

downward pressure on the dollar. Investment necessary to fund the deficit could only be reattracted through interest rate increases, which would result in a domestic credit crunch, causing further declines in equity prices and consumer demand; the 'meltdown scenario'. At the time of writing this review, the inevitable has been temporarily staved off by renewed bouts of hype and speculation; interest rate cuts have, so far, been able to reflate the bubble, and, hence, keep the US stock market attractive to foreigners. But the rickety props supporting a veritable Potemkin village are increasingly visible.

It is hardly surprising that, given the tyranny of the rational choice paradigm within mainstream economics, such a powerful critique of contemporary capitalism is provided by an historical sociologist. Yet this does not mean a softness regarding empirical detail; Brenner provides a wealth of quantitative evidence to buttress up his arguments. There is little doubt that Brenner is *right* about the fundamental crisis facing the US and global economy; the challenge is now to provide more detailed theoretical constructs founded on this masterful overview.

Johann Graaff. *What is Sociology?* Cape Town. Oxford University Press. 2002.

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This book is first in a series of what the publisher Oxford University Press describe as 'small books'. The series aims to present foundational sociological topics in modular form, i.e. each topic in a separate book. Students need buy only the modules relevant to their course. The idea is to cut down on the cost students would incur buying a 600-page conventional textbook in which a large number of chapters are never used. The first five topics will offer introductions to sociology in general (the book under review); social institutions (education and the family), crime and deviance, population studies and industrial sociology.

The editors promise that each book in the series will be written in such a way that it tells a coherent story with a 'developing and cumulative theme'. The style will be 'lucid, logical and organized' and the exercises in the book 'geared towards higher cognitive skills'. In addition the books will deal with issues of some substance in sociology, with clear and accessible discussions written in language that 'flows and entertains as it educates'. While rejecting the notion of a southern African sociology, the series does claim to utilise southern African reference points and examples. The final promise of the series introduction is that in putting question marks behind some of our most dearly held beliefs it

will take its readers on a sociological journey that can be 'exciting, surprising, angering, outrageous and scary'.

The potential reader will be forgiven, on reading this introduction, for thinking that they have picked up a Stephen King novel rather than a sober academic textbook. Or perhaps not. Maybe now that we have in many South African universities done away with discipline-based departments and introduced 'programmes' in their place, we have left behind the stuffy halls of classical academia and entered the realm of social science as popular culture, a roller-coaster ride of thrills and spills that entertains as it educates.

And in this new environment who better to kick off with than Johann Graaff? I had the pleasure of working with him in the erstwhile University of Bophuthatswana, where as head of the Development Studies department, he spent many hours honing our skills in the art of lecturing. For him a logical structure, clarity of presentation and keeping your audience interested constituted the essence of good communication practice. The latter, apart from humorous asides, meant using examples to illustrate concepts that have a real resonance in the student's own lives. These are virtues that I have cherished in my own teaching and writing to this day. One may not always agree with Johann Graaff, but at least you are always clear on what it is that he is saying.

His book *What is Sociology?* remains true to these ideals. The sixty eight-page book, which I managed to read in a few hours, is essentially an attempt to sell sociology as a discipline, explain basic sociological concepts, and outline the difference between common (non) sense and scientific 'hard and soft' theories. The last is illustrated through an exposition of the three major sociological paradigms: Marxism, Functionalism and Symbolic Interactionism. The language is clear and each section is logically structured. The examples used have a resonance in students own lives. These range from cooldrink cans as a relativised object, the use of students within the university to illustrate the meaning of system, Aunt Muriel as the purveyor of common (non) sense, to the development of the path through a grassy plain adjacent to a rural village as the entrenchment of social structure. The symbolic interactionist paradigm is illustrated through the study of migrant labour in South Africa.

The answer to the question what is sociology is answered in the first chapter entitled 'The Nature of Sociology'. After a clear summary of what the chapter entails in the introductory section, the author gets into the heart of the subject matter without further ado. The sociological imagination is explained through the related concepts of relativising, system-relating and debunking. The nature of sociology is further pursued through an exposition of the relationship between the individual and society (agent and structure). The one shortcoming here for me is the lack of any discussion of the idealist/materialist division that underlies this relationship. Graaff also fails to explain the difference between the common meaning of materialism and the philosophical one. The chapter

ends with a discussion of the difference between science, social science and common sense and an explanation of theory as a systemised body of thinking. This latter section serves as a good introduction to the three chapters on Marxism, Functionalism and Symbolic Interactionism. The problem in this section is Graaff's attempt to distinguish between hard and soft theory. This leads him to grouping functionalism and Marxism together in the hard category, that for him is synonymous with positivism and macro theory. While I have no problem with the latter, the characterisation of Marxism as a positivist theory is problematic, given the central methodological rejection of Marxist realism of empiricism (a central claim of positivist science) and Marxism's insistence on uncovering underlying unobservable structure.

The central theme of the chapter on Marxism is an understanding of materialism. It contains four sections: dialectical materialism, materialism and production as the foundation of society, historical materialism as theory of social change, and a critique of Marxist materialism. The example of ancient Rome to illustrate the base/superstructure model, that is the way in which production processes have a profound influence on the other sectors of society, works well. Boxes on the side of the main text offer both biographical information on Marx as well as questions for students to consider. This format is carried through for each of the subsequent chapters. Missing from the chapter are two issues that I would consider central to understanding Marx's contribution to sociology in particular: his theory of alienation and his theory of exploitation of the worker under capitalism through the extraction of surplus value.

The chapter on functionalism considers the writings of two of the paradigm's best-known theorists, namely Durkheim and Parsons. The section on Durkheim, following through on a central element of the two previous chapters on the nature of sociology and Marxism, kicks off with the Durkheimian view of the relationship between the individual and society. Graaff uses both a contemporary example in the form of the popular movie *The Matrix* as well as Durkheim's classic study of suicide to illustrate the effect of social structures on even our most intimate behaviour. After a brief critique of functionalism, he goes on to discuss Parsons's contribution. This section concentrates very briefly on his famous AGIL schema, the exposition of the positive functions societies need in order to survive, and ends with another criticism of functionalism à la Parsons. One wonders whether a single critique of functionalism as a whole would not have served the chapter better.

The first two paradigms were examples of macro and what Graaff terms hard theories. As an example of micro/soft theory, he discusses symbolic interactionism. The chapter starts off with an outline of the main writers within the micro subjectivist paradigm, and then, rather confusingly, slips in Weber. This is no doubt due to Weber's straddling of both macro and micro approaches, and to the fact that although he provided many of the basic tenets of microsociology, he defies classification within any particular branch. This

should be explained at the outset, given that the book is aimed at students with no background knowledge of the topic.

The box comparing Weber and Durkheim's approaches is interesting and provides for students a good illustration of the interrelation between structure and meaning. A short section on Giddens's structuration theory, on which Graaff has written about elsewhere, as an attempt to overcome this opposition would be useful. The rest of the chapter deals with Mead, and is well done. It covers meaning, pragmatism, the self and ends with a critique.

The final section of the chapter is entitled 'symbolic interactionism in practice', but it is actually an excellent consideration of migrant labour in South Africa through the lens of many different microsociologies, including Goffman, Schutz and Mead.

The last chapter in the book attempts a comparative conclusion and goes back to a consideration of the practical example of the village, the grassy plain and the path through it, used at the beginning of the book. Each of the paradigms outlined in the previous three chapters gets a turn to analyse the village and the structures and meanings it embodies. This is brought together nicely in both a comparative table and circular diagram. The book ends with useful exercises pitched at three levels of complexity and difficulty: simple understanding, transposition of ideas from one situation to another, and lastly, analytical questions that require independent thought. A glossary that defines the most important concepts used in the book and an annotated bibliography are also included.

In conclusion, the book may not give Stephen King much competition at the box office in its attempt to be 'exciting, surprising, angering, outrageous and scary', but it certainly does live up to its other claims. It tells a story with a developing and cumulative theme, is structured as a logical and sequential argument, and is written in a language that flows and entertains as it educates. Its minor shortcomings highlighted above could easily be corrected in subsequent editions. All in all it is a useful addition to the pedagogical tools available to the South African university lecturer/ tutor at both first and second year level. If sociology ever becomes a subject taught in schools, it will find a ready market at the senior levels.