected his influence, even if through a rejection of it. The functionalism of Durkheim also appears prominently in the works of others as does the rational empiricism of Weber. If the French Revolution was a major influence on the thought of

the earlier post-enlightenment thinkers (including Marx), the Industrial Revolution was a primary influence on the theories of this group.

The work of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud is appropriately discussed in the text. Though some readers would question why a figure from the field of psychology would exert such a pervasive influence in social thought, it is appropriately alleged that Freud was also a macro level thinker who applied his ideas of repression in individuals to the notion of repression in society. Psychoanalysis, although initially applied to individuals, influenced greater social concerns such as the study of juvenile delinquency. As with Marx, Freud reappears throughout the text as a testament to his influence on later theorists.

The remaining chapters have less cohesion in terms of a logical order and explores an amalgam of the thoughts of philosophers, sociologists, activists, and an anthropologist, all possessing a hodgepodge of different perspectives. This is not a criticism of the book, however, because the work follows an evolutionary pattern of the thought of select thinkers rather than typologies, except for the in-chapter groupings for the Frankfurt School theorists, poststructuralists, feminist theorists, and postmodernists (it is interesting, albeit appropriate, that Herbert Marcuse was discussed separately from the Frankfurt School).

The selection of theorists was appropriate for a work of this type; however, one must wonder why certain other thinkers were excluded. For example, Thorstein Veblen, who is otherwise mentioned in the book in passing, is conspicuously (pun intended) not awarded a biography. Likewise, biographies on the lives and thought of George Herbert

Mead, William James, and W.I. Thomas would have been a welcome addition to the work. (But of course, all authors of biographical data have to draw the line *somewhere*).

A criticism of the work is that there are several typographical errors throughout the book. The editors should have paid more attention to this detail because errors such as this significantly detract from the work. In addition, one mistake was found-- in the chapter on Herbert Marcuse, it was reported that the theorist received a teaching appointment in 1965 to the University of California at San Diego, this was in actuality U.C. at La Jolla, where he remained until he retired several years later.

There is a profusion of recent books on social theorists and each text has its own twist. An exhaustive reader (Lemert 1993) takes a multicultural perspective in his presentation, another uses the metaphor of “maps” and is delivered in a humorous manner in a vernacular for college students (Fernandez 2003), while another uses four “key ideas” (Kivisto 1998). Yet another highly innovative book frames social theory in a narrative format through the use of a Sherlock Homes mystery (Berger 2003).

Salerno’s text delivers exactly what it purports to do--provide a brief overview of the lives of key post-enlightenment thinkers that should stimulate interest and a desire on the part of the reader to learn more about them. Although it does not possess the novelty of some of the works just mentioned, it is a fairly comprehensive, easy to digest, user friendly work that whets a reader’s appetite for larger feasts. It is a welcome addition to the social theory collection.

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