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Christopher Steed, *A Question of Worth: Economy, Society and the Quantification of Human Value*, London, New York: I.B.Tauris 2016.

I start this review with a confession: I don't usually read books. This might sound like a rather surprising thing to say by someone pursuing an academic career, but there are reasons for this. The most important one is that the most recent and valuable research in comparative politics is published in articles in peer-reviewed journals not books. The latter are published at a much slower pace and they usually present what had already been discussed in the articles. Also, academic books published by prestigious publishing houses are extremely expensive – and particularly in comparison to salaries in the Eastern Europe and to the individual cost of zero for downloading a research article via a website of the university library.

Obviously not reading books on a regular basis creates a bias in expectations. Being used to studying concise empirically-oriented research papers with a relatively narrow topical scope makes you expect the same from every work-related reading. Since Christopher Steed's *A Question of Worth* is not a mainstream (quantitative) empirical political science study, I encountered a few difficulties while getting used to his writing.

The title of the book also contributed to my ineffective expectations regarding its content. 'Quantification of human life' in respect to politics is precisely what the mainstream political science does. We create synthetic indices of virtually every political phenomenon and incorporate it in the analysis. Personally, I find this process compelling to the extent that made me to transform my Ph.D. thesis into a book bereft of any actual empirical analysis and devoted to measurement of the properties of party systems only (Rafałowski 2017). Thus, including the word 'quantification' in the title of the Steed's book was really appealing as I expected it to deal with using

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quantitative indices to measuring some aspects of human life. But this is not what this book is about.

Steed's publication is rather an extended essay on the consequences of how the contemporary capitalism affects the human condition and the behavior resulting from it. It might be also considered a philosophical tractate that uses some empirical data to say things about human spirit at the beginning of the 21st century and formulates general propositions concerning problems the humanity faces.

The book is divided into three parts and fifteen chapters which I appreciate as a logical organization, even though it is not what I have got used to after getting through research papers with their standard structure. Each chapter focuses on a relatively narrow set of issues which makes the narrative clear and easy to follow. There are no spoilers. Author's diagnosis of what the problems and their solutions are not to be found in the introduction and then you have to get through to the end of the book to learn them. Also there is no concise summary at the end. You have to at least flick through the whole book to get the idea what it is about.

The first three chapters (the part entitled 'The Social Transmission of Value') elaborate the issue of human worth from the individual perspective: what makes people think how much they are worth. The author rightly demonstrates that this kind of evaluation engages several dimensions of one's life experiences, but also that they might be summarized with two rudimentary aspects: how much you earn and what you own. The latter is closely related to what Thorstein Veblen (1899) labelled as the 'conspicuous consumption'.

The second part of the book entitled 'Capitalism on the Couch' exhibits the variety of ways in which contemporary capitalism influences how individuals evaluate their worth. The title and structure of this part (each chapter dealing with a certain 'symptom') demonstrate well author's strong background in psychology and his experience as a pastor and a therapist who had talked with his parishioners on several occasions about their everyday problems and provided them with a psychological aid, advice and consolation. These quasi-interviews provide the main empirical material of the book that I was so eager to find given my own background. Although the observations from these conversations are merely a point of departure for the author to a wider look on the world economic system we live in, especially on inequalities, poverty and pain it creates as well as a predatory behavior it encourages. The analysis focuses on times of the economic crisis that struck the world economy after 2008. It exhibits the problems and contradictions of capitalism when they are particularly visible.

The third part ('Marching to a Different Drum') proposes solutions to the problems outlined in preceding sections of the book. In the opening of the chapter 14 (after a vast critique of contemporary capitalism in previous chapters) the author states: 'This is no tirade against capitalism' and his further propositions are indeed in line with his declaration. Steed suggests that in order to avoid harm to the life of an individual caused by capitalism it is necessary to incorporate human value into the economic calculation (page 185), i.e. to take into account the value of people's life, social relations, work-life balance etc. when evaluating options before making economic choices on resource allocation (page 201). This idea closely resembles the well-known postulate of incorporating the negative externalities such as destruction of the natural environment into the economic account. Steed's contribution is in fact changing the way we think about the externalities that should be taken into consideration. Unfortunately his work does not provide any specific ways to measure the phenomena to be added to the account. The postulate made by the book is undoubtedly important, but the reader is left without any definite solutions to the problem.

Author's proposal is not radical. It's simply about widening a perspective of something that is already a part of the debate. It also supports and maintains the logic of capitalism. Some might say that this lack of radicalism is good, because it increases the chances of implementation. Others (representing the radical left) will criticize it by saying that putting a price on individuals, their emotions and relations is basically a further commodification of life we should fight by putting the capitalistic logic aside.

Having said that I proceed to some more detailed remarks about the book. I would like to express my appreciation for the interdisciplinary theoretical background of the publication. His inspirations are grounded not only in psychology, but also in works of Marx, Weber, Veblen, Durkheim or Bourdieu – all classics when it comes to the subject of capitalism, capital and social cohesion – phenomena vastly interconnected in light of the book.

A great portion of the book is devoted to the issue of economic inequalities – their sources and consequences for individuals and communities. A part of this interesting discussion raises the question why people accept inequalities. One of the answers given is that as long as their pay is good, people don't mind astronomical pays of CEOs – even if the inequalities increase. The problem arises when there is a crisis striking the poor and the incredibly wealthy are hardly affected (page 39). The author justly emphasizes that the belief that poor are not trying hard enough reproduces inequalities. In the light of his analysis rioting becomes an understandable (yet not justifiable) reaction to poverty, not a sign of racism or religious unrest. These people are not just

getting the necessary resources by force. They want to destroy the very symbols of their oppression and rioting is the only available way of ‘grabbing a voice’ (page 123).

Looking at *A Question of Worth* from the point of view of social sciences makes it necessary to point out an important drawback of the publication. As it had been already mentioned the main empirical basis for the author’s conclusions are his talks with patients and parishioners. This does not constitute a viable material to build a scholarly book on. A study based on qualitative interviews should include citations of interviewees longer than limited to few words to allow the reader to evaluate the validity of author’s interpretation. There should be basic information about the subjects such as age, gender and social position etc. This would allow to judge if there might be any bias in the gathered material. Currently the methodological discussion with the book cannot be conducted, because there is insufficient information on the matter. This suggests that the material was not gathered in a systematic way. Thus the evidence presented is anecdotal.

Also the book does not test any particular theory. It indeed helps to understand the situation of individuals during the crisis of capitalism, but I doubt it expands our knowledge about the capitalism itself. Although the aim of the book was probably not to become a landmark in the field of economy or social policy, but an essay on important challenges that contemporary world faces. It fits well into the latter category and can be recommended for social science students during their introductory courses. It brings an overview of the most important social problems in the contemporary world along with an interesting and original approach to understand them. For the same reason the book might be of use for journalists who write about social problems and policy-makers who would like to understand better the people they may affect by their actions. This is not a book for specialists in the field of economy, social policy or psychology who expect rigorous analysis it lacks. This is a manifesto worth knowing, but rather for the general public not for scholars.

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