

Gianfranco Poggi

Jonathan Hearn, "Theorizing power". Cambridge: Polity, 2012, xii + 251 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/73720)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2013

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Book reviews

Jonathan Hearn, *Theorizing power*. Cambridge: Polity, 2012, xii+251 pp.

doi: 10.2383/73720

This is an excellent book. The first 130 pp. cover an impressive range of contributions dealing (more or less expressly and diffusely) with the power phenomenon. Hearn reviews some main issues those contributions raise – e.g. the analogies and differences between the physical and the social aspects of the phenomenon, the “power over vs. power to” distinction, and the prevailing focus on structure vs. agency – and persuasively adjudicate some of the related controversies.

The book then explores a family of concepts associated with social power – domination, authority and legitimation – before moving on to an account of the most significant approaches (“classical” and contemporary) to power theorizing. It labels “epistemological” those approaches which emphasize the mutual bearing between power at one end and knowledge and discourse at the other. A passage from this section wisely argues that Foucault, in particular, confounds power and knowledge. However, “(k)nowledge is a fundamental means of coordinating human experience and behaviour. Power concerns the capacity of agents to realize their wills, a capacity that is often unevenly distributed.” The relations between these two distinctive resources cannot be settled “by collapsing the idea of power into that of knowledge” (other authors discussed in this context are Barnes, Bourdieu, and Latour).

Hearn labels “evolutionary” an alternative ensemble of contributions, focused on different historical manifestations of power and concerned to detect within them patterns of relations between “factors” and mechanisms accounting for such patterns. He presents Gellner and Mann as the main contemporary proponents of this approach (Marx, Weber and Durkheim are the key classical ones) as well as the contributions by, for instance, Polanyi, Lenski and John A. Hall. He identifies significant convergences and divergences between them.

From p. 133 on, after rendering the reader an outstanding service by reconnoitring the vast and complex theoretical terrain surrounding the notion of power, Hearn flies solo. Chapters 7-10, which he appropriately characterizes as “essays,” discuss aspects of the contemporary problematic of power of major, not only conceptual significance. Respectively: the distinctive aspects of “domination, authority and legitimacy” within liberal societies, revolving around such phenomena as civil society, the private/public divide, and the public sphere (in my view he does not sufficiently consider the complex role played by law in this context); the stubbornly persistent significance of religion within contemporary political structures and processes. As he says, “We do...ourselves a disservice if we forget that recourse to transcendent divine authority to justify worldly political projects is alive and well today around the globe.” My sentiments exactly, much as this bothers such an old-fashioned believer in the classical notion of secularization as myself; how political structures and processes affect the phenomenon of gender inequality – and viceversa. Here Hearn draws on anthropological literature (feminist and non) to illustrate pre-modern manifestations of patriarchy, but considers also the suffragette

movement and later initiatives intended to moderate gender inequality; some current political issues which have a more or less direct bearing on problems of identity and personhood rendered salient by contemporary cultural developments.

The volume's Conclusion [pp. 209-217] reflects on various moments of the previous itinerary in the light of the issues, respectively, of "power over" vs. "power to" and of "is" vs. "ought" in theoretical discourse. The author's final look at current phenomena indicates that, while he operates prevalently at a high level of abstraction, he is also keenly aware of developments on-the-ground in contemporary societies: "We should be worried by the polarization of basic power in many contemporary liberal societies, characteristically into an inter-generationally underemployed and marginalized working class, a relatively stagnant middle class, and a stratospherically wealthy and relatively autonomous upper class. The powerlessness and over-mighty power at either extreme end tend to detach both of these groups, in different ways, from the necessary conditions for moral obligation to society as a whole."

The volume is complemented by a Glossary, a massive bibliography and an index. Within the compass of 250 pages, it presents a most sophisticated analysis of its demanding topic, which all scholars interested in the power phenomenon will do well to consider closely.

Gianfranco Poggi
University of Virginia