

Bryan S. Turner, ed.

The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology.

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Of all the academic disciplines, sociology is the one that sprawls over the largest territory, leaving any pretense at theoretical coherence well behind. As a field with a large number of puzzled students, it is not surprising that several publishers have recognised an important market and this dictionary is the latest addition to the list of available guides. It breaks fresh ground in two respects, by expanding the range of biographical and conceptual references, and by introducing long entries for key theorists and areas. The Jackson Pollock canvas on the front cover captures the nature of the field; the accolades on the back proclaim this product as its standard guide.

Previous experience with such dictionaries has led this reviewer to a general skepticism about their value. The problem they try to solve is real, but the challenge of doing so is very great. The selection of entries defines the boundaries of the field. The entries themselves have to be succinct, comprehensive and uncontroversial, and their location in a more extensive body of analysis should be identified. They must be easy to read and use. Apart from technical terms, the entries should guide the reader to a fuller, scholarly treatment.

This one starts superbly well, with Bryan Turner's survey of the manifold issues that are currently engaging sociologists and his case for the preservation of the integrity of the field around an evolving canon. It shows how sociology can be both exciting and scholarly. However, the promise of so much at the beginning soon leads to disappointment with the actual results.

The dictionary follows the conventional format of including both definitions and discussions of concepts and intellectual biographies, but arranges them in a strictly alphabetical order. The problem of how these entries are linked together conceptually is addressed by highlighting terms in the entry itself. Using a different and sans-serif typeface in bold gives these terms more significance than they often warrant, especially when they refer to common sense concepts. For example, the entry for Franklin Frazier presents the terms **racism**, **family** and **politics** in bold, inviting the reader to turn to those entries, where they will learn nothing that is needed to fully grasp the material already presented. Regular users will therefore have to acquire the habit of disregarding much of what is called to their attention through this device.

Two other technical problems raise more serious issues. While the important role of professional editors in such a project is duly acknowledged, they have left some work for succeeding editions. A few examples: the entry for Gans concludes with two consecutive sentences beginning with "Finally"; that for Michels gives his date of birth as 1856 rather than 1876. Careful proofreading would have spotted the missing h in Durkeim, eliminated the redundant i in Guillaume and transposed the W. G. in Hegel's initials. Such mistakes inevitably undermine the authoritative character of the project, together with any attempt to impose a technical discipline on the current generation of students.

Date references are inconsistent both with respect to the original publications in English and to translations. The student who reflected on Turner's introductory discussion of the relationship between Anglo-American and European sociology would be given a very misleading impression of the extent of the former's insularity on seeing references to translations of the *Elementary Forms* in

2001, of the *Protestant Ethic* in 2002, and of *Political Parties* in 1966. Dating the translation of the *Communist Manifesto* as 1968 suggests that Marxists played no role at all in the working class struggles of the English speaking world.

While many of the entries treat their assigned subjects in exactly the right manner, two problems emerge quite consistently. Some authors fail to recognise the limitations of their intended audience. A couple of examples: "Prisoner's Dilemma" is considered so "celebrated" that it does not need explaining, and many who continue through the discussion of game theory may get stuck on "stochastic learning, Bayesian updating, best reply with finite memory, and local optimization." Marx' throwaway line on religion and opium is considered "famous," without reference to the role it plays in the overall argument which establishes the imperative to change the world.

More disturbing is the way in which boundaries are set. In some respects this appears quite arbitrary. While many of the thinkers reviewed in Turner's introduction are given separate entries, more than a dozen are not, and those excluded are often of greater stature. Particularly puzzling is the exclusion of Adam Smith. Darwin and Keynes warrant their own entries, but not Nietzsche. Some exclusions seem to reflect a more systematic bias. There is no reference to Cohen or Elster, and while the French Catholic tradition receives a brief mention through Nisbet, students will have to turn elsewhere to gain an appreciation of the way in which Bonald, de Maistre, etc. represent the basis of another alternative to mainstream sociology.

The distorting character of that mainstream emerges in other ways. The entry for Durkheim runs to over 5,000 words, but only deals with the famous four texts that have been received into the sociology canon. His contributions, of course, are far more extensive, and some are of far more enduring significance than contemporary works that are celebrated elsewhere. Such a treatment only legitimates the efforts of those who write textbooks without a thorough grasp of the theorists they are presenting.

Perhaps the most egregious example of this kind of distortion is the entry for Michels, who is treated as yet another career academic whose important contribution to a specific field of enquiry is duly noted. What is excised from the account are the following essential biographical features. He was a syndicalist who joined the SPD in anticipation of its serving as a vehicle of revolution. His active participation in the party soon led to the realisation that it was actually an obstacle, and the crucial insight that emerged from such disillusionment became the basis of *Political Parties*. His fundamental revolutionary commitment, however, remained intact, and prevented him from securing an academic appointment in Germany. Eventually he supported Mussolini, as someone who could break through the constraints of organisation. Leaving all this aside overlooks the fact that many significant figures have come to sociology not to further their own careers but because they see it as a vehicle for a far more important political project. Had these features been mentioned, then students might have understood more of the background to Weber's "Science as a Vocation," and the price the German academy paid for its own distortions.

In spite of these observations, this may well be the best of such products available. Readers will find that it answers many of their questions, and as long as they keep their critical faculties intact, they will see how this is as much a sociological construction as it is an authoritative guide to a complex field.

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John Hillman's most recent review for CJS Online was of Richard Swedberg's *The Max Weber Dictionary: Key Words and Central Concepts*.

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