



RECENSÃO

The Politics of the Book.
A Study on the Materiality of Ideas,
de Filipe Carreira da Silva e Mónica Brito Vieira,
por Csaba Szalo

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It is not the first time that sociology and the humanities turned to the performativity of books. This interest in what and how the books can do with their readers seems to be arising from the requirements for self-understanding and everlasting reorientation permeating current sociology. Perhaps, there is also a profound theoretical question of why certain books come to carry the performative force and others do not. For Bourdieu, Thomas Kuhn's book on scientific revolutions had a powerful effect since it was utilized as a weapon against a unified science theory held and imposed by those in academically dominant positions. Silva and Vieira's account focuses on the reflexive standing of canonical books in the sociological tradition, of how these books frame their own story and thereby present themselves to be read in a certain way.

This book is about those who exercise power over books, over their meaning and their form. The statement that authors are not in full control of their book's appearance currently is not generating any sentiments. It is widely accepted that a more competent specialist makes decisions about typography, binding, paper, that is, the process of publication

in general. However, the book's meaning is also emerging out of various interventions in which the author does not necessarily play a crucial role. In bookmaking, the author is supplemented by a collective of agents, including editors, translators, and commentators. While in many cases, these agents act in addition to the author, Silva and Vieira demonstrate that it is not exceptional that the book's composition is entirely in this collective's hand.

There are two particular modes of intervention that the collective of agents use to control the book's meanings. First, it is the book's form, which makes the book into a thing and enables its circulation to its readers. Second, as far as there is no form without content, some interventions manifested in textual composition mostly cut into the content as translations, prefaces, and other kinds of framing devices addressed to contemporary readers. Central to Silva's and Vieira's perspectives are potential conflicts of interpretations. This principle explicates why various collectives of agents strive to influence both the form and the content of books. This attention to the publishing collectives' agendas and interests generates a balanced position between approaches that favor either the author or

the reader. Neither writing nor reading is purely a cognitive affair.

The authors analyze six sociological books. The first book is Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, a classic work that was given a kiss of life by the advent of cultural sociology in the 1990s. The sacred's symbolic structure turned out to be a theoretical model for a new disciplinary reorientation of sociology initiated by Jeffrey C. Alexander. While the rise of the cultural Durkheim points to the significance of the commentators in the struggles over books' meaning, the second chapter unveils the absence of the classically conceived author behind the famous *Mind, Self and Society*. Despite being a compilation of decontextualized notes, the collective action of editors "Mead's book "provided legitimacy for symbolic interactionism. The figure of the master commentator is played in this narrative by Herbert Blumer, who developed a close connection between the interactionist theoretical frame of reference and this iconic book standing for Mead.

Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* incorporate another highly successful editorial compilation of writings detached from their immediate context. The third chapter, concerned with the social mystery of Marx's famous "1844 Manuscripts," forms the center of the book. This is a brilliant chapter about the *praxis* of giving rise to a cultic book. Silva's and Vieira's text moves from the historical context of strive for authentic Marxism different from Bolshevism to the theory of objectification, from

the myth of the written text as a neutral medium of thought to diverse editorial interventions framing the text toward the ethical grounding of Marxism, from the pure persuasive force of rational arguments to controversies inseparable from sensual experiences of things and another living being in the social process that mediates our self-understanding. The next chapters turn our attention to a book whose subsequent editions generated contradictory readings. We can follow in this chapter how Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folks* became a different book for different interpretive communities. The rationale for this is easy to understand but challenging to welcome: powerful interventions of publishing politics into the struggles over meaning get together with the process of universalizing abstraction and depoliticization that permeates our current public culture.

In the last two chapters, translators play the leading role. Max Weber's *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* forms a part of its translator's success story. Perhaps Talcott Parsons's appropriation of a relatively unknown German scholar through translating, editing, and commenting was a part of a collective endeavor persuasively exemplifying that an interpretive community formed around a book cannot be reduced to the assemblage composed solely from readers. The sixth chapter Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* offers a comprehensive reconstruction of the translation struggle over the control of this famous book's meaning. Translation and re-translation are perhaps among the

multiple and usually ignored interventions by which the book and its author are gaining social life. However, in this case, the disputes over the actuality of translation make visible both the progressive and conservative interpretive strategies of the retroactive meaning formation behind the cultural practice that usually is conceived as an exercise in mediation between languages.

While grasping how these notable books were pieced together, Silva and Vieira developed knowledge based on the concrete instead of applying them as an easy theoretical judgment. In other words, they do not strive to demonstrate their capacity to subsume these single cases under a general category of struggle. Thus, a general conclusion that books' production and reproduction have their politics is not sufficient for Silva and Vieira because what is decisive for them is historical circumstances. This is what makes this book unique in its sociological effort to disclose what can be achieved in sociology with not just writing but first and foremost by publishing particular books at certain times.

Thus, what constitutes the essence of the book for Silva and Vieira is not being a weapon as such, but the history of particular books' creation, production, and appropriation, which involves passionate struggles, to be sure. However, these histories of particular sociological books are not to be comprehended only as stories about the struggles over their meanings. These historical accounts are at the same time about various actors stimulating the interpretation that founds community.

The editors, translators, all the actors assembled around the book are oriented to a sense of what can be convincing. Hence, these histories of significant sociological books reveal how practical knowledge directed to concrete situations is central for the self-understanding of sociology.

Let me finish by raising an inquiry to this brilliant book about books. Sociologists enthusiastically reading classic sociological books are seduced by the canonical books' ideological or utopian prefiguration of themselves as the exemplars of something extraordinary made manifest in the world. Can we still preserve a tradition if we will read these books as contingent effects of performative forces? What is more, these forces can hide themselves thanks to motivating us to explore sociological books to find the exceptional one. Without describing itself as the manifestation of extraordinary, the canonical book would not be extraordinary at all. Reflexivity, hence books describing themselves, is thus central to their performativity. The book can act only because simultaneously with this action, the book also provides us with a narrative about this action, employing what categorizes it as a particular kind of action. To frame the books' power in this mode is to shift attention to ways in which particular books reflexively typify themselves. For all we know simultaneously with this, these books typify other books, too. What is more, these books are also typified by other books. Let us conceive this mutual typification in the forms of

citation and interpretation. As I read it, Silva's and Vieira's most crucial point is the creative potential of citation and interpretation. Similar to translation, as Silva and Vieira demonstrate it, citation and interpretation make to appear in the world simultaneously something new and old. Introducing alterity through repetition reanimates the social forms in which intelligibility dwells. This creative potential, located by Silva and Vieira in the agency that can be performed with and through the book form's materiality, as I would point to, works only because of the reflexivity contained in the acts of

interpretation, citation, and translation. For this reflexivity to be performed, a media is required, a specific media inseparably composed from matter and non-matter: that is, human existence.

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