
ISBN: 9781594518126

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Crit Sociol 2011 37: 497
DOI: 10.1177/08969205110370041102

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Blunden’s exciting and interesting proposal to include a normative dimension in the definition of the unit of analysis suffers from a one-sided rejection of abstract universal forms of moral consciousness. Rightly convinced that ethics must include a focus on the concrete other, Blunden overlooks the importance of moral universality in judging the normative status of projects and in reconciling differing projects without resorting to force.

Habermas, as Blunden recognizes, demands that ‘only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse’ (Habermas, cited on p. 269). Habermas’s intentions here are hard to grasp without the other half of his discourse ethics, the universalizability principle. This is articulated in Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action as follows: “All affected can accept the consequences and the side effects that [the norm’s] general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone’s interests, and the consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation” (Habermas, 2001: 65). It is unfortunate that Blunden did not discuss this part of Habermas’s position, because its reference to interests and consequences shows just how distant Habermas is from pure Kantian moral formalism.

Blunden’s preference is for Seyla Benhabib, a moral philosopher working in the Frankfurt School tradition, whose criticism of Habermas is that his position does not sufficiently take into account the ethical importance of self-realization. Blunden proposes that ‘Seyla Benhabib questions the demand for universalism, and demands that ethics be oriented to a concrete other, not a generalized or abstract other’ ( p. 270). But again, this is a one-sided representation of the position, because what Benhabib really argues for is the mutual complementarity of the generalized other and the concrete other, Habermas’s discourse ethics and an ethics of self-realization. She proposes in Critique, Norm and Utopia ‘the necessary complementarity of these two perspectives. The ideal community of communication corresponds to an ego identity which allows the unfolding of the relation to the concrete other on the basis of autonomous action.’ (Benhabib, 1986: 342)

In conclusion, Blunden’s reconstruction of activity theory in terms of the intellectual tradition from which CHAT emerged and its future directions is important and interesting. The notion that the unit of analysis in social theory should include a normative dimension brings his work into productive contact with the Frankfurt School, in what is clearly an invitation to dialogue. An Interdisciplinary Theory of Activity is an historically illuminating and conceptually rich contribution to CHAT with the potential to open up a significant new conversation with other forms of social theory.

References


In a Burawoy-led symposium published in Social Problems on public sociologies, Charles Derber stated that he always wanted to be ‘an intellectual who helped change the world’ (Burawoy et al., 2004: 119). A self-proclaimed ‘public sociologist’, Derber believes in making his intellectual work accessible to the general public, to social movements, and, of course, to students. Rather than
compartmentalizing knowledge into disciplinary slices, the goal of the public sociologist is to broaden the knowledge base beyond the limitations of the academe so as to contribute to democratic action. *Greed to Green* is Derber’s effort to integrate a public sociological account of climate change into the public domain. As with all Derber’s work, the goal here is to contribute to the creation of (in his words) ‘a system of knowledge production and organization’ that includes copious ‘public participation, accountability, and accessibility’ (Burawoy et al., 2004: 121).

While the world struggles to not capsize amid what appears to be a ‘perfect storm’ of economic, political, and environmental turmoil and degradation, most Americans often feel powerless in making any truly significant changes. An onslaught of confused messages from the media (e.g. ‘Climate Gate’, the *New York Times* report that weathercasters – while untrained in climatology – are doubtful of human-caused global warming, etc.) has arguably contributed to mass inaction on the part of the unsettled individual. Any solution to climate change must include a major shift in our understanding of limitless growth and the subordination of the interests of big business to the interests of the common good through the recognition of social and ecological stewardship. *Greed to Green* appeals to the everyday citizen by telling the story of climate change in frames that are readily understandable. Derber tackles a plethora of misconceptions about climate change, and his text is likely to have a profound impact due to the eloquent and comprehensible diction that he employs to explain complex socio-ecological interactions. Furthermore, his insightful analysis of the interconnections between the American short-term mind set, climate change, and the crisis-riddled economy addresses many of the misconceptions and lapses of awareness the general American public holds regarding both environmental and social justice. In short, Derber brings clarification to an otherwise convoluted web of interconnections among the environment, militarism, politics, the economy and its recession, and social justice.

Derber divides his discussion into four major parts: truth and denial; how to green America; green globalization; and when the grass roots grow green. The first chapter introduces the concept of the ideological apparatus and different types of truth. Scientific, popular, and gut truths are very different and provide the foundations for explaining how the public interacts with certain ideas. The key to action is to move truths from the brain (acknowledgment) to the belly (inspiration and action). Derber recognizes, however, that ‘it is extremely difficult for the public to see gut truth that goes against the grain of entrenched powerful interests and challenges the subtle dogmas of the ideological apparatus’ (p. 23). Denial is easier to swallow in the short-term, but the costs of inaction are so great that keeping the truth only in the brain will ultimately lead to inaction and perhaps even social collapse.

In chapter two, Derber presents the mainstream ‘facts’ of global warming, which he argues understate the dangers of the ‘climate time bomb’. In general, the public believes that truths are not solidified at the scientific level, yet Derber argues that these misconceptions formed because fossil fuel companies and their political counterparts disseminate counter-knowledge that calls climate science into question. Derber references the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) 2007 report which outlines the core scientific truths of global warming, including that it is unequivocally anthropogenic; there is at least a 95 percent probability that human activity is contributing to global warming, and world temperatures will likely rise between 2 and 11.5 degrees F during the 21st century.

Chapter three, however, discusses climate change without the padding that mainstream climate science is pressured to utilize to soften the blow of the reality of global climate change. Climate change is not a smooth progression, but rather it involves various drastic tipping points and, eventually, points of no return. Human-made carbon emissions, the core cause of climate change, trigger a complex, strongly-felt feedback mechanism that alerts us of a need to change course.
Derber states that, ‘It’s like the doctor telling you that your cholesterol is way too high and, if you don’t bring it down right away, you’re going to have a stroke’ (p. 41). To ignore these symptoms, Derber argues, will lead to large-scale catastrophe and the creation of horrific living conditions for those who remain.

The growing clarity regarding the human causes of climate change and the dangers of our current trajectory is limited by the short-term mind-set of many Americans and what Derber describes as ‘the denial regime’. For example, Derber points out that Republicans listed global warming as the lowest priority issue – dead last – and far below gay marriage and flag burning. Derber’s point is that a large portion of the public has difficulty envisioning global climate change as a tangible, resolvable issue. Moreover, the American upbringing of eating from the spoon of self-interest and the American Dream of collecting perpetually more ‘stuff’ is a great hindrance. A real gut recognition of climate change would mean accepting the need for limits to growth and the resurrection of ecological stewardship by a public currently trained to be self-interested at whatever cost. Americans are seduced into denial because of the various reasons explained in Chapter Five. The most interesting insight that Derber discusses is that the conservative ideological apparatus is brilliant at cultivating denial by addicting the public to fears that do not threaten corporate or political interests in order for the elites to maintain their status and compulsion for accumulation.

How does one extirpate the denial industry from American politics? For Derber, the very fact that global warming is anthropogenic provides hope for a solution. Since humans are the creators of climate change, Derber maintains hope that we have the power to stop or mitigate it. Moreover, short term crises that the public is more apt to worry about are increasingly tied to climate change issues and short term benefits can be achieved through awareness and action. But who is to take on this action, and how?

For Derber, the most feasible and effective way to foster mobilization is to instill a “time-tricking” strategy that seeks to solve the long-term crisis by hitching a ride on the back of short-term issues now churning the guts of the majority. Derber argues that the new economic recession has created a collapse of trust in the ruling authorities that has concomitantly generated spaces for new (critical) thinking and politics. This mistrust might be a blessing in disguise if it provides the drive to action and the necessary shift in systemic power over energy, politics, and the economy. The complex interactions between capitalism and the environment are at the root of Derber’s argument: systemic change is needed that requires deep changes in the US economic model, including shifting our current system of corporate-managed markets and government to a more democratic system in which business serves the public. The market can no longer be blind to the environmental and social costs of a system focused on only self-interest without regard to the common good. Essentially, while the ruling ideas of endless accumulation are still cherished, there is no hope for solving climate change.

Yet, Derber’s final chapter is one of the most significant and relatable on an individual level. He closes his book by recognizing the schism many endure between creating a personal life and career and working to change society as full-time activists. Derber claims that the new green revolution’ is an open door for almost everyone to blend personal and political lives, and he even offers a few examples of hope for those who feel the tension of being stuck between societal pressures and desire for personal and socio-ecological change. Potentially the most powerful group with regard to creating a climate change movement – those in college or newly graduated – are also those individuals first entering financial and personal independence and bearing the brunt of these tensions. The stories Derber reflects on may provide his student readers especially with guidance on navigating the current system without dismissing concerns for the global climate.
This book is released as we are in the midst of a pivotal moment. With the baggage inherited from previous administrations, many would argue that Derber holds too much hope for the Obama Administration to address adequately climate change. While the rhetoric of climate change has indeed changed American politics, inaction is still prevalent as can be seen in the disappointment of Copenhagen and the lack of government oversight in the current BP disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. Nonetheless, this persuasive book is very timely as these events continue to sustain our current trajectory. This accessible book succeeds in communicating effectively and clearly many complex, perplexing, yet essential ideas related to climate change. *Greed to Green* is unique in that it avoids academic jargon, is ‘light’ on social theory, and yet it promises to encourage an informed student reader to reassess her or his views on a wide range of issues related to climate change. Students and activists interested in improving their environmental awareness would benefit from reading this book, and it will hopefully spark their interest to learn more about this important issue.

Reference

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Howell S. Baum’s *‘Brown’ in Baltimore: School Desegregation and the Limits of Liberalism* is first an account of the desegregation and resegregation of the Baltimore public school system and, at the same time, an examination of how classical liberalism failed the civil rights movement. Baum pulls no punches in this new book. Using Baltimore’s often disheartening civil rights history as evidence, Baum asserts that a society that cannot talk about race cannot solve racial problems: ‘Liberalism provided the argument for black emancipation, but it also offered a way of thinking that hindered knowing about race. For policymakers who feared political conflict and for individuals who feared their own moral and emotional conflicts, thinking liberally was a culturally normal, commonsense way of avoiding talking or even knowing about race’ (p. 223). This institutionalized ‘individualism’ produced a kind of color-blind racism – the refusal in American public philosophy to admit that race is a factor in social inequality – and, in the Baltimore public school system, an exchange of de jure segregation for de facto segregation.

In the 1950s, Baltimore was a northern Southern city, a ‘quintessentially American’ (p. xi) border town, with a city government proud of Baltimore’s relatively calm racial history, and a school board skilled at balancing conflicting interests while adhering to its own individualist agenda. This was a local government that obeyed the letter of federal law with only sometime regard for the law’s intent. At this time, the city was segregated by neighborhood. White schools had advanced courses, excellent resources, and modern facilities. Black schools were overcrowded, barely funded, and inadequately staffed. In some cases, facilities that were outdated or condemned were changed into black schools (p. 28). These ‘colored’ schools were by nature unable to provide black children with education materially similar to the education of their white counterparts. Baum is quick to note that these problems are not solely historical, that ‘segregation continues to limit the academic development and social and economic opportunities of black children, particularly if