BOOK REVIEW

SOCIOLOGY: UNDERSTANDING A DIVERSE SOCIETY

(By: Andersen, Margaret L., and Howard, Francis T., Thomson Learning inc, 2008)

Arif Ma’mun Rifa’i
Jurusan Syariah, Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam (STAI) Ngawi

INTRODUCTION

This book is really good to read which contains comprehensive source of insight into the mechanisms of social interaction between diverse social groups within a certain unit of society. The book is instrumental in providing an overview of the differences in ethnicity, gender, class, religion, as well as the geographical origins of individuals who can greatly influence one’s system of values, beliefs and stereotypes. The volume is based on extensive research work that has been carried out by the authors and covers a wide range of topics related to such sociological notions as culture, power, social change, stratification, crime, inequality, social interaction and social structure, among others. The first part of the book is focused on a discussion of sociological perspectives. Part two covers the topic of individuals and society and part three is about social inequalities. The fourth part is dedicated to social institutions and mechanisms of their functioning, whereas the fifth and last part covers the notion of social change.

AUTHOR’S BACKGROUND

The book is co-authored by Margaret L. Andersen and Howard Francis. Dr Margaret Andersen is a distinguished American sociologist whose professional interests revolve around the sociology of race and gender. She currently holds the position of Professor of Sociology and Women’s Studies at the University of Delaware, where she has also served as Dean of the College of Arts and Science and is the former Vice Provost for Academic Affairs. Dr. Andersen has also been a Visiting Professor at Stanford University (Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity), and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Women’s Studies). She has received the 2006 Jessie Bernard Award, given annually by the American Sociological Association, and the Robin M. Williams Lecture Award from the Eastern Sociological Society. She is active in several professional organizations, most notably the American Sociological Association (where she is the vice president-elect for 2008-2009), the Eastern Sociological Society (past president), and Sociologists for Women in Society.

Howard Francis Taylor is a distinguished researcher and a prolific scholar, his scientific interests being ethnic and racial differences, as well as social class diversity as it relates to public policy and social justice. He has served on many editorial and governmental boards of both private and community organizations. Most notably, from 1989-96, he served as chair of the National Advisory Committee for the ASA Minority Opportunity Summer Training Program (MOST), and in 1996-97 he was president of the Eastern Sociological Society. He is also listed in many directories of distinguished scholars and citizens. He is also a recipient of the American Sociological Association award.
BOOK ANALYSIS

The subject of social diversity and mechanisms of its functioning is one of the broadest notions in sociology. Thus, the greatest value and forte of this book, in my opinion, is that its authors were able to systematically address and divulge each of the components of this immense subject, providing clear-cut explanations and specific examples to explicitly and successfully get their point across to the reader. Sociological theories covered in the text are explained in an understandable and easy-to-capture approach, giving the necessary overview of all complex terms used in the narration. This gives learners and students a soft landing spot when studying the subject of diversity in society.

Particular emphasis should be given to the examples provided by the authors and the ways these examples help convey a much better idea of the notion ‘diversity’ itself. Unlike most sociological textbooks I have come across, the examples in this book are not just of the American society and given from an American’s point of view. As diverse and different as societies are all over the world, the authors managed to demonstrate many of these differences in an interesting and engaging manner, providing unusual informative and, at the same time, educational examples. They also managed, in a brilliant way, to make theories and terms easier not just to understand at the moment of reading about them, but also to remember and reproduce later on. Such bright examples will certainly make the material much more memorable for students.

The first section addresses the sociological perspective by offering a comprehensive description of sociology and outlining its evolving nature. In this section, which is divided into two chapters, the authors inform students of the existing sociological imaginations. This imagination is revealed in our daily lives and is used to unearth several unsettling facts. The section provides an insight into the significance of diversity on a global perspective. The reader is also offered a theoretical framework in the first chapter. In the second chapter of this section, the authors cover the topic of conducting sociological research and the most effective research approaches that are both ethical and informative. The research process in sociology is explained in detail from the development of the research question to the data analysis process and the drawing of conclusions.

The second part of the text is comprised of six chapters that are centered on individuals in society. This section provides the description of culture and its elements, which include language, beliefs, religion, and norms – terms covered in the first chapter of the section. This chapter elaborates on the cultural diversity in the world through a review of the dominant and popular culture, as well as addresses the multifaceted nature of theoretical perspectives of culture and cultural change. The student is offered a comprehensive discussion of the socialization process, as well as agents of socialization. These terms and their meaning are explained with the help of the theories of socialization in the second chapter of the section. The authors explain social structure and analyze its interaction within society.

In this part of the book, the authors use examples to better explain how groups and organizations function, how the factors of crime and justice are rooted in the fundament of social norms and beliefs. When covering the social influence in groups, a logical perspective is taken where the authors present the results of the Asch conformity experiments to elaborate their concept of the group categorization in the society. The authors display an intense sense
of boldness when they explain the ‘McDonaldization’ of society. They also bring reader’s attention to how bureaucratic the society is becoming with individuals being forced to adopt a certain artificial systematic pattern in their lifestyles.

The purpose of this section is to address the issue of social inequalities, which is the focus of the discourse in this part of the book, covered in the six chapters from nine to fourteen. The authors provide a basis for the cross-examination of the issue of social inequalities in the first and second parts of the book. The ninth chapter elaborates on the forms of social class and stratification, which play a central role in the perpetuation of social inequalities. Theories of global stratification such as the modernization theory, dependency theory and the world systems theory are addressed in this section. The consequences of global stratification are discussed to illustrate how the issue of social inequalities impacts the distribution of resources across different ethnic, religious, racial groups. This section also offers an evaluation of the dimensions of ethnicity and race in relation to social inequalities. These dimensions include the racial stereotypes that are incorporated in society, as well as the interplay of these stereotypes between gender and class. Moreover, the text offers an explanation of discrimination and prejudice, as they are seen in different societies, and how they can be based on cultural factors. Here, the authors address both the psychological and sociological theories of prejudice.

The textbook greatly improves its credibility in the arguments portrayed throughout the text by supplying factual evidence of research findings that have been most recently documented by scientists from all over the world. For example, in the section on social inequalities, the authors provide factual data on the stages of development for ethnic groups, including Native Americans, Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, as well as the Middle Eastern Americans. Moreover, in their explanation of the patterns of racial and ethnic relations, the authors provide background information on the concepts of assimilation and pluralism in the society. Another example is seen through the application of such factual data in the review of sexuality, in society, where the authors construct a credible basis for argumentation. They also apply several sociological theories to explain counter-relations between sex and culture. Some of the points addressed in the book which are considered to be crucial to the stability of society, include abortion, birth control and sexual violence. The application of data from statistical authorities to justify the impact of the sexual revolution, which has led to the commercialization of sex and cybersex, is a credible basis of argumentation.

CONCLUSION

*Sociology: Understanding a Diverse Society* the terms and notions covered of this book are described in simple and comprehensible language, using grounded and intelligible examples. This is no less than wonderful studying material for students of any major, whether sociology-related or not. Moreover, the textbook can be also a great educational resource for anybody interested in how the mechanisms of social functioning, and the growing diversity of practically every social unit, influence our lifestyle and way of thinking. Personally, I think this book deserves its own special spot on any family’s bookshelf. The theories In this context, it is only logical to conclude that this book will be of particular interest and utility to every reader.