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Book Reviews

Joseph Borlagdan

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of Mansfield's book. It is a valuable contribution and once the constraints of his cultural studies approach are recognized it could have a useful role as an introductory text in undergraduate sociology subjects.

Mervyn Bendle

*Department of Sociology
James Cook University*

SOCIAL THEORY IN THE REAL WORLD

Steven Miles

*London: Sage Publications, 2001, 186 pp.,
£18.99 (paperback).*

Just how useful is social theory? How can it help us understand our reality and the changes that take place within it? These are the key questions that *Social Theory in the Real World* sets out to address.

To do this Miles takes us through various contemporary social theories that attempt to explain and understand social change. These include theoretical perspectives that define society as being postmodern, post-industrial, globalized, and as one primarily concerned with risk. Ideological patterns are also discussed through the work of the Frankfurt School and notions of mass society, and there are chapters on consumption and McDonaldization. Consequently, the book is neatly structured so that each chapter gives a brief outline of a theory before critically evaluating its usefulness in terms of explaining and understanding our social world as well as its contribution to social theory as a whole.

Miles begins by exemplifying the usefulness of social theory when reflexively and creatively applied. He gives us the example of a more 'dated' theory (that of George Simmel) and applies it to an

understanding of present-day fashion consumption. This sets the tone for the key theme of what makes for good social theory.

From the outset, Miles identifies the relationship and tension between structure and agency as the key problem from which social theory works. This is pertinent to his critique of the Frankfurt School, Ritzer's McDonaldization, and consumption theory as deterministic and as neglectful of the potential impact of human agency in resisting structural constraints. In the case of consumption theory, Miles suggests that the paradox of consumer culture (as both liberating and constraining) needs to be articulated in greater depth through more in-depth research. He is similarly critical of the lack of groundwork supporting theories of postmodernity. In this case, since reality is merely representational, Miles adds that the charge of postmodernist relativism is accurate – leaving the social theorist with nothing meaningful to say about it. For Miles, this key problem can be generalized to other theories as he makes it clear that, ideally, social theory does not settle for a depoliticized and value-free account of social change. Indeed Miles expresses his concerns by wondering 'whether social theory is simply struggling to find an identity, or whether, more worryingly, it is afraid to do just that' (p. 37). In this sense, he argues, the Frankfurt School is to be admired for its critical and subjective stance.

Miles consistently presents a fair and balanced look at each theoretical perspective. This type of text effectively gives the reader an idea of what to expect when it comes to delving deeper into these theoretical perspectives. Throughout, Miles maintains a balance between canvassing key debates while still inviting the reader to explore each perspective in greater depth. Although each chapter cannot be discussed here, the author typically refutes the more

extreme theoretical accounts that he believes tend to exaggerate the extent of social change (such as post-industrial and postmodern theory). In such instances, Miles takes care to note that even these theories are useful and indeed successful by virtue of their propensity to stimulate debate.

One criticism that may be directed at Miles is that he does not clearly distinguish between social theory and sociology. From the outset he implies that social theory basically falls within the larger discipline of sociology and is therefore subject to its core propositions and tenets. Perhaps this is part of Miles's call for a more liberated approach to theoretical work, one that is not constrained by pre-set assumptions and methods. This argument is more clearly put forward by Miles in his concluding chapter; however, one feels that it is necessarily limited due to the constraints of this type of text. This is a shame, as Miles's call for a reflexive and creative social theory melds well with his critique of contemporary social theory.

In spite of this minor complaint, Miles clearly displays a passion for social theory and its potential uses. His enthusiasm is so pronounced that it will hopefully be infectious for readers, whether they be newcomers or more experienced students. In terms of the actual message of the text, the call for all of us to actively engage with the sociological imagination is heartening. Throughout *Social Theory in the Real World*, Miles espouses the value of creatively applying social theory to an everyday context. Although he does not point to the methodological implications of such an approach, a comparison can be made here with the 'grounded theory' approach of Glaser and Strauss as Miles argues that it is only through applied and reflexive social theory that the theorist can even begin to open up

opportunities for understanding and potentially instigating social change.

Joseph Borlagdan

*Department of Sociology
Flinders University*

HABITUS: A SENSE OF PLACE

Jean Hillier and Emma Rooksby (eds)

*Hampshire: Ashgate, 2002, 408 pp., £47.50
(hardback).*

In Emmison's obituary of Pierre Bourdieu in the June 2002 edition of *Nexus*, he notes that Pierre Bourdieu never visited Australia. We are therefore fortunate that Bourdieu was able to make a virtual contribution of his presence to the *Habitus 2000* conference in Perth, of which the papers in this volume are a record.

Hillier and Rooksby divide the book into three sets of papers under the headings: habitus at a macro level: national/international political structures and activities; habitus and place-making in fields related to practices of the built environment; the durability of habitus and the need to change some people's habitus.

These are rather more a set of concerns that should or could usefully guide the thinking of the reader than a set of principles that have informed the writers or strictly underpin the arrangement of articles in the volume. The editors provide a useful set of observations on the concepts of habitus, field and game, and capital and power in their introduction and illustrate how these concepts have been deployed by the authors in the 18 papers included in the volume.

Bourdieu's work has been embraced with enthusiasm in English-speaking sociology since his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* was first published in translation in 1977. Recognition of the utility