

Øyvind Ihlen & Magnus Fredriksson (eds.) (2018). *Public Relations and Social Theory: Key Figures, Concepts and Developments*, 2nd edition. London: Routledge, pp. 454, ISBN: 9-781-13828-1-301, 9-781-13828-1-295, 9-781-31527-1-231.

The works of 20 prominent social theorists are exposed, examining their beliefs, concepts and developments in four different areas — social changes, social forces, social interactions, and power — with a specific and deliberate focus on their applicability towards public relations and broader communications practice.

This is a deceptively small book in a nutshell, jointly edited by Øyvind Ihlen and Magnus Fredriksson. This second edition has significantly renovated and reworked its predecessor version published in 2009; itself built on many academic articles published in 2007, adding new chapters on theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman, John W. Meyer, John Dewey and Karl Marx. The criteria for inclusion was interesting, derived from the contextual usage of a theorist by public relations scholars, forming part of a major search, review and evaluation process that broadened in the process the base of knowledge. This approach avoided the same core of theorists being feted time after time, providing coverage of a range of theories and strategies such as functionalism, postmodernism, constructionism, social constructionism, feminism, and post-colonialism.

To a public relations practitioner this material can be esoteric and less-relevant, yet for the researcher it can be a valuable reference work, a consolidated interchange of knowledge and inspiration to both the familiar and hopefully less familiar. The editors motivate well their objectives, believing that ‘more extensive use of social theory could help to provide analytical frameworks highlighting institutional, organisational, and professional conditions for public relations, as well as how different configurations of these and other circumstances influence practice.’ Consideration is given to the broader impact public relations may have ‘for other actors and society as a whole’, and the editors admit that their approach may be unsettling or disapproved of by some traditionalists. Good!

Segregation of the chapters into four thematic sections seems considerate, working to demonstrate how different theories guide understanding of public relations and its societal roles and impact. As noted by the editors, theories may not be necessarily pigeon-holed into one theme and an approach may both advocate and criticise elements of the same discipline, for example, within the work of Habermas, there are critical arguments about the negative influence of public relations, yet also advocacy for specific public relations activities to create social interaction and understanding.

This review cannot delve deeply into and argue about specifics from the 20 different chapters in a book of over 200,000 words, but criticism is freely given within each chapter towards the stated theory where relevant as part of its detailed



The editors then conclude, accompanied by Piet Verhoeven, by acknowledging that it would be 'quite foolhardy to lump together the wide array of theoretical directions that have been presented [in the book]' and any 'task of summarising and drawing parallels can hardly do justice to the sophisticated philosophical systems that underpin the different approaches.' This makes a reviewer's task easier since often a review is expected to offer a challenge, criticism or comparison in every situation. For the reasons stated previously, this would be less applicable and quite difficult to apply. However, the book seeks to collectively suggest that five key conclusions may be intimated, if not directly drawn, from the varied social theorists with relevance to public relations concerning:

- what compass or what knowledge interests scholars using social theory are guided by;
- the importance of seeing public relations in its societal context;
- what the central concepts for public relations are;
- what important social concerns are brought to the fore by applying social theory to public relations activity;
- the possibilities the presented approaches present for raising empirical questions about public relations.

The book is clear that there is not one single view for public relations and related activities, and obviously there can be variance between interpretation, application and even one's own biases and cultures too. The summary provides an intellectual context that is more than a mere conclusion, acting either as a digestif for the reader or a guide for those who need a little more prompting. It is unfortunate that this book is likely to pass the average public relations practitioner by, although there would be a lot of potential utility and inspiration on an intellectual/higher level even if it could be consumed when time allows. For the specialist researcher and scholar, this is a comprehensive, detailed, compressed and information book that acts as an inspirational and referential work.

It is definitely a book worthy of consideration for many.

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