

Jiří Šubrt – Alemayehu Kumsa –  
Massimiliano Ruzzeddu: *Explaining Social  
Processes. Perspectives from Current Social  
Theory and Historical Sociology*.  
Cham: Springer, 2020, 189 s.

The book deals with a very interesting and important subject, and it's necessary to appreciate its sheer scope. Its aim is to familiarise readers with social processes. The authors discuss issues they consider vital for historical sociology. With its theoretical reasoning, sociological-epistemological suppositions, and comprehensive approach to historical issues of sociology, the book provides an insight into long-term development processes which are related to power and life in current societies.

Let me start by saying that the book is not only well-written, but due to its form, style, and especially content also suitable both for the professional public, and university professors, as well as students of bachelor's, master's, or doctoral programmes. The authors focus on the individual's relationship to society, on gradual changes in attitudes which occurred as early as in the era of the "founding fathers" such as Max Weber or Émile Durkheim, or on various approaches to sociology and historical sociology, emphasising Norbert Elias and his stressing of the individual and society, as well as his differentiation between these two subjects.

The book has a very clear structure. Individual sections deal with a single school of sociology, with chapters focusing on individual thinkers trying to establish a new approach to sociology in order to overcome the dualism of sociological thinking. At the beginning of each section, the authors define a theory of sociology and its key thinker. Following up on these principal theories, they add new approaches and research conducted by other authors who gradually joined in. The authors strive to connect individual schools of thought to achieve unity.

Apart from the section on globalisation processes, all subjects are approached from the traditional sociological perspective, "bounded by the concept of society in the framework of nation state" (p. 159). In the authors' view, "sociology is a science for which the playing

out of dimensions of time, space and social movement are important" (p. 1–2). At the very beginning of the book, the authors claim that "we wish not to formulate a wholly new theory of sociology, but rather at base we attempt to link to the notable achievements of this discipline in previous decades" (p. 2). What I especially appreciate about the book is the detailed approach to mapping the theories of Norbert Elias whose work is woven throughout several parts of the text, such as chapters *Historical Sociology as a Processual Sociology* or *The Society of Individuals and Figurations* which are based mostly on Elias' book *The Civilizing Process* (1939). I would also like to highlight the detailed erudite contribution to the concept of Norbert Elias' figuration and Parson's social functionalism which are subjected to a thorough criticism and assessment. Authors advocate Elias' civilization theory and methodically refute the arguments of his opponents, such as: "The most extensive effort to challenge Elias's civilization theory was developed by cultural anthropologist Hans Peter Duerr (born 1943), the author of the five-volume work *Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozeß* (1988–2002). Duerr asserts that Elias's theory is false, that it is a pure myth, identifiable with the ideology of colonialism that sees other cultures as 'uncivilized', even the cultures of our own past. Duerr is not willing to formulate an alternative to Elias's civilisation theory; he simply puts compiles a heap of evidence with the aim of falsifying Elias's theory" (p. 97).

In *Rethinking the Theory of Structuration*, the authors discuss Anthony Giddens and his theory on the occurrence and reproduction of social systems, connecting it to Durkheim's fundamentally socialised individual. What is interesting about this section is that although Durkheim introduced the idea of two perspectives, i.e. 1) "the individual is seen as a unique being equipped with its own "ego"; 2) "the individual as fundamentally socialized", the authors lean in favour of the latter, that is the idea of a transmission of the collective consciousness to an individual one, sort of a society's projection into an individual.

I would especially like to emphasise the part which focuses on collective memory and

historical consciousness which, in my view, constitutes a key segment of the book. Considering the sheer scope of the subject, this part is divided into many chapters. To keep things organised, however, the authors maintain a clear continuity and coherency throughout the text. Here, collective memory is clearly described in depth as a set of generally shared memories members of a group have of the group itself or of events which immediately affect it. This will be appreciated primarily by students while they are preparing for an exam. The authors discuss approaches to collective memory from the perspective of individual sciences: sociology, history, psychology, philosophy, and anthropology, focusing on scientists and writers who deal or dealt with the subject of collective memory, and at the same time striving to provide space for new knowledge in the field. They greatly stress that the reader needs to be able to see the difference between collective and individual memory. There is an obvious emphasis that individual memory can exist only due to the collective one. “The deliberate formation and use of memory, rationally and emotionally, is encountered widely on the level of collective memory, mainly through religion, nationalism, ideology and power” (p. 62).

The issue of historical consciousness also comes into foreground and clearly underlines how an individual’s memory is defined as a phenomenon whose nature is shaped by social environment. I was especially intrigued by the comparison between collective/historical memory and a computer programme and data. “The relationship between historical consciousness and collective memory may be understood by analogy with the world of computers. Historical consciousness and collective memory are interdependent in a way similar to computer programs and databases. Computer programs are dependent on computer memory. Even though programs can exist without data, to be valuable they need data stored in databases” (p. 76–77).

The one part I would like to criticise concerns the issue of identity (p. 83) which is closely related to the subject of collective memory and historical consciousness and presented

immediately after it. The authors provide a “theoretical framework for a sociological approach to identity” (p. 83), having chosen a philosophical approach as its foundation.

The authors take a broad approach to the concept, definition, and theory of identity which unfortunately means they do not go in depth. This part begins with a quote from *Confessions* by Augustine of Hippo, written in the 4th century AD; the following paragraph refers to Descartes’ reflections; five lines below that, the authors highlight Wittgenstein and analytic philosophy, etc. I cannot criticise the authors for a lack of clarity, but this part appears nearly encyclopaedic due to its structure, free of clear connections.

Conversely, this encyclopaedic nature works well in the part about social power from the perspective of historical sociology where power is defined by the theoretical approaches of various authors. Even though this once again takes mostly the form of mapping and summarising the concept of power, similarly to the part on identity, I would like to highlight the aptly drawn connections between individual theories and their setting into a specific framework which is smoothly related to current social processes where all theoretical definitions of power are clearly, specifically demonstrated. To me, this segment seems as though consisting of two parts: *Social Power from the Perspective of Historical Sociology* (p. 109) deals with theory while *Current Societal Processes* (p. 131) is empirical.

Overall, the book is interesting, helpful, and in some respects resembles *The Perspective of Historical Sociology. The Individual as Homo-Sociologicus Through Society and History* (2017) or its previous version *Historická sociologie* (2007). However, *Explaining Social Processes* (2020) maps the subject in a clearer, more detailed manner and most importantly is contextualised. This is the text’s strongest suit, and the book thus offers a comprehensible insight into the main subjects of historical sociology.

Markéta Minářová

DOI: 10.14712/23363525.2021.10