

# Reviewing the Reviewers: Ideological Bias in the APSR Book Section

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I would like to give attention to that portion of the *American Political Science Review* which is most read and least criticized, the book review section. My reading of *APSR* book reviews in recent years leads me to the following observations:

Most of the books selected for review adhere to the orthodox ideological values of today's political establishment. More importantly, these books almost invariably are reviewed by political scientists who share the same centrist ideological slant as the authors they are reviewing. In the reviews dealing with international relations, for instance, cold war terms like "totalitarianism", "Castroism", "subversion" and "Free World" are employed uncritically. Western capitalist nations are described as having "governments", while socialist nations are said to have "regimes", usually identified as being under the tutelage of one personage, hence: "Mao Tse-tung's regime", and "Fidel Castro's Cuba".<sup>1</sup> The idea that popular sentiments and democratic in-puts might be part of the governance of countries like Cuba or China is not entertained.

Other stereotype images abound: we hear of "the wily Chou En-Lai" but never "the wily Henry Kissinger"; we hear of "Peking's global revolutionary strategy" but never "Washington's global counter-revolutionary strategy."<sup>2</sup> The socialist governments are "totalitarian dictatorships"<sup>3</sup> and are said to be in many ways indistinguishable from fascist ones. And while their impressive advances in areas of human welfare are on rare occasions begrudgingly acknowledged, a reviewer will hasten to add, without benefit of argument or evidence, that the costs "have been exceedingly high in terms of human suffering and political repression,"<sup>4</sup> — an assertion that craves rebuttal, at least in regard to *some* socialist nations.

The reviewers, and most of the foreign policy books they review, assume the desirability of maintaining U.S. "interests" abroad, although these interests are rarely subjected to a critical analysis or even a precise definition. The overseas expansion of U.S. corporate and military power is treated as a beneficial and necessary phenomenon. Indeed, one worried

reviewer notes that "it is sobering to be reminded of non-American influences in the Western Hemisphere."<sup>5</sup> "The United States," we are told by another reviewer, "lacks the drives and motivations of empire." Nevertheless "we have in fact been catapulted into an hegemonial position as a result of worldwide political and international forces."<sup>6</sup> While other nations have empires and are imperialists, the U.S. has hegemony and is virtuous.

The desirability of foreign aid is measured according to its ability to shore up "a country's political and social stability,"<sup>7</sup> and stability is itself considered a desideratum regardless of the conditions it imposes on the indigenous and often indigent population. It follows that those who challenge the established social structure, thereby adding to its instability, are undesirable. Social revolutionary insurgencies are seen as threats to U.S. interests and seldom as struggles for social justice. The view from the *APSR* book section remarkably resembles the view from the State Department.

Economic growth in the Third World is presumed to be a good unto itself, little attention being given to the social uses and abuses of the wealth produced and its distribution within and without the Third World nations. The idea that U.S. aid and U.S. corporate investments usually leave the population of a Third World nation worse off rather than better off, and serve the investors and the local oligarchs at the expense of the common populace, a point made by a number of critical studies,<sup>8</sup> seems to have escaped the minds of most reviewers, as has the idea that "underdeveloped" nations might really be "maldeveloped", the victims of a longstanding exploitation imposed on them by industrialized capitalist nations. Instead reviewers are more likely to make unsubstantiated references to the "humanitarian and technical assistance . . . of much of AID's current activities,"<sup>9</sup> and to assert that Third World develop-

<sup>1</sup> H. Malcolm MacDonald, September 1971, p. 825; Stephen Kertesz, June 1973, p. 705; Lowry Nelson, December 1973, p. 1389; Edward Gonzalez, December 1973, p. 1412-13. Citations herein are to be considered as illustrative rather than exhaustive. All references are to the *APSR* book review section unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> See James L. Nichols, June 1973, p. 717; and George P. Jan, December 1972, p. 1379.

<sup>3</sup> Ivan Svitak, September 1973, p. 1074.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Gonzalez, December 1973, p. 1413, talking about Cuba.

<sup>5</sup> George Blanksten, December 1973, p. 1443. Blanksten is concerned about German, Japanese and Soviet economic investment in Latin America.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth W. Thompson, December 1971, p. 1259.

<sup>7</sup> S. G. Triantis, December 1973, p. 1373; see also Charles Wolf, Jr., December 1973, pp. 1445-46; and Charles R. Frank, Jr., December 1973, pp. 1447-48.

<sup>8</sup> For a sampling of this literature see Teresa Hayter, *Aid as Imperialism* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971); Steve Weissman (ed.), *The Trojan Horse: The Strange Politics of Foreign Aid* (New York: Monthly Review, 1973); Arghiri Emmanuel, *Unequal Exchange: A Study of the Imperialism of Trade* (New York: Monthly Review, 1972); Cheryl Payer, "The Perpetuation of Dependence: The IMF and the Third World," *Monthly Review*, 23, September 1971, pp. 37-49.

<sup>9</sup> Charles R. Frank, Jr., December 1973, p. 1447.

ment programs are for the purpose of "raising the standards of living of the mass of the people at the substance level,"<sup>10</sup> highly debatable propositions for anyone who knows anything about the fate and the intent of most development programs.

Similar centrist ideological biases can be ascertained in the book reviews dealing with American politics. Occasionally a mild muckraking utterance might flicker across the page, as when we are reminded that federal regulatory agencies are inclined to serve the interests they are supposed to regulate. But for the most part, the postulates of the pluralist approach, so widely criticized by growing numbers of political scientists, remain unchallenged as do the assumptions about the desirability, workability and, indeed, reality of "American democracy."

Both in the books selected for review and the way they are reviewed, questions dealing with social change, corporate influence, democratic accountability, secrecy and deception in government, militarism, ecology, racism, sexism, poverty, inflation, systemic corruption and political oppression are afforded a one-dimensional treatment or usually none at all. To treat poverty, for instance, as a manifestation of the class conditions fostered by capitalism is not the kind of approach a respectable centrist political scientist would consider; it is simply outside his ideological paradigm.<sup>11</sup> Instead one critic notes that the book he is reviewing suggests that the elimination of poverty in the U.S. "is achievable in this decade, without a major restructuring of our society," a stunning assertion which he leaves unchallenged.<sup>12</sup>

The fundamental dynamics of the present politico-economic system in America are largely ignored in the *Review's* back pages or are accepted as a natural good. To the extent that economic theory makes an appearance it is essentially capitalist-bound theory and its critical perspective is almost always Keynesian or neo-Keynesian.<sup>13</sup> Questions of class interest and class conflict are treated as irrelevant or "ideological" rather than as significant components of political reality which can invite systematic empirical investigation. What

Hobbes, Locke, Adam Smith, Madison and Hamilton knew, and what Marx remembered, we are made to forget. Denied even a legitimated vocabulary, certain politico-economic phenomena are either left uninvestigated or are prejudged in accordance with the closed notions of the centrist paradigm, the very notions which some of us have been trying to open to inquiry.

A tiny number of the books reviewed in the *APSR* reflect views that might be considered heterodox, that is, pointedly critical of established policies and institutions, and these few are reviewed by persons hostile to them. If a book offers a revisionist interpretation of international events, or if it treats the developments within social revolutionary movements and nations from a perspective that is to the left of the centrist viewpoint, or if it makes a critique of established domestic institutions or an indictment of capitalism as a system, or if it is just anti-pluralist, it is almost certain to get a hostile review — if any at all.

Book critics in the *APSR* tend to apply a double standard of evaluation. When the book fits within their own establishmentarian ideological range, they are less likely to ask for exacting and conclusive documentation, indeed they are more likely to applaud the author for having written thought-provoking "interpretive essays" or "richly illuminating essays." In a flash of self-revealing candor rarely found in the back pages of the *Review*, Heinz Eulau notes that he finds the book he is reviewing "so agreeable to me because I agree with most of it."<sup>14</sup> But radical or other anti-establishment books, failing this centrist test of agreeableness are expected to be conclusively documented and had better not indulge in "unscholarly" speculations no matter how richly illuminating.

Yet for all the insistence on empiricism, the data and evidence that anti-establishment books *do* provide are seldom given any careful exposition by the reviewers. So comfortably unchallenged are some reviewers in their ideological presumptions that they simply dismiss an anti-establishment work without feeling obliged to explain why the reader should share their prejudices. Vernon Van Dyke's critique of James Petras' informative essay is quoted here in its entirety: "James Petras, writing about U.S. foreign policy and business in Latin America, sees nothing but intervention; everything reminds him of intervention."<sup>15</sup> Thus does the reviewer brush aside the question of whether Petras might have something of interest to tell us about U.S. military and corporate doings in Latin America.

<sup>14</sup> Eulau, September 1973, p. 994.

<sup>15</sup> September 1971, p. 794. Petras' essay was just one of a number appearing in the book under review, but the reviewer still could have given us some idea of what Petras was saying. *Time* magazine slickness is not uncommon in the reviews of anti-establishment books. In his critique of a book on military justice, Sidney Ulmer writes like this: "Basically Sherrill argues that the military justice system and those who run it are bad, bad, bad!" Ulmer, September 1972, p. 1045.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Streeten, December 1973, p. 1411. Another of many uncritical reviews is Doris A. Graber, March 1972, pp. 288-89.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, reviews by William Niskanen, September 1973, pp. 1020-21; and Rebecca Rollan, March 1973, pp. 224-25. It is true that only a small percentage of the published books can be reviewed. Yet there is room in the *APSR* for a friendly review of a book called *Soviet Prison Camp Speech* (September 1973, pp. 1054-55), a glossary of Russian prison terms which express the oppressive conditions of Soviet camps. But one waits in vain for a review of one of the many works dealing with the brutal and repressive conditions in Greek, Brazilian and American prisons as expressed in the language of prison inmates and other observers.

<sup>12</sup> Niskanen, September 1973, p. 1020.

<sup>13</sup> For a typical example see William Grampp's review and the book of collected essays he reviews, September 1973, pp. 984-85.

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A common technique is to pin a label on the book or author, one that operates like a code word, eliciting the conditioned judgmental response, e.g., "New Leftists," "the apologists of the New Left," "currently fashionable thinkers in [sic] the Left."<sup>16</sup> Charles O. Jones resorts to this technique when reviewing a book of essays about ecology. *Eco-Catastrophe*, he says, is one of those "eco-scare" books, a "horror story, damn the Establishment" book which, of its kind, "stands on the far left." It is nothing more than "slick journalism with a purpose." What is the book's suspicious purpose? — to show that the ecology crisis is not a distinct and separate social problem but an integral part of the general social crisis of corporate America.<sup>17</sup> At no time does Jones explain why that purpose is not worthy of our serious attention. At no time does he address himself to the propositions and evidence offered in the book he is reviewing. Slick journalism, maybe. Slick reviewing, certainly.

Reviewers will refer without explanation, to "time-worn Marxist concepts" and Marxism's "intellectual baggage."<sup>18</sup> No similar characterizations are made about western liberal capitalist thinking. It is acknowledged by reviewers that non-Marxist academics involve themselves in scientific efforts, but Marxist "science" and Marxist "scientific" efforts always seem to appear in skeptical quotation marks.<sup>19</sup> We are also repeatedly told that Marxist and neo-Marxist books "offer nothing new." Here the implication is that establishment books are bursting with new ideas and that new empirical and analytic contributions cannot be made within a New Left or Marxist paradigm, at least none that we need bother with. And by claiming that a book has nothing new, we evade the question of whether it has anything true.

In sum, the back-page critics of the *Review* display an ideological one-sidedness that bears little resemblance to the scientific objectivity and professional neutrality one hears so much about. Establishment political prejudices persist unchallenged thereby allowing important empirical questions to remain unexamined or to

be settled by assertion and injunction rather than by evidence and a free exchange of conflicting ideas. Anti-radical books are reviewed by anti-radicals and radical books are also reviewed by anti-radicals. Vernon Van Dyke will review a book by Alan Wolfe and Marvin Surkin, but neither Wolfe nor Surkin are called upon to review Van Dyke. Richard Merelman will review Matthew Crenson, but Crenson will not be asked to review Merelman. Earl Latham will review William Domhoff, but Domhoff will not be chosen to review Latham. Norton Long will be invited to review Green and Levinson but not vice versa.<sup>20</sup>

Very few dissenting political scientists are asked to write reviews for the *APSR*. Peter Bachrach and Christian Bay made an appearance on the back pages in 1971 and there may have been a few others, but they can be counted on one hand.<sup>21</sup> "For indoctrination to occur," Ralph Miliband once noted, "it is not necessary that there should be monopolistic control and the prohibition of opposition: it is only necessary that ideological competition should be so unequal as to give a crushing advantage to one side against the other."<sup>22</sup>

I am not suggesting that all persons who have written an *APSR* review are ax-grinding protagonists of orthodoxy, although enough are, nor that the reviews, even some of those I have cited, are totally without merit or interest. Within the confines of their ideological perspectives, some reviewers attempt to treat complex questions under severe space limitations with thoughtfulness, scholarly competence, and sometimes even with an absence of pedantry. And it should be added that a good portion of the books reviewed are of such an antiseptic nature as to be classified neither as radical nor anti-radical; although even here one sometimes wonders why the antiseptic study is more likely to be reviewed than the controversial one. And one begins to see that much of the noncontroversial work implicitly accepts the desirability or neutrality of the institutions, policies and processes under study. Compare for instance the literature on Congress that *is* reviewed with

<sup>16</sup> To cite only two of the many instances of this: Robert B. Fowler, September 1973, p. 991; Richard Y. Funston, September 1973, p. 988. Funston identifies the noted political scientist and historian Howard Zinn as one of the New Left "apologists." He refers to "the facile treatment, rhetorical sleight of hand, and oversimplification characteristic of Zin [sic] and his ilk." Funston's remarks are injected, without discussion or explanation, as opinionated side-swipes in a review that is not about Zinn's *Disobedience and Democracy* but about two other more conventional works on civil disobedience.

<sup>17</sup> Jones, June 1972, p. 590.

<sup>18</sup> For instance, Arthur Trueger, March 1974, pp. 253-54.

<sup>19</sup> For one of many instances see Joseph O'Malley, March 1973, p. 212.

<sup>20</sup> Van Dyke, September 1971, pp. 793-94; Merelman, March 1972, pp. 216-17; Latham, March 1972, pp. 199-201; Long, June 1972, pp. 618-20. I found one radical book, Radosh's study of American labor and U.S. foreign policy, which received a non-hostile review: see Robert Hattery, September 1971, pp. 813-14.

<sup>21</sup> I was asked in 1970, when most of my work was still in the area of ethnic politics, to review a book on Black nationalism, an invitation I declined because I felt the job should go to any one of several Black political scientists who were doing work on the subject superior to mine.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968), p. 182.

the more critical literature on Congress that is not.<sup>23</sup>

Is the orthodoxy of the review section the result of a conscious effort at thought control by the *APSR's* book review editor? I think not. The editor assigns reviews to people who are thought to be capable scholars, and scholarly capability is defined by criteria that are seldom recognized as harboring an ideological dimension. Many centrist political scientists claim to be "non-ideological" in their work. And they are, in the sense that their profound ideological commitment to the established social order and to their own self-interested position within that order, are seldom explicated. If anything, their ideological interests are best served by denying the existence of such ideological interests. These evasions have a conservative effect on the consciousness of our profession.

My complaint is not that establishmentarian political scientists are aware of their ideological biases and act deliberately upon them, but that they are often *unaware*. It is their understanding that dogmas, doctrines and ideologies are things that exist to the right and the left of them, while the center is inhabited by persons who practice their science and try dispassionately to understand the world as it is. They are, or they claim to be, non-partisan and non-political. But the determination of what is non-partisan or non-political is itself a highly partisan matter. What is called non-partisan is in practice usually *bi-partisan*, involving mainstream Democrats and Republicans and excluding those who occupy that portion of the political spectrum beyond establishment boundaries.

The truth of the matter is that there is no way any political science publication or its book reviews can remain non-political — not as long as some link is maintained with the realities of this world. The debate here is not between those who would keep the *Review* "non-political" and those who would not, but between those who *think* they are preserving a non-political *Review* and those who *argue there is no such thing*. Whether they are writing articles, speaking on panels, teaching courses or reviewing books, political scientists operate from ideological premises and value preferences.

Now if our political biases and presumptions

<sup>23</sup> One might argue in this context that the *Review's* main concern is with the professional literature, the rigorous theory-building stuff written by students of politics rather than the policy-oriented work of non-political scientists, and to be sure, much of the critical work on Congress and public policy is by journalists, Congressmen, and public interest advocates. Yet this rule of professionalism does not hold in other areas; a good number of unrigorous, impressionistic books dealing with foreign policy and overseas aid and development are given supportive and respectful reviews in the *APSR* as noted earlier. These books almost always take an orthodox ideological position, and a striking number of them are written by past or present U.S. agency officials, ambassadors, foreign service officers and other establishment practitioners.

are often inescapable then all the more reason we should become aware of them, holding them up to scrutiny and to the test of argument and evidence. Radicals seldom enjoy the luxury of propagating unchallenged ideas, and the challenge often comes at a heavy personal price. But what of our colleagues who occupy the political center, who profess to an objectivity and innocence not found in this world and who control the avenues of expression, the publications and the other resources of our profession? When are their thoughts, their fears, their unexamined presumptions, their interests and ideologies held up to scrutiny and challenge? As Zillah Eisenstein put it:

To have an ideological position is very different from being an ideologue. This is a distinction which is too often overlooked. The most harmful ideologues in my view are implicit ones. An implicit ideology is difficult to deal with conclusively. It is harder to question, more difficult for others to question, harder to learn from, and harder to change. If an ideology is explicitly stated one learns from the process of stating it, and makes it accountable to others as well. It is in the open. It helps others organize their thoughts, either in their acceptance or rejection of it. Ideologues however are those individuals who stop questioning their own ideas. This is very different from one who is able to examine ideas and questions them further through their explication.<sup>24</sup>

Since ideology cannot be ruled out, then a greater range of ideological orientations ought to be allowed in. It may well be that book reviews are by their nature opinionated, one-sided affairs, but why must it always be the same opinions from the same one side? We should move from bi-partisanship to multi-partisanship. The back pages of the *Review* must not be the bailiwick of any one sectarian interest, not even pluralism or anti-communist counterinsurgency. Anti-establishment as well as establishment political scientists ought to be reviewing books of various persuasions. When a book is highly controversial and covers some major issue around which our discipline is fundamentally split, it might be deserving of two reviews, one by someone who shares its orientation and one by someone who does not. This would give readers greater exposure to competing ideas. A wider variety of opinions would be forthcoming also if there were a book review editorial board composed of persons representing the differing viewpoints within the Association. If the Association is supposed to speak for *all* members, it might begin by doing so through its publications and its editorial boards. What we need is some "affirmative action" in the ideological sphere. Why should one person or one small like-minded group have final say over what the other 16,000 members of the Association can or cannot read?

<sup>24</sup> Zillah Eisenstein, "Connections between Class and Sex: Moving Towards a Theory of Liberation," paper presented at a panel sponsored by the Women's Caucus, APSA annual meeting, September 1973.

The objective should be to make the official publications of the Association as representative as possible of the diverse tendencies within the membership, even those currents that are substantially to the left and the right of mainstream Republicans and Democrats. By opening up and diversifying the editorial decision-making positions we might be able to diversify and maybe even enliven our discipline's intellectual fare. And *that* supposedly is

the function of intellectuals and their professional publications, is it not? to propagate ideas and be as open to free inquiry as possible, thereby avoiding the stultification of society's established orthodoxy. What I am asking is that certain of our colleagues overcome their fear and hostility toward ideas which compete with theirs and begin to practice in their profession the pluralism they so persistently preach in their classrooms.

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