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## Introduction: Reading the 'Social' and the 'Political'

Welcome to this introductory guide to politics in the contemporary world. The text is intended for a person who needs to get a quick grasp of a range of social and political issues, together with some understanding of the theoretical background to the arguments. I have attempted to do this in a way which is not patronising, but which is simple enough for a reader coming to contemporary social and political debates for the first time to be able to follow. However, fashionable writers are often very convoluted and inelegant in the way they express themselves. Zygmunt Bauman (1999), for example, has described the contemporary world by the term *Unsicherheit*. This German term incorporates uncertainty, insecurity and unsafety and involves 'the loss of livelihood, social entitlements, place in society and human dignity' (Bauman, 1999: 29). For Bauman, this state of *Unsicherheit* is linked to processes of globalisation and the inability of governments to have any real control over economic conditions within a nation-state.

In an effort to make such interesting and important ideas and arguments more accessible for a student readership I have included a great deal of information which is not specifically social scientific in nature, drawing on Angela Carter, and Sting, among others. The purpose of this material is simply to give you an opportunity to enhance your interpretative and evaluative skills, as well as to highlight key elements in the arguments I am discussing, with material that you may be more familiar with. From my own experience and that of the students whom I teach, many of us find reading original social theory texts daunting. How do you start to read the work of an author who often assumes that you are

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familiar with a range of debates, concepts and theories? How do you read authors who assume that you are familiar with every book and paper they have ever published? Moreover, how do you complete these difficult tasks in a short period of time, against deadlines for assignments and when you may have to write assignments and/or sit exams? I assume that the readers will at some point have to attempt an assignment or sit an examination in which they will be expected to discuss the ideas and arguments of the people in this book.

Before you attempt any assignment, in what many people might consider to be a very 'modernist' fashion, you need to be clear in your own mind what the nature of the assessment criteria is. In other words, what are you expected to do in the assignment and how will your work be judged? When I was an undergraduate, some years ago, I got an essay back from a professor, with a mark that was not particularly good. I asked the professor why he had given the mark that he did. His reply was that the essay did not give him a buzz! When I asked about the criteria I should look for in order to do this, he said that I should not be upset by the poor mark, because when he was my age he had never even heard of sociology, he was too busy killing Germans. The moral of this story is simply that it is important that the assessment criteria are transparent.

Using the web sites of a number of sociology departments, I carried out a simple content analysis of the advice given to undergraduate students on how to complete assignments. Essentially, you are expected to demonstrate three skills. First, you must be able to demonstrate that you can read the work of theorists or researchers and give an outline of their fundamental arguments. I hope this book will help you develop this skill.

Second, you must develop your skill of interpretation. Quite simply, you must give your own restatement of the theory or research. This exposition is *your* reading, *your* version of what the theory or research is about. A central element of this is your ability to demonstrate your understanding of the relevant material by making a connection with other sociological material and relevant non-sociological material; for example, news events, docudrama, film and your own personal experience. You must be able to demonstrate that the ideas you are discussing have relevance outside the world of academic books and papers. This is not simply taking lines from books and papers and rewriting them in your own words, but bringing the ideas to life by discussing the lives of the people who are being theorised about, including yourself, and showing how the sociological ideas affect people's everyday lives. Good sociology should inform you about your life; if a theory or type of research has no relevance to you or your life, then say so in your assignment. If you have a convincing justification as to why the theory or research is of little relevance to you and your life, then you are well on the way to demonstrating the third skill of evaluation. I hope this book will help you develop your interpretation and application skills.

Third and finally, you need to develop the skill of evaluation. In other words, you must make judgements or assessments of a theory or type of research. You will

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be expected to present a balanced argument, and to demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of a theory or research. How do you do this? Outline the strengths and weaknesses of whatever the topic of your assignment is by looking at the published critiques and at those writers that endorse the theory or research you are looking at. But suppose you do not like a particular theory or cannot think of anything positive to say about it. In this case, outline the points made by the writers that endorse the theory and explain, with some justification, why you do not agree with them. As an undergraduate, you may feel more confident in doing this by drawing upon the published work of established sociologists. I hope this book will help you to develop this skill.

In other words, this textbook is about helping you to develop your skills to ‘read’ the key social and political debates.

In addition to this introduction, the content of this text is broken down into seven ‘areas’. These areas can be read in any order. In Area 2, we consider the issues of power and authority. The difference between the legitimate use of power and coercion is considered by reference to the work of Max Weber. In this area we spend a great deal of time and space looking at what Weber had to say about bureaucracy. The reason for this extended discussion is that up until the emergence of New Social Movements (NSMs), all political organisations were essentially formal organisations, in the ‘Prussian’ style, with the rigid rules and formal hierarchies that Weber had so fully and clearly described in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Whenever you are assessing any organisation, it is always worth looking to see whether it has any of the features that Weber described. This is a good starting point for your evaluation.

Area 3 moves away from the ‘modernist’ concerns of Weber and looks specifically at what a range of writers have had to say about the nature of a postmodern politics. The area starts by looking at the characteristics of the postmodern condition; this is the idea that the world has become a very uncertain and highly fragmented place. Individuals may be experiencing ‘epistemological insecurity’ and ‘ontological plurality’; do not be put off by the odd-sounding terms. Postmodernists are not averse to using strange and puzzling phraseology. Moreover, in this text, you will come across a great deal of it! Hopefully, such language will translate into a form that is easily understood. What these strange-sounding terms above mean is that we are unsure about what we know and how we know it (‘epistemological insecurity’); similarly, we are unsure about what reality consists of (‘ontological plurality’). Instead of one reality that we all accept without question as the truth, there may be a range of realities that we can move between. This is a situation not unlike an episode of *X Files*. In terms of practical politics, what were once stable political regimes may be giving way to a process of Balkanisation, within which Weberian formal bureaucratic organisations no longer have any significant influence. In contrast, the unstable tendencies that are evident in former Yugoslavia may be becoming common across the world. This raises questions such as ‘Is postmodern politics based upon social class factors or upon more unstable forms of identity politics?’

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Area 4 looks at the contribution of the distinctly 'modernist' Marxist and elite theories to our understanding of the nature and distribution of power within societies. We examine the contributions made by classical theorists, but also look at the relevance of these theories to the contemporary world. In particular, we look at the ways in which Marxist writers have attempted to come to terms with the views of postmodern writers.

In contrast, Area 5 looks at pluralism – the theory that power is widely shared within societies. We look at the nature and structure of political parties in Britain. In addition we outline the changes that they have gone through since the general election in 1997. The Blair Project, communitarianism, the 'third way' and the 'new deal' are all discussed. The membership of traditional political parties has declined over the past ten years; however, support for NSMs has significantly increased. This is further developed in Area 6, where we look at the rise of NSMs and evaluate their significance. Issues of power and politics are not confined to any one country, and in Area 7 we look at processes of globalisation and the possible decline of the nation-state. Area 8 looks at the contribution that sociologists have made to our understanding of war and how the nature of war-related activities may have changed with the emergence of the 'new world order' at the end of the twentieth century. Finally, in Area 9, we evaluate theories of voting behaviour with specific reference to the 1997 general election in Britain.

In all the areas, there is an attempt to look at the contributions of leading sociologists and other social theorists who are working today: Anthony Giddens, Jurgen Habermas, Richard Sennett and a range of postmodern writers – notably, Zygmunt Bauman, Richard Rorty and Jean Baudrillard.

During the time that this book was being written, Anthony Giddens became director of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Clearly, he has had a significant influence on the thinking and the approach of the Blair government. However, Giddens is notably 'cool' in his thinking about postmodernism. He is not directly hostile to the idea that modernity is coming to an end, but is unwilling to accept many of the assumptions that postmodern writers make about the nature of the world. Giddens prefers to describe the contemporary world as a place of 'reflexive modernisation' or 'late modernity'. In a number of the areas, readers are encouraged to contemplate Giddens's approach in relation to the range of postmodern approaches.

In the last analysis, this is a students' guide, and the idea is that by the time you reach the end of the text you should have a clearer idea of politics, the 'social' and debates about the postmodern condition. To aid this process, at numerous points in each area, you, the reader, are asked to do some of the work! You will be asked to reflect upon an issue, and to interpret or evaluate some text. The idea is that you should not function simply as a passive receiver of the information that the text is presenting. All texts are there to be challenged, and this text is no different. Postmodern writers have a tendency to say very provocative things, notably in relation to gender. Jean Baudrillard has a tendency to annoy feminists, simply as

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an end in itself. He and other postmodern writers have made highly contentious statements about gender. I have attempted to remain faithful to his provocation! Hence, many of the points that you will come across will, I hope, provoke you, especially in the area on a postmodern politics. The text itself is not written from a postmodern perspective. However, I have suspended both my belief and my disbelief about postmodernism and the postmodern condition while writing the text. Hopefully, this should allow you, the reader, to arrive at your own conclusion about the important issues raised in the text.

### References

- Bauman, Z. (1999) *In Search of Politics*. Cambridge: Polity.  
Raskovic, J. (1990) *Luda Zemlja*. Novi Sad: Slavija.