Reviews   ISRB

R. K. Merton and E. Barber, *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity: A Study in Sociological Semantics and the Sociology of Science.* **Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004, 352 pp., ISBN 0691117543 (hbk), US$49.50/£32.50, 0691126305 (pbk), US$18.95/£12.50.**

Robert K. Merton and Elinor Barber's *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity* is the history of a word. The choice of writing a book about a word may surprise those who are not acquainted with Merton's work, but certainly not those sociologists that have chosen him as a master. Searching, defining and formulating concepts were always Merton's main intellectual activity.

If Merton and Barber invested energy in writing the history of a word, I feel it necessary to write a few words about the history of their book. This is no less fascinating than the content of the book itself. It was in the 1930s that Merton first came upon the concept and term serendipity, in the *Oxford English Dictionary.* Here, he discovered that the word had been coined by Walpole, and was based on the title of the fairy tale, 'The Three Princes of Serendip'.

The discovery of the word was serendipitous as well, since Merton was not looking for it. The word could not fail to trigger him, considering that at the time he was busy with the foundation of the sociology of science – more precisely and quite significantly with the elaboration of a sociological theory of scientific discovery – and with the formulation of the idea of the unanticipated consequences of social action. In this way, the combined etymological and sociological quest began and resulted in *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity*.

After completion in 1958, the book on serendipity was intentionally left unpublished. However, it was occasionally and most tantalizingly cited in Merton's other publications. When Merton's masterpiece *On the Shoulders of Giants* (1965) was translated into Italian, the publisher noticed a footnote mentioning the existence of the manuscript and proposed its publication in Italian. The authors agreed. The

Italian version was published in 2002, after Barber's death. Two years later and a year after Merton's death, we welcome the appearance of the English version.

The first few chapters elucidate the origin of the word, beginning with the 1557 publication of 'The Three Princes of Serendip' in Venice. This is a story about the deductive powers of the sons of the philosopher-king of Serendip. In a letter to Horace Mann dated 28 January 1754, Walpole described an amazing discovery as being 'of that kind which I call Serendipity'. He went on to provide his succinct definition but then blurred it by providing an inadequate example:

> As their highnesses travelled, they were always making discoveries, by acci-
> dent and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of: for instance,
> one of them discovered that a mule blind of the right eye had travelled the
> same road lately, because the grass was eaten only on the left side, where it
> was worse than on the right – now do you understand serendipity?

After many decades, in 1833, Walpole's correspondence with Horace Mann was published. Through this and other editions of the letters, the word serendipity entered into the literary circle. Merton and Barber do not fail to study and empha-size the social and historical context that permits the acceptance and diffusion of the neologism. The 19th century is the century of industrial revolution. It is a period of extraordinary expansion for science and technology, marked by the foun-dation of numerous new scientific disciplines, sociology included. As Merton and Barber (p. 46) remark: 'With the accelerated pace of scientific development in the nineteenth century, the need for new terms was frequently felt and as frequently met by the construction of neologisms. Scientists had no antipathy to new words as such: hundreds and then thousands were being coined.'

Serendipity was used in print for the first time by another writer 42 years after the publication of Walpole's letters. Edward Solly had the honour of launching serendipity into literary circles. He signed an article on 'Notes and Queries' and defined serendipity as 'a particular kind of natural cleverness'.

From the turn of the 20th century, serendipity gained acceptance for its aptness of meaning among a wider and more varied literary circle and the word appeared in all the 'big' and medium-sized English and American dictionaries. When outlining the lexicographical history of the word, the authors reveal dis-parities in definition: serendipity is both an event and a personal attribute. In 1909, the word is defined by *The Century Dictionary* as 'the happy faculty or luck of finding by "accidental sagacity" ' or the 'discovery of things unsought'. But the double meaning disappears in the 1913 definition provided by *Funk and Wagnall's New Standard Dictionary of the English Language*, where serendipity is uniquely 'the ability to find valuable things unexpectedly'. By contrast, in *Swan's Anglo-American Dictionary*, serendipity is just an event: 'the sheer luck or accident of making a discovery by mere good fortune or when searching for something else'.

Even though Merton waited four decades to publish his book on serendipity, he made wide use of the concept in his theorizing. In 1946, he revealed his concept of the 'serendipity pattern' in empirical research. In this way Merton contributes to the history he maps out. His attention to the concept of serendipity is the best

evidence of parallel attention to the very content of scientific discoveries and the
way they are made:

> Since it is the special task of scientists to make discoveries, they themselves
> have often been concerned to understand the conditions under which dis-
> coveries are made and use that knowledge to further the making of discov-
> eries. Some scientists seem to have been aware of the fact that the elegance
> and parsimony prescribed for the presentation of the results of scientific
> work tend to falsify retrospectively the actual process by which the results
> were obtained. (p. 159)

The Baconian and positivist dream of elaborating a set of methodological rules
capable of also opening the door to scientific discovery to people of modest intelli-
gence and sagacity cannot be better challenged than by the idea of serendipity.
Colombus's discovery of America, Fleming's discovery of penicillin, Nobel's dis-
covery of dynamite, and other similar cases, prove that serendipity has always
been present in research. However, Merton does not consider the problem of
methodology solvable with the elimination of the context of discovery and the
improvement of the context of justification. The problem of discovery is what
Oldroyd would define as the ascending part of the arch of knowledge – from
object-level to theory – which cannot be settled by merely replacing induction with
intuition/invention, as Popper suggests. It is still both possible and worthwhile to
study this problem from a sociological point of view. The concept of serendipity is
Merton's proposal to attempt to complete the hypothetical-deductive model: 'The
serendipity pattern refers to the fairly common experience of observing an *unan-
ticipated, anomalous and strategic* datum which becomes the occasion for developing
a new theory or for extending an existing theory' (Merton 1968: 157–62).

    This descriptive model has many important implications for the politics of sci-
ence, considering that the administration and organization of scientific research
have to deal with the balance between investments and performance. To recognize
that a good number of scientific discoveries are made by accident and sagacity
may be satisfactory for the historian of science, but it raises further problems for
research administrators. If this is true, it is necessary to create the environment,
the social conditions for serendipity. These aspects are explored in Chapter 10.
    Merton and Barber (p. 199) underline that:

> Research administrators may be authoritarian or they may be permissive,
> they may see the interests of the individual scientists as being identical with
> those of the organization as a whole or they may not, and such preferences for
> relative autonomy and independence or for relatively rigid control may be
> refracted through the problem of the legitimacy or desirability of serendipity.

The solution appears to be a Golden Mean between anarchy and authoritarianism. Too
much planning in science is harmful. The experience of Langmuir as a scientist in the
General Electric laboratories under Willis Whitney's direction proves the impor-
tance of the autonomy of the individual researcher, together with the concern of the

administrator. Langmuir decided autonomously to study high vacuum and tungsten filaments. Whitney supervised the evolution of the enquiry every day but limited himself to asking: 'Are you having fun today?' It was a clever way to make his presence felt, without exaggerating pressure. The moral of the story is that you cannot plan discoveries, but you can plan work that will probably lead to discoveries.

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Leo Semashko, *Tetrasociology: Responses to Challenges.*
St Petersburg: State Polytechnic University, 2002, 158 pp.,
ISBN 5742202634, US$15.00.

Leo Semashko and 14 dialog contributors, *Tetrasociology: From*
Sociological Imagination through Dialog to Universal Values and
Harmony, **in Russian, English (trans. M. R. DeWitt) and Esperanto.**
St Petersburg: State Polytechnic University, 2003, 396 pp., ISBN
574220445X, US$25.00

Leo Semashko, *Children's Suffrage: Democracy for the*
21st Century, Priority Investment in Human Capital as a Way
toward Social Harmony, **trans. M. R. DeWitt. St Petersburg:**
State Polytechnic University, 2004, 72 pp., ISBN 5742206550,
US$5.00.

keywords: Information Age ✦ pluralism ✦ social reproduction ✦ sphere classes ✦ sphere democracy,

Tetrasociology is an ambitious attempt by Professor Semashko to synthesize a long tradition of theories of societal reproduction, introducing or integrating concepts

such as: the reproductive employment of people, social harmony/disharmony and four dimensions of social space–time. A central premise of tetrasociology is that sustainable development and maintenance of society (homeostasis) is provided by a natural law of social harmony (balance) achieved among four spheres of social reproduction. This harmony is constantly challenged by deviations (conflicts) within the four spheres, among various branches (social classes), enterprises, regions and social groups. The strength and number of deviations (conflicts) create a measure of disharmony. When this exceeds a critical measure, the society either perishes or the law of sphere harmony is subordinated for a time, until sphere harmony can be restored. Harmony among spheres and sphere classes (of people reproductively employed in each sphere) exists in two forms: spontaneous and conscious. Spontaneous harmony of sphere classes is the natural, historical basis for preserving societal stability, whereas conscious harmony will begin, Semashko anticipates, with self-identification of sphere classes (as social actors) in an Information Age (post-industrial society). Thus, tetrasociology posits social harmony not only as the basis for society but also as its ultimate goal.

Tetrasociology synthesizes the western *structural* concept of spheres of reproduction and the eastern *value* concept of harmony. The concept of *harmony of reproductive spheres of society* is the central focus and core premise of tetrasociology.

Semashko develops six 'discoveries' (predictions) from this synthesis: (1) self-identification of sphere classes of the population will transform them into conscious actors, striving for harmonious cooperation among spheres; (2) sphere democracy will be based on an equal distribution of power among sphere classes, among generations and between genders, transforming democracy into an instrument of social harmony; (3) sphere demographic statistics will provide a quantitative measure of representation prerequisites to enhance sphere-generated social harmony; (4) sphere information-statistical technology will be developed to calculate potentials for increasing social harmony; (5) sphere sociocultural technology will be able to measure achievement and maintenance of social harmony; and (6) sphere strategic management techniques will be developed to ensure harmonious governance of spheres and sphere classes, at all levels of political, economic and financial regulation.

Semashko distinguishes between (a) the subject and product/capital of sphere reproduction, and (b) the reproductive employment of people within each sphere.

a. The four spheres of societal reproduction identified by Semashko are the social, informational, organizational and technical. The resource/capital reproduced within each sphere is for society as a whole, for the benefit of all of its spheres. Consequently, the spheres must work together to achieve social harmony. The social sphere reproduces the resource/capital *people*, the informational reproduces the resource/capital *information*, the organizational sphere reproduces the resource/capital of *organizations* (political, legal, financial) and the technical sphere reproduces the resource/capital of *things* (material). Each sphere includes many branches (at times conflicting) and enterprises (at times competing). And each has a large number of resource inputs and product outputs, through which they exchange the capitals that reproduce society as a self-organizing cybernetic system. The reproductive employment of people in these spheres is essential to the process of reproduction in all spheres, and unites them in one self-reproductive

system. The fundamental concept of reproductive employment of people covers life from birth to death, and includes all forms of social action, interaction, activity, labor and behavior. Semashko identifies four dimensions of social space–time: resource/capital (*social statics*), processes of reproduction (*social dynamics*), structure-spheres of reproduction (*social structuratics*) and social time: the various states of society from growth through decline (*social genetics*).

b. The primary reproductive employment of the population is divided into four productive sphere classes: (1) *socioclass*: (in the sociosphere) includes workers in education, healthcare, welfare, sports and entertainment, and also non-working population: pre-schoolers, students, the unemployed, the retired; (2) *infoclass:* (infosphere) includes workers in science, culture, communication and information services; (3) *orgclass*: (orgsphere) includes workers in management, politics, law, finance, defense, police and security; and (4) *technoclass:* (technosphere) includes workers in industry and agriculture. Classes of reproductive employment are more fundamental than class distinctions based on property. Property ownership is temporary, partial and inherently unequal, whereas reproductive employment is constant, universal and, although qualitatively different, inherent in all human activity.

In *Tetrasociology: Responses to Challenges*, Semashko lists 75 practical applications of tetrasociological theory (pp. 138–40) to meet challenges of the 21st century: terrorism, religious and ethnic strife, nuclear proliferation, poverty, ecological degradation, demographic dislocation and crises of democracy. Among the applications are sociocultural projects in problem areas, such as: family, gender, education, religious tolerance, international bilingualism, innovative statistics and information technology, anti-terror strategies and ecological preservation.

In brief, Semashko believes that civilizations are founded on a naturally occurring social order of four, easily identifiable population groups, unequal in size but equally essential to societal functioning. He contends that, if each of the four sectors is sufficiently represented in the development and use of resources, a society will enhance its ability to flourish, but if one or more of the sectors is not sufficiently represented, a civilization will decline.

To the end of doing comparative studies in collaboration with international research institutes, Semashko has invited dialog with other sociologists, both in Russia and internationally. His book *Tetrasociology: From Sociological Imagination through Dialog to Universal Values and Harmony* (2003), is written with 14 contributors, from four continents, in three languages: Russian, English and Esperanto. It includes 10 dialogs considering various aspects of tetrasociological theory by sociologists from the US, Japan, Australia, Germany, the UK and Russia. A further publishing project in Esperanto is planned as a way to continue unbiased dialog between civilizations, and to create a global culture of peace.

Another project proposed by Semashko in this book is the establishment of a 'Faculty of Social Harmony' to provide 'humanitarian education for dialog and peace'. Semashko contends that the militarization in education (which exceeds the degree of its humanitarianism) emphasizes preparing the young for war and violence rather than for constructive dialog. He would select faculty members from four educational disciplines, corresponding to the four spheres of society. An

educational program teaching ways in which the spheres interact to achieve harmony, to be introduced at all grade levels, would have far-reaching consequences, he believes, for individuals in everyday social relations, and for society at every level of social organization.

Ten dialogs with tetrasociology, by social scientists from six countries, introduce ideas that respond to and expand the insights of tetrasociology from various individual and shared perspectives. In the first two dialogs, Phillips (US) and Bachika (Japan) see Semashko moving toward a New Age of Enlightenment. In the next two dialogs, Yuriev (Russia) and DeWitt (US) continue this critique from the perspective of political psychology and power sharing. Yuriev, who posits a 12-dimensional psychological typology of understanding, sees a need for greater development of Semashko's concept of harmony, and of mechanisms of 'formation of the new classes in the new era' (p. 199). DeWitt integrates central ideas of Phillips, Semashko and her own to suggest (p. 201) 'a combined approach to resolving global disputes equitably and peacefully'. Research is proposed (p. 204) 'to compare alternative ways of sharing power'.

In dialogs five and six, Roseman (Australia) and Isaev (Russia) look further into the implications of tetrasociology for communication and negotiation skills required for conflict resolution. Roseman (p. 206) presents McLuhan's 'four part metaphor of the transformation process', applies it to tetrasociology (p. 209), and asks (p. 210) 'Is transformation of the world possible?' and 'under *what* restrictions?' Isaev suggests (p. 215) greater development in tetrasociology of the notions of information and energy. Butkevich, Kondratiev and Cvetkova (Russia) review the history of Esperanto since its creation as an international language in 1887 (p. 217) as 'a means of uniting people . . . in a neutral language' for multicultural dialog that would 'preserve the diversity of languages and cultures of the world'.

Hornung (Germany) and Scott (Britain) view sociocybernetics and tetrasociology as interdisciplinary and multidimensional sociological theories. Presenting four tables of concepts (p. 225–9) with 28 sociological concepts listed, they show corresponding concepts in sociocybernetics and tetrasociology. In the last two dialogs, Kavtorin and Lebedinsky (Russia) present practical and philosophical critiques of Semashko's work. Kavtorin offers a practical reason for taking seriously all attempts at 'grand theory' (p. 234) 'as a stimulant for elaboration of a new "general theory" of sociology'. Lebedinsky, continuing a 10-year dialog with Semashko, offers seven well-articulated criticisms (p. 236–7) of the philosophical foundations of tetrasociology, then closes with (p. 238) five 'major strengths of tetrasociology and of a tetra-outlook'. A potential dialog is presented in an essay by Govorov, who suggests (p. 244) the development 'of bona fide scientists capable of taking control of all social development processes'.

In Semashko's third book in English, *Children's Suffrage: Democracy for the 21st Century, Priority Investment in Human Capital as a Way toward Social Harmony* (2004), he develops what he believes to be a practical consequence of tetrasociology. This third treatise, together with the first reviewed earlier, is directed toward educating for a culture of peace in an Information Age, as global consensus toward achieving social harmony to prevent wars and to counter terrorism. Semashko's third book is devoted to what he sees as an urgent need for children's

suffrage executed by their parents. He responds to a resolution of the UN Special Session on Children (May 2002). Children's suffrage is presented by Semashko as an effective political institution for a global movement, to modernize democratic representation, promote a culture of valuing children as future citizens, and erad-icate the origins of terrorism in childhood. Replacing the state's priorities on mil-itary and economic spending with priorities on children and their reproduction of the social sphere will effectively promote a culture of peace.

Semashko supplements the concept of children's suffrage with practical sug-gestions for its institution. First, he proposes an international comparative research study to determine the likelihood of parents' acceptance of children's suf-frage. Second, he proposes a project to determine an appropriate law for Russia. Semashko has created a website – www.peacefromharmony.org – to promote the idea of working together to achieve global peace by 'putting children first'.

Tetrasociology and its derivative proposals are presented in anticipation of, and in preparation for, a global culture of peace, rooted in what Semashko believes to be a natural, evolving order of social harmony. His ideas about child suffrage express his urgent concern for reproduction of the social sphere, which is uncer-tain if the development of children as future citizens is given low priority. He believes in practical applications of sociology, an optimistic view in the face of increasingly difficult challenges in the 21st century. His style bears the imprint of pre-Communist Russia, suggesting an intense, searching-for-answers mentality. His approach may seem naive, in challenging deeply embedded, long-accepted, con-frontational, conflict-oriented ideas about the natural order of things, but he is thorough in developing his logic, and hopeful that others will judge his practical insights on their merit. Semashko's positive contribution is to focus our attention on sectors/spheres of society that work together to reproduce each other, as well as themselves, and thereby provide an underlying structure of social harmony *(latent, at the global level).* In its optimistic search for practical outcomes, tetrasoci-ology is a sociology for post-industrial societies, and qualitatively different from the sociologies of industrial societies.

As with any social engineering proposal, Semashko's formula for achieving global harmony and world peace will invite multidisciplinary anticipation of potential consequences. How might the power brokers of 21st-century societies, in their strategies for barter, trade and information exchange, adapt to, manipulate or try to control this new form of democratic representation, formalized as sphere power sharing? Could there be regimentation and loss of freedom? Or a renais-sance of creativity? Who will decide, in an Information Age?

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George Ritzer, *The Globalization of Nothing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004, 259 pp., ISBN 0761988068 (hbk), US$80.95, 0761988076 (pbk), US$34.95.

With *The Globalization of Nothing*, George Ritzer delivers a highly readable and deeply critical look at the relationship between globalization and consumption. Ritzer boldly rejects the postmodern turn away from grand narratives in social science and offers a new grand narrative of his own: the contemporary era of globalization is marked by crossing the great divide from 'something' to 'nothing'. By 'something', Ritzer means 'a social form that is generally indigenously conceived, controlled, and comparatively rich in distinctive substantive content' (p. 7), and by 'nothing', Ritzer means 'a social form that is generally centrally conceived, controlled, and comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content' (p. 3). Globalization, defined as 'the worldwide diffusion of practices, expansion of relations across continents, organization of social life on a global scale and growth of a shared global consciousness' (p. 72) is replacing something with nothing, shifting society generally toward the nothing end of the something–nothing continuum. Ritzer worries that 'there is a long-term trend in the social world in general, and in the realm of consumption in particular, in the direction of nothing' (p. 138).

The fun and fast introduction provides several interesting if problematic examples of nothing (credit card companies, pre-approved credit card loans, telemarketers and automated teller machines) and something (community banks, personal loans, personal bankers and individualized assistance). The seven subsequent chapters (1) conceptualize nothing and something in finer detail, (2) offer examples of varieties of nothings and somethings, (3) distinguish glocalization and 'grobalization' as conflicting processes of globalization, (4) discuss the relationship between globalization and nothing, (5) treat 'large scale consumption sites on the internet' as ideal-typical forms of nothing, (6) reconsider the rise of nothing in a broader context and (7) set globalization and consumption in a broader context and consider forms of resistance to globalization. The book concludes with an appendix that delves more deeply into some of the theoretical and methodological challenges and commitments that are left implicit in the main body of the text.

After introducing something and nothing, Ritzer raises the contrast between something and nothing with a discussion of the five subcontinua of the something–nothing continuum. These are: unique–generic, local geographic ties–lack of local ties, time-specific–time-less, humanized– dehumanized and enchanted– disenchanted. Ritzer uses several contrasting examples to illustrate these continua: a gourmet meal (unique) vs a microwave-ready meal (generic); handmade Oaxacan pottery (local ties) vs mass-produced pottery (lack of local ties); 1960s US-made 'muscle cars' (time-specific) vs mass-produced cars from brands like Kia (time-less); the small teaching college (humanized) vs the Internet university (dehumanized); and the magic of a home-cooked meal (enchantment) vs mass-produced meals like Domino's Pizza or Kraft's Lunchables (disenchantment). Ritzer argues that social forms falling at the nothing end of these continua, all of which lack, to varying

degrees, distinctive substantive content, are on the rise, while those at the something end are in decline through globalization.

Having set out these subcontinua, Ritzer turns to the various *types* of something and nothing and the conflicting relationship between somethings and nothings. He contrasts *places* (like local restaurants) to *non-places* (like McDonald's), *things* (gourmet Italian Culatella ham) to *non-things* (Big Macs), *people* (bartenders in traditional taverns) to *non-people* (Disney employees donning the Mickey Mouse costume), and *service* (waiters in gourmet restaurants) to *non-service* (waiters on cruise ships). In all these cases, subcontinua of something–nothing are used to explore the characteristics of these types of somethings and nothings.

Ritzer argues that the rise of all these nothings and the decline of all these somethings are related to globalization. To explain how, he separates globalization into two constitutive but contradictory processes: glocalization, Roland Robertson's concept of the creative integration of the global and the local that produces 'unique outcomes in different geographic areas' (p. 73); and Ritzer's own new concept, 'grobalization', which emphasizes 'the imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, organizations, and the like and their desire, indeed need, to impose themselves on various geographic areas' (p. 73). The term grobalization references the interests of such organizations in 'seeing their power, influence, and in some cases profits *grow*' (p. 73; emphasis in original). Ritzer allows that the term 'grobalization' is, borrowing a phrase from Charles Peirce, 'ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers' (p. 231). In general, grobalization (and its subprocesses of capitalism, Americanization and McDonaldization) fosters nothing, while glocalization fosters something. Grobalization wins and spreads nothing because 'there is too much power behind the forces pushing grobalization, the forces opposing it . . . are far too weak, and there are far too many real and imagined gains associated with it' (p. 95). Ritzer identifies 'large-scale internet consumption sites' such as Amazon. com as 'perfect examples of nothing' (p. 117) and its grobalization.

The Globalization of Nothing deserves praise for staking out bold moral positions on globalization and consumption, offering examples of cultural globalization that should spark interesting discussion in university courses, introducing concepts that are useful for thinking about globalization, and presenting arguments with a light and engaging style. But while this book shows clear strengths, it also suffers some shortcomings. In the appendix, Ritzer confesses that he is inclined 'to being both elitist and incurably romantic, nostalgic about the past, and desirous of a world more characterized by something than nothing' (p. 213), so I will not make more here of the obvious elitism of drawing distinctions between mass-market beers and 'the better varieties' of beer (p. 102), or the obvious nostalgia for the American diner implicit in the contrast of 'great good places' to 'McDonaldized non-places' (pp. 42–5). To his credit, Ritzer takes pains to point out that somethings (like home-cooked meals) can be cheap, nothings (like Gucci bags) can be pricey, and all was not right with the world in the 1950s, not even in 'small town America'. But elitism and nostalgia are not the book's only limitations.

First, as Ritzer defines them, the concepts of globalization and nothing overlap so much that the argument that globalization replaces something with nothing comes close to truth by definition. It seems that something more (or less?) than elective affinity is in play here. If 'nothing' is by definition 'a social form that is

generally centrally conceived, controlled, and comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content', then any given thing that is global must also be nothing. Globalization is implicit in this definition of nothing, because if nothing is 'centrally' conceived and controlled, there must be a center. For there to be a center, there must be spatial variation in the locations of the social form, a point from which things diffuse. Globalization is also implied by the essential characteristic of nothing ('devoid of distinctive substantive content') because a thing cannot be distinctive if it is everywhere, and a thing must be distinctive if it exists in only one place. Ritzer argues that some somethings are global, but the examples of these global somethings (traveling concerts and art exhibits, p. 99) seem to conflate temporal with spatial diffusion. There is an important distinction between the (still centrally controlled) diffusion of one thing to various places over time, and the simultaneous presence of the same (or nearly the same) thing in different places at the same time. This overlap between nothing and globalization suggests that a better title for this book might have been *Globalization* and *Nothing*.

Second, the book's relatively restricted empirical material cannot support all of its claims. Privileging conceptual development over empirics is consistent with the book's goal of introducing, through social criticism, some new concepts for thinking about globalization. But, non-USA readers should be forewarned that nearly all the examples offered in support of the book's claims come from the US context. This US-centrism should provide more grist for the mill of conversation, as students encounter the concept of globalization in the classroom. Conversation could also be directed to how some specific claims, such as the claim that social relationships are less likely to form in 'non-places' like chain restaurants than in 'places' like local diners, might be evaluated with evidence.

Third, the book does not do enough to place its argument in context of the dramatic historical and cross-national variation in the timing and extent of globalization. Indeed, a key contradiction within the growing but still immature globalization literature is that markers of globalization – international brands, multinational corporations, telecommunications infrastructure and even international organizations – are not smoothly spread around the globe, but instead are densely clustered in some places and virtually absent from others. Another key debate within the globalization literature concerns the timing of globalization, with some analysts arguing that certain forms of globalization can be traced back through centuries of the evolution of the world-economic system. Ritzer sidesteps these debates by delimiting the scope of the book to consumption in the contemporary West (particularly the US), but this treatment of cultural globalization would be richer for a serious engagement with cross-national variation in globalization, and with earlier forms of cultural globalization, especially the formation of global churches.

Fourth, even if we accept the argument that globalization is replacing something with nothing, we can still ask how much any of this matters. *The Globalization of Nothing* succeeds in connecting the abstract process of globalization to everyday life in a way that should be very useful to those teaching courses on globalization, but students in those courses may question the ultimate significance of the proliferation of things that annoy many academics (Internet universities, pre-approved credit cards, McDonald's, products of the Disney Corporation, Starbucks,

Lunchables). There is substantial evidence that globalization does mean more than this, and I hope that future editions of *The Globalization of Nothing* will do more to connect the realm of consumption to other pressing social problems.

Although, like any book, *The Globalization of Nothing* is not able to engage every relevant issue, its morality, readability and pedagogical utility make it worthwhile as a sharply critical take on globalization and consumption.

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T. K. Oommen, *Crisis and Contention in Indian Society*. **New Delhi: Sage, 2005, 245 pp., ISBN 0761933581 (hbk), Rs 560, 076193359X (pbk), Rs 320.**

The book under review comprises 12 essays on themes as varied as pluralism democracy and conflict, challenges to citizenship, Dalits, Gujarat riots, Indianization of the church and its implications, linguistic reorganization of Indian states, sources of internal threats to India's security, social movements in northeast India, Indian federalism, 20th-century Indian society as well as a prognostic essay on the challenges before Indian society in the 21st century. Anchored in the historical and contemporary experiences of Indian society, all the chapters derive their substantive content from the exclusive attention accorded to the chequered trajectory of such a complex and multifaceted civilization. Yet, readers are well advised to note that most of these essays are the unmediated publication of six talks and six seminar papers delivered by the author at different forums and at different points in time. Six of them have previously been published in journals and edited volumes, and have been collected here for the benefit of concerned social science scholars as well as lay citizens.

Notwithstanding the author's eminence as a sociologist, most of these essays are in the mode of generalist reflections on topical themes of public interest. True, a sociologist is not barred from pontificating on issues of 'national' concern. Though one is somewhat disconcerted when ideology and propaganda masquerade as received sociological wisdom even when one is aware that sociology has never been a value-neutral enterprise. The contents, like the tone and tenor of Oommen's essays, are polemical in the extreme. While being unsparing in his critique of his political and ideological opponents, he fails to submit to critical

scrutiny his own unstated assumptions, which are equally loaded. His uncritical acceptance of too many givens depletes his arguments of any serious analytical and methodological rigour. Moreover, his trademark fondness for systematization and typologies (mistakenly construed as conceptual finesse) makes for prosaic reading.

It is difficult to appreciate Oommen's contention that Indians are neatly divided into 'aliens' and 'natives', the former professing non-Indic religions such as Islam and Christianity. For him, Islam and Christianity are associated with conquest and colonialism, and are also proselytizing religions. The statement's historical truth apart, there is no justification for taking a quantum analytical leap by asserting that Indians want to keep these religions out on this account. In fact, his categorization of India's neighbours in terms of 'religious affines', 'religious neutral' and 'religious strangers' (p. 157) is misleading to say the least, for it emanates from a highly questionable distinction between Indic and non-Indic religions.

True, 'while the Indian state has consciously and decisively intervened as a reformer in the case of religions which originated in India, it has played a non-interventionist role in the case of 'alien' religions' (p. 80). Equally true is his assertion as to the ambivalence between the expansionism of the Constitution, the Hindu Code Bill and the Indian census on the one hand and the reservation policy with respect to religious minorities of Indic origin on the other. He discerns a deep-seated Indic/non-Indic divide in the way the term Hindu has been defined in certain administrative-legal-constitutional contexts. But his reading between the lines precludes him from exploring the analytical possibility that the Indian state's non-interventionism could be a deliberate attempt to respect religious pluralism and minority rights at a given historical conjuncture.

Half-baked conclusions abound throughout the pages of the book. Sample this: 'thus, the fundamental difference between Aryan Hinduism and Dravidian Hinduism is crucial: the former is hegemonic, but the latter is emancipatory' (p. 99). Readers are left groping for the substantive basis of such a profound assessment. Again, he asserts, 'In India, although Hinduism is not the official religion, for all practical purposes Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and Buddhists, particularly the former two are marginalised' (p. 110). There cannot be a greater blurring of fact/value distinctions at the level of scholarly arguments.

For Oommen, 'there are several core nations although the numerically superior Hindi speaking community is widely perceived as the hegemon' (p. 67). Perceived by whom? From which vantage point? Though he bypasses the equally pertinent question: Why is the same 'hegemon' at the bottom of all the acceptable indices of social development? Similarly, one is amazed at Oommen's unproblematic equation of Shudras with the category of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Dalits with the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and tribes with the Scheduled Tribes (STs). He is highly selective in emphasizing the contested nature of certain categories. Whereas categories such as nation and Hinduism are demonstrably contested, his political proclivities refuse to acknowledge the historical accumulation of contents and meanings that categories like tribes and Dalits have undergone.

These contestations apart, the book reiterates certain commonly agreed upon insights. For example, the Indian state heeds the demands of social movements only when they resort to violence. Likewise, one comes across the statement that

'communal riots are by and large an urban phenomenon in India' (p. 34). There is also the author's pet prognosis: 'the only viable basis to form politico-administrative units is language' (p. 25). On the whole, the book is a great disappointment. Neither students of sociology nor those of South Asia will miss anything valuable if they skip the present publication.

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