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Book Review

The Emerging Consensus in Social Systems Theory. By Kenneth C. Bausch. Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2001. ISBN 0-306-46539-6, $69.50.

Kenneth Bausch has written a huge, impressive and often demanding book. I have rarely encountered a single volume that spans so many disparate areas. By his own count, he considers "over 1000 works," many of which, he notes, have "never before met each other." Seeking some red thread that can organize it, a "creative bifurcation" in his words, is obviously not an easy task. For him, it requires both a "critical mass," which the number of his sources provides, and an "intensive interaction among . . . ideas."

Operationally, he uses a combination of approaches that include "Relating these ideas unconsciously in metaphoric maps . . ." "Assisting these unconscious processes with conscious cognitive activity . . ." "Using pen and paper along with methods of parcelation, comparison, saliency generation, and relationship accounting to assist cognitive efforts . . ." and "Using well-designed computer programs . . . to expedite decision-making processes." He notes, "In the generation of this book, I carefully parceled hundreds of statements into five categories (designing social systems, the structure of the social world, communication, cognition, and epistemology), and whittled down their numbers on the criteria of novelty, saliency, and clarity" and "employed the computer assistance afforded by the Interactive Management methodology to create further affinity clusters and patterns of long and deep logic among those statements. I state his methodology at the beginning because, while his breadth of interests is a source of what is impressive, it is his methodology that is the source of what is demanding in this book.

In the first case, Bausch begins by noting Habermas' "systems" interpretation and Luhmann's "phenomenology of meaning" interpretations of Talcott Parsons' attempted sociological synthesis—in fact much of his book revolves around the debate of the late 1960s and early 1970s between these two notables. As he returns to their differences he incorporates the work of Kauffman, Laszlo, Prigogine, Maturana, Varela, Churchman, Checkland, Banathy, Warfield, Kampis, Goertzel and others.

It is the sheer volume of writers that makes the work so demanding. Given that the book is "only" 427 pages in length, each source must be given only limited space. This requires that only their central themes, as generated by his paradigm can be included. For those readers conversant with these authors, Bausch's contribution is quite valuable: for those of us less acquainted with this corpus, it is somewhat off putting. One either experiences running into walls or seemingly endlessly going to primary sources to discover the arguments that Bausch finds so salient. This, in itself, is certainly not an argument against the book's obvious value—it is, however, a warning to anyone who would approach it as a review of the extensive literature that the author surveys.

I highly recommend this book for those equipped to follow its valuable arguments; for those not so equipped, however, it can appear frustrating, like following arrows in a smoke-filled room.

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