

Douglas Baer, ed.

Political Sociology: Canadian Perspectives

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This edited textbook provides an overview of some of the major topics in Canadian political sociology. It is organized into five sections: political beliefs and political culture; the state; social movements; political movements; and politics and social class. Each section contains an overview by the editor and chapters contributed by other authors. The book contains a good mix of theoretical and empirical chapters.

Generally the book is well organized and tackles most of the major issues, and some less prominent ones, in Canadian political sociology in a systematic manner. As might be expected from an edited volume, however, the quality of the chapters varies. Some of the chapters are excellent, others are mediocre, but generally they are well-written.

The first section on Political Beliefs and Political Culture includes three excellent chapters. The first, by Lorne Tepperman, clearly dissects Inglehart's postmaterialist thesis, claiming that in contrast to Inglehart's findings, empirical evidence suggests that there has not been a "culture shift" in values. This section also contains a chapter by Ed Grabb and Jim Curtis that basically summarizes the large body of research they've done with Doug Baer assessing Lipset's thesis of the differences in political values between Canadians and Americans. The third chapter by Baer himself provides a valuable discussion of the role of ideology in political sociology and society more generally.

Although not as uniformly good, there are also chapters worth noting in the other sections. For example, in the section on the state, Julia O'Connor's chapter provides a good overview of theories addressing the development of the welfare state. In the same section, Mary Ellen Turpel's chapter raises the important question about whether Quebec independence is possible without Aboriginal consent. Although this chapter provides a good legal argument, I'm not sure about Turpel's claim that "Should Quebecois fail to deal with aboriginal self-determination, their movement stands to lose a great deal of legitimacy and support in Canada and the international community" (p. 137). She is perhaps correct about the international diplomatic community, but without evidence from public opinion polls, I'm not convinced that the legitimacy of the independence movement as seen by the Canadian public is conditional on Aboriginal consent. Still, the chapter is well worth the read, especially for undergraduates who probably know little about this issue.

The section on social movements contains two good chapters: a theoretical chapter on social movements by William Carroll and an empirical chapter on new social movements in Canada by Curtis and Grabb. Absent from this section, however, is a discussion of revolutions, an important area of study in political sociology. It is obvious why it is absent—there has never been a revolution in Canada, and the book is concerned with the Canadian context. Still, including the wider context could have led to an interesting discussion as to why Canada has not had a revolution. Of course, this is a very minor point.

The next section examines various political movements, such as the rise of the Reform Party, the Social Credit Party and the CCF in the west, the weakness of the NDP in Quebec, and the Quebec independence movement. The final section discusses the role of social class in contemporary Canadian politics.

I was generally favourably impressed with the book but found its emphasis on “Canadian perspectives” both a strength and a weakness. On the positive side, this is the most comprehensive political sociology text addressing the Canadian context. On the negative side, some of the individual chapters do not give enough consideration as to how Canada fits into the larger international context. When cross-national comparisons are made, they are typically only with the US, a country that Canada has more in common with than with any other. Despite political sociology being well-established in Europe, there is little comparison with European countries. For example, I would have liked to see a better discussion of whether there has been a decline in class voting in all Western democracies (this is of course still debated), and if so why that decline has taken place and how the Canadian situation relates. Despite this criticism, Baer’s introductory sections excellently frame each topic in a wider context, so the lack of comparison with other countries is not as notable a limitation as it otherwise would have been.

Alone this book would be an excellent text for a 2nd or 3rd year political sociology course, either in political science or sociology. If supplemented with other readings, in particular readings on countries other than Canada, this book would also work very well as a main text for a 4th year of graduate course in political sociology. I was impressed enough with the book that I’ll be using it in my own political sociology course this fall.

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Bob Andersen's research and teaching interests are in quantitative methods, political sociology and social inequality. Some of his most recent research has examined the social bases of vote and attitudes in Canada, the US and several European countries; educational inequalities in Britain and the US; and the relationship between public opinion and income distribution in cross-national perspective. More information can be obtained at <http://publish.uwo.ca/~randerse>

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