
HOWARD G. SCHNEIDERMAN, *ENGAGEMENT AND DISENGAGEMENT: CLASS, AUTHORITY, POLITICS, AND INTELLECTUALS*, NEW YORK, ROUTLEDGE; 2018.

Sanja Petkovska

There is perhaps no topic more pressing than social and political engagement, especially in relation to social hierarchies and to the role of intellectuals. Yet the development of the topic and the mode of argumentation found in this book are quite unexpected. While this book should probably be considered in the context of its origin in contemporary American sociology, it strikingly poses many questions shaking the essence of the social sciences and their role in imagining, legitimating and/or advocating certain model of social relations and social change. It seems that the times we are living in are in fact a time in which the tradition of engagement related to challenging given structures of power are being quite unpopular. Rather, scientific authority is employed to claim that the status quo is not only factual but furthermore almost an ideal and desirable state in which only certain social arrangements are to be produced. A premise of this bias as presented in this book is that current debates and theoretical opponents are mostly simply ignored, and the authorities that bear the stamp of “classics” of political and social theory, such as Max Weber or Alexis de Tocqueville are invoked most frequently to support claims and interpretations. The book itself is composed of seventeen

essays including the introduction, some of which are co-authored by E. Digby Baltzell. Those essays are seemingly written in a more narrative than argumentative manner, many of which have been previously published elsewhere and most of which are focused on offering new light on the work of the colleagues Schneiderman appreciates or with whom he has closely cooperated. From the introduction, but also from the titles of the chapters and their content, it is obvious that the main focus of the book is on a supposed “crisis of leadership and authority”, so it might also be suggested that the title may not reflect the content of the book in the best possible way, except for if the engagement is to be understood as the engagement of elites in relation to leadership positions.

The author of the book, Howard G. Schneiderman, is a professor of sociology at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania. His main research field is intellectual history, especially the topics of charisma and authority in relation to religion. His work does not appear to attract massive attention and polemic, and he seems to be barely known outside the United States. This book is supposed to offer his most serious attempt at a significant academic contribution, but the author simply chooses to concentrate almost exclusively on

authors from at least several decades ago, which constitutes a quite specific perspective, what could be understood also as advantage and specificity of this book. Thus the purpose of the book is not to attempt to make an original scientific contribution, but rather to provide us with insight into a specific perspective on the nature of society and social relations that the author has gained by studying the work of other authors. And the basic supposition of that perspective is clearly defined in the introduction: “authority and social stratification are indispensable to social organization”, and revolutionary organizations also seem to be very authoritarian and hierarchical, increasing egalitarianism while the quality of leadership is declining (p. 2). Besides egalitarianism, the other reason for the “crisis of leadership” Schneiderman focuses on is the “ethos of radical individualism” which actually has its origin in democracy and undermines social integrity. The author clearly holds the position of functional necessity of social stratification, referring to the Davis-Moore hypothesis, but without much attempt to notice or respond to more contemporary criticisms of it, what could help him in building the stronger argumentation. The highest matter of democracy for the author appears to be that oligarchic elites are drawn from all social classes and accountable to the rest of society, in other words that there is “definite aristocratic culture” based on honor. Schneiderman holds that because of radical individualism, democratic societies have a problem with authority and tend to be suspicious towards it – viewing it as something undoubtedly bad or undesirable. All the essays in the book are simply illustrations and repetitions of these given assumptions of the author in different contexts. However, the main value of the book seems to be that it could spark a further debate over the nature and necessity of authority and unequal distribution of power and wealth in American society.

The first essay in the book is supposed to build on important names of social theory from the main strongholds of Western

academy and demonstrate “value-neutral social science theories on authority”. What likely makes them “value-neutral” is the fact that they see authority as a constitutive, indispensable part of society. Those “value-neutral” theorists are allegedly not focused on justifying or condemning authority, but on accepting and understanding it. It remains unclear why the authority is to be accepted even prior to justification, but also why we as social scientists should not also accept the fact that opposition to and the request for legitimacy of the authority exist, seeking to be explained and understood. The following chapter provides an analysis of how charisma and religion influence leadership and authority patterns in Puritan society in Connecticut on the one hand, and on the other hand in the Rhode Island elite of Quaker and Baptist background. While the first one valued greater hierarchy and provided more figures of public authority, the second was more individualistically oriented and contributed privately oriented individuals. These findings are based on an analysis of biographies of elites in the US, although we are not provided with more details of the survey’s methodological background. However, the pattern of authority derived from the biographies was uncovered and it is suggested that it demonstrates the influence of religion, followed by the conclusion that Puritan society is superior because it empowers social integration.

The following chapters firstly provide us with the story of the concept of the American dream under which mobility is understood to be based on hard work. Subsequently, there is an analysis of the radical movement of Jacobins as given in the work of Brinton from 1930, again based on biographies. Schneiderman compares this revolutionary movement to the racist movement of the Ku Klux Klan and claims that its origin is in literary and Masonic societies with which it has some organizational similarities. Allegedly free masons were stated to be among the founders of the first Jacobin clubs, but no supporting evidence is provided for these claims. With the concept of the “circulation of elites”,

every aspect of the revolutionary potential and idea of the Jacobins was diminished, stating that they simply replaced aristocrats in positions of authority and have become the elite themselves. The next chapter offers a critique of political sociology since it appeared relatively late in the US and did not fight back against threats to the political values of Western civilization, among which Schneiderman mentions revolutionary nationalism, anarchism, and even nihilism and political messianism; political sociologists were claimed not to be so good at predicting political catastrophes and to started to write on intriguing phenomena of terrorism significantly late. The explanation of why political sociology emerged in Europe and not in America is that in Europe, unlike in America, politics overwhelmed institutions and civil society, since the state and society are to be understood as competing to occupy the same position. In the early 19th and 20th century the place of politics was occupied by civil society in America, and this was also a relatively peaceful period with a focus on community and consensus, while in Europe this was a turbulent time focusing on the state, conflicts, power and revolutions. The insights into the relation between society and politics which are differently conceptualized in America compared with Europe and relatively pacified within the concept of civil society seem very useful in understanding why it is less likely that social problems could be articulated as political in the American context. The power inequality is simply mediated by religious and philanthropic activities.

In the following chapter/essay Schneiderman first offers his interpretation of the work of Irving Louis Horowitz who according to him was falsely accused of transitioning from a radical to a conservative position, while he allegedly was and remained an “old-time liberal committed to reason and truth from the start” (p. 111). Subsequently, the work of E. Digby Baltzell is presented along with some biographical information, especially his work on the theory of the establishment and WASP (white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) developed

under the influence of Weber and Tocqueville. The ruling aristocracy elected democratically is the best possible solution for Schneiderman and he sees no tension between the two concepts, while disturbing the class distinction could be dangerous according to him. While success is highly valued in American life, that is not the case with authority. Then Schneiderman goes on to prove that American presidents from a high social class background have performed better and been more effective in office than presidents from lower class origins, although we cannot see how the success and the effectiveness of the presidents were defined and measured. The same thesis is then also applied to those in the justice system, with the conclusion that the chances of the lower classes entering the Supreme Court have increased. The role of the Protestant establishment or WASP as a force in American history is especially important for Schneiderman, explaining that hegemony and elitism are necessary for the well-being of society and protection of freedoms (p. 208–210). Schneiderman also intends to shed new light on some other issues from American history by bringing to the table the book “In Search of Nixon” by Bruce Mazlish which was considered to be underrated even if relevant because of the anticipation of what will happen, and the use of psychohistory to explain Nixon’s behavior.

The last chapters discuss the democratic dilemma of diffused power, that leads to fewer individuals being ready to take on the responsibility for governance by evoking the work of Lord Bryce on civic duty, defending William Graham Sumner as not conservative, elaborating the work of Aldous Huxley once again with the help of bibliographical data, and discussing historical peculiarities relating to Das Max Weber Haus at the University of Heidelberg. The book ends surprisingly without a summarizing or concluding chapter, thus leaving these fragmented stories to stand for themselves, and leaving us to draw and generalize some conclusions of our own.

Except for conservative readers from the US and eventually abroad who will

likely enjoy it, this book has little to offer other readers interested in social theory aside from those with an interest in certain peculiar specificities, mostly biographical, of certain American sociologists, mostly from the second half of the 20th century. Many problematic claims are insufficiently supported. To support his claims that authority is a necessary functional part of society, Schneiderman even refers to the essay “On Authority” written by Friedrich Engels, but with a rather biased interpretation. In this essay Engels does claim that authority is needed as a kind of strategy, but in his view this authority is clearly linked to democratic political procedures of being outvoted as a mechanism for the subordination of someone’s will to political leadership, rather than to

any kind of charismatic, aristocratic or irrational authority. Furthermore, in the conclusion Engels clearly indicated that authority is planned to be abandoned in his vision of a future communist society, despite the fact that he does not greatly elaborate how. This kind of approach based on denial that other sides or theoretical and political opponents exist, that opposition and disagreement are also real existing phenomena, not simply some unscientific speculation of philosophers, even falsely using claims of authors that belong to the conflict and critical tradition of thought to prove his own assumptions seems to be rather worrying for the future of engagement and disengagement, and for the power of imagining social change that will bring a more equal and just society.