

2006

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Recommended Citation

Langham, Thomas C. (2006) "Book Review: *Thinking the Unthinkable: The Riddle of Classical Social Theories* by Charles Lemert," *Great Plains Sociologist*. Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/greatplainssociologist/vol18/iss1/7>

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Book Review

Thinking the Unthinkable: The Riddle of Classical Social Theories by Charles Lemert



Reviewed by: Thomas C. Langham*

Lemert, Charles. *Thinking the Unthinkable: The Riddle of Classical Social Theories*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2007. 195 pp. \$60.00 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

Social theory in the modernizing Western world began as a critique of modernization. Charles Lemert, a professor of sociology, in his work *Thinking the Unthinkable: The Riddle of Classical Social Theories* not only discusses selected classical social theories as his title in part promises but also like the early theorists takes up their task in providing his own critique of contemporary global modernization. This book accordingly moves in two directions providing both a discussion of classical social theory and a sometimes theoretical and sometimes personal commentary on contemporary life. Lemert unifies both of these directions asserting that the classical social theorists as well as what he writes involves "Thinking the Unthinkable" about the very rapid development that first took place in the West and has now become a worldwide phenomenon. What Lemert means by "Unthinkable" comes from Immanuel Wallerstein, the progenitor of world systems theory, who has asserted that it is a dangerous liberal "belief that the modern world is progressive and reasonable" (p. 10). Lemert in his title finally suggests that the "Unthinkableness" of modernization has produced and has left social theorists confronting a number of riddles – puzzling, even dark, questions. He argues, like his classical

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colleagues, that these riddles are intractable problems that modernity seems to produce rather than resolve. Lemert writes with flair that entices the reader, but there is pessimism, even a kind of nihilism apparent in his work. Early on he recounts an incident in his first year of college when a fellow dorm mate unexplainably attacked him. This incident becomes a parable for his work in which he warns how rationality and reason have failed thinkers in their efforts to explain the social world.

The best of Lemert is embodied in the direction that he takes when he writes what amounts to a fairly standard treatment of classical social theory. There is really nothing new here in his handling of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, or Sigmund Freud. He presents each as being guided by a social theoretical riddle, presented in the form of a question, which relates to a different and debatably "contradictory" facet (inherently unsolvable problem) of modernization. Marx accordingly asks why the modernist (liberal capitalist) revolution has not brought a better way of life for most persons. Weber asks why rational rules intended to lead to progress have brought about only an unreasonable excess of rules that have oppressed rather than freed persons. Durkheim asks how, with the decline of Christian faith in the West and more generally religion in the world, social order can be maintained or, as Lemert writes, how "social conflict" can be avoided. And, Freud asks what if the unconscious is so important in shaping human thought and behavior that rationality alone cannot explain social thinking. Lemert also adds a fifth, non-social theoretical commentator, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a late nineteenth century author most famous for her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) which recounts her bout with depression and the poorly conceived medical treatment that she received. Perkins asks what, looking to women but also others who have been marginalized due to social differences, is the place of those who are categorically different in the modern world. Readers will also want to notice that Lemert explores the ideas of additional social thinkers beyond the

most widely known of classical social theoretical period. Among these others are W. E. B. Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper, Georg Simmel, and Ferdinand de Saussure, all of whom provide variations on what Lemert describes as the "classic riddles."

While the questions, riddles that Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Freud, and Gilman as well as the variations provided through the other thinkers have certainly been central to social theorizing, what is also quite interesting are the social thinkers that Lemert fails to mention and the ways in which he characterizes the ideas of those that he does discuss. For instance, not only are thinkers who write in the early functionalist tradition left out, so too is Auguste Comte, the founder of the discipline of sociology. To leave Comte out in a discussion of classical social theory seems remiss. Comte, of course, does ask his own question, coming out of the traditions of the Scottish Moralists, Christian Social Philosophers, and other Enlightenment thinkers, which, using Lemert's paradigm, forms its own riddle. Comte asks how might social forces external to the individual account for order as well as change. This question seems particularly pertinent in a present-day world that struggles with the problems of order and change that have accompanied global development and its very serious but interim byproducts of overpopulation, absolute poverty beyond the most developed areas, and violence as social dislocation and consolidation take place. Beyond his riddle Comte notably offers his thought that social theoretical knowledge should be used to help humanity, a point sorely missed in this work.

Further, Lemert also suggests in error that Marx was "the first thinker in modern time to develop the structural method" (p. 49). This method can arguably be traced back at least to Bernard Mandeville, the author of *The Fable of the Bees: Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (1714), up through the Scottish Moralists, including Adam Smith's introduction of "invisible hand" in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Cause of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) and Christian Social Philosopher Joseph de Maistre's actual use of the words "social structure" in *Considerations on*

France (1796), and finally to Comte with his discussion of "social statics." Lemert also seems much too quick to dismiss and blame the classical liberal outlook as misguided and give up on the project of the Enlightenment as he argues from the beginning to the end of his work that liberal capitalism is responsible for widespread poverty, inequality, violence, and the notion that human progress is possible. One might contrarily argue that contained within the works of the classical liberals is a solution to many of the riddles that Lemert complains, a solution which is still playing itself out as progress is being made toward realizing a world in which individual striving brings about collective good.

Lemert is decidedly less useful when his work takes the direction of personal commentary concerning modernization in today's world. Hinting at what will come in the course of his work Lemert early on comments, "this, I now realize, is life as it actually is behind the intricate stage settings that play up the good life to cover up the dirty backstage" (viii). For Lemert the "dirty backstage" includes complaints that life is filled with liminality, irrationality, inequality, and violence among other ills, all of which he attributes to the path of development, rooted in liberalism, that the West has pursued and that has now spread around the globe. While taking such a standpoint has long been a tradition among social theorists, a more constructive approach might have better served scholarly discourse and humanity in general. Lemert ultimately offers only the insights of critical theory as a possible avenue for gaining additional understanding of humanity with the added possibility that Westerners as they come into contact with the East might find their own future. Perhaps Lemert and others who have criticized the course of global modernization would do well to reflect on the many gains that have improved the human condition over the past five hundred years and the many more that will certainly come. He and the others might also wisely take note that pretty much the entire world is moving rapidly toward embracing the capitalist, if not liberal, model of development.

The writing of Lemert is beguiling as well as needlessly bleak and those who might choose to read his book should approach it with caution as the theory it offers and history it tells are both very much incomplete.