

Book Review

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600 Laws in Sociology, by Mark Bird. Boston, MA: Pearson Learning Solutions. 2013. 164 pp.

650 Laws in Sociology, by Mark Bird. Boston, MA: Pearson Learning Solutions. 2014. 206 pp.

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One important and interesting trend in sociology over the past 20 to 30 years is the shift away from simplicity toward complexity. Much contemporary sociology concerns the articulation of a local, contingent, situated, and nuanced description of how old notions of universal laws ignore much of reality. Mark Bird's *Laws in Sociology* do not fit this trend.

The books open with a series of selected quotes from well-known sociologists and intellectuals on the topic of science, followed by a brief chapter titled "An Introduction to Laws." Each subsequent section deals with a set of laws within a particular realm: "Laws of Research," "Laws of Bureaucracies," "Laws of Crime," "Global Warming Laws," and so on. The new edition of *650 Laws* contains questions after each section to assist students with written assignments or to stimulate class discussion. As I turned the pages in each book, I felt like I was reading an extended glossary—though each includes a glossary—rather than a traditional textbook. I could easily see either book used as a quick reference for various topics in social science, much as one might use an encyclopedia. The books would gain substantially from two additions. One, a subsection with each law that presents contradictory evidence or contingencies in the face of which said law would fail. And two, the inclusion of references to original works from which all the laws derive.

The simplicity of these books makes them accessible to diverse audiences, but simplicity also weakens the books. For example, Bird relies on a "dictionary definition of law" to mean "a generalization based on the observation of repeated events," but also defines laws as "factors, patterns or principles that clarify a given social science topic" (p. 1). The term *law* is used in such a broad manner throughout the books that the notion of a law becomes inconsistent. In Bird's books, laws can be risk factors, trends, or recommendations, each of which might be considered a law if contextualized, but most often is not.

Bird also explains that the books take a deterministic view and concern cause and effect. However, the writing often confuses cause and effect and analytic categories. Bird provides culture laws, socialization laws, and education inequality laws. Culture, socialization, and education inequality are also analytic categories that social scientists use to describe sets of phenomena further described by "sub-categories." Yet the sections sometimes seem to be a mere list of things within a conceptual category (e.g., socialization laws) rather than an articulation of cause and effect relationships. The book also suffers from a simplistic view of science, ignoring much of contemporary philosophy of science and science and technology studies. In doing so, the books seem anachronistic to the informed reader in that Bird's project becomes proximal to the project of Comte and Durkheim, to whom Bird refers in his introductory chapter. In adopting the terminology of laws, the book shares the tradition of much early sociology that struggled for legitimacy in the face of the "hard sciences" and engaged in rhetoric to justify its own existence. As such, the books hold the modernist myth of progress and a flavor of Western ethnocentrism. Given the overly simplified format of these books, I recommend them as supplementary texts. Applied social scientists might use them while engaging clients or community groups, as a foundation upon which to build a more nuanced and critical perspective of social problems affecting them. Teachers might use them as part of an assignment for

students where they begin with the laws on a particular topic, then read more detailed studies in that area, using additional readings and discussion to critique the laws or as evidence in support of them.