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Claudio Colaguori, *Agon Culture: Competition, Conflict and the Problem of Domination*

Mojtaba Mahdavi

International Sociology 2012 27: 696

DOI: 10.1177/0268580912452379

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Reviews: New theoretical interventions

International Sociology
Review of Books

27(5) 696–702

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DOI: 10.1177/0268580912452379

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Claudio Colaguori,

Agon Culture: Competition, Conflict and the Problem of Domination, de Sitter:Whitby, ON,

Canada, 2012: 286 pp.: ISBN 9781897160633, CAD\$39.95

Reviewed by Mojtaba Mahdavi, *University of Alberta, Canada*

Keywords

Adorno, agon, conflict, domination, reification

Agon Culture: Competition, Conflict and the Problem of Domination is a book in the tradition of the Frankfurt School's critical theory. It takes a critical look at one of the key concepts in sociopolitical thought – *agon* (conflict) – through a reworking of Adorno's model of reification-as-domination. Reification occurs when practices aimed at preserving individuals actually end up harming them (p. 176). Reified practices, in turn, are mirrored by reified concepts. One such concept is *agon*, i.e. the idea that the clash of opposing forces necessarily results in growth and progress. Such 'agonal rationality', the author argues, promotes social and international conflict and domination (p. 2). From ancient Greek to contemporary Marxist and liberal/western sociopolitical thought, the author argues, *agonism* has been seen as a positive force at the service of individual growth and sociopolitical progress. Colaguori is clear about his opposition to the use of *agon* as essential to democratic spirit and personal growth. He views it more of an ideology that masks the workings of destructive practices and repressive power relations. As a result, he reconstructs *agon* as a critical model that points to the destructive side of conflictual social and global practices. Dubbed by Colaguori as the 'agonal model' of critical analysis (p. 4), it is particularly relevant in a time when all repressive forms of domination are on the rise globally. Similar to Adorno's idea of the 'economic mechanism of selection', the agonal model emphasizes the destructive side of the competitive mechanism of selection. Warfare has been one of the most prominent forms of such destructive social practices. While there have been some recent books on reification (e.g. Timothy Bewes's *Reification*) and on the growing culture of militarism (e.g. Carl Boggs's *Imperial Delusions*), these have remained virtually disparate realms of social enquiry. Colaguori successfully ties reification theory with a critique of the culture of war. This connection is exemplified, the author convincingly shows, by the discourses of domination that underpin the international conflicts of the post-9/11 era.

It is by the end of reading the book that the enigmatic cover-image of the book, a rose half red and half white, reveals its meaning. It symbolizes the author's aim to point to the destructive side of *agon*, a side that has been largely ignored by sociopolitical thought.

The chapter titles tantalizingly reveal significant themes of the books: 'The philosophy of agonism', 'The agon of war', 'The agony of domination', 'Popular agonism, the mediagon and competitive sport', 'Competition, violence and the question of human nature'. Some may think this is a display of the grandiosity of a project whose scope is too large. However, on the whole the chapters are well thought-out, well written and tightly connected to the main theme of the book. Although the tone and the style of writing vary from dry to passionate, it remains honest and analytical throughout and does not devolve into an angry barrage of platitudes thrown at global capitalism.

Chapter 1 introduces the volume as a work informed by the Frankfurt School and based on the premise that ours is an age of organized domination. The author sets out to show that agonism underpins the worldwide project of domination in that it legitimizes imperialistic wars, environmental destruction and social inequities: 'the social, political and economic order that prevails in the world today is effectively maintained and normalized by . . . the philosophy of the *agon*' (p. vii). The author introduces the *agonal* model of analysis as a theoretical framework to explain the prevalence of violence, to criticize competition-based justifications of inequality, to demystify sociobiological narratives that portray conflict as the natural basis of social life, and to promote resistance to domination.

In Chapter 2 the author looks at the origins of the idea of agonism. He traces the idea to ancient Greece where it helped legitimize war and colonial expansion. Chapter 3 discusses agonism in relation to the suffering produced by the system of global domination. Chapter 4 discusses agonism as the ideological counterpart to the forceful maintenance of unstable structures of power. Chapter 5 focuses on the connection between agonism and war in the long tradition of social and natural sciences. The author points to the tradition's portrayal of agonism as expressive and justificatory of war as natural and eternal. Chapter 6 discusses agonism in relation to the philosophy of history. The conflictual and cataclysmic accounts of historical progress, the author argues, are largely based on selective readings of historical events reflective of a deeply rooted agonism.

Chapter 7 takes issue with biological discourses that reduce violence to a fact of human nature. The author argues against evolutionary and natural scientific discourses that propose a human *instinct* for violence and competition, and instead, views these as expressions of social and psychological conditioning produced by *agon* culture. Humans do have basic drives, needs and emotional responses, the author argues, however, how they are expressed has largely to do with social, political and cultural factors. Based on an 'agonal model', furthermore, Colaguori convincingly argues that the contemporary accounts of 'conflict' are largely the result of the misapplications of evolutionary biology and psychology to social practices (p. 158). In these discursive domains competitive agonism is presented as natural and beneficial. The key result of this misapplication has been the justification of global capitalism and the concomitant practices. Here Colaguori has his predecessors in the likes of Kropotkin, Engels and Stephen Jay Gould.

In Chapter 8 the author discusses the concept of reification in some detail to examine how agonistic thinking culminates in various forms of destruction (from self-defeat to social and international harm) despite its portrayal as a positive force. Chapter 9 is a discussion of what the author dubs as the 'mediagon', a blanket term for the mass media portrayal of sports and forms of entertainment that are based on competition (p. 226). The author also discusses the increasingly popular usage of military terms (e.g. surgical

strike, collateral damage) as the part of the same process whereby agonistic thought is normalized in political discourse. Chapter 10 is the concluding chapter where the author restates the arguments of the book, re-emphasizes the emancipatory aims of his project, and outlines the basic features of the global system of domination.

After a period of relative disinterest, the popularity of the Frankfurt School's tradition of scholarship is on the rise again. This is mainly due to the sharp increase in social inequality, authoritarianism and militarism that have become so pronounced around the world (including western democracies). This book will surely help this resurgence of interest by its novel and passionate outlook, which in Adornian tradition aims to 'lend a voice to social suffering' (Adorno, 1973 [1966]: 17). This intent immensely adds to the value of the book and makes it that much more interesting and worthwhile. Despite its complex argument, the book is highly accessible and makes an excellent read even for those new to critical theory. It could have been a little longer though. At points key details (e.g. about Greek view of conflict) receive only cursory attention from the author. The book, nevertheless, is of relevance to those interested in sociology of power and domination, social theory and conflict studies. As a whole, this book offers a unique perspective and is a valuable contribution to the research on conflict, competition and power. It is bound to stir up some debate in the scholarly community by challenging some of its basic assumptions about some key concepts and therefore I highly recommend it.

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Mojtaba Mahdavi is an Associate Professor of Political Science and Middle East Studies at the University of Alberta, Canada. His books include *Towards Dignity of Difference? Neither End of History nor Clash of Civilizations* (co-edited, Ashgate, 2012), and *Problems and Prospects for Democracy in Post-revolutionary Iran* (Rowman and Littlefield, forthcoming). He is currently working on two book projects: *Post-Islamism in Context: Neo-Shariati Discourse and Political Sociology of Post-revolutionary Iran*. Address: Department of Political Science, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2R3. Email: mojtaba.mahdavi@ualberta.ca

Mark Rouncefield and Peter Tolmie (eds),
Ethnomethodology at Work, Ashgate: Farnham, 2011; 251 pp.: ISBN 9780754647713,
 £60.00

Reviewed by Matthias Gross, *Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research, Leipzig, Germany*

Keywords

Ethnography, Harold Garfinkel, qualitative methods, sociology of work

As a student I was drawn to different ethnographic approaches and the study of ordinary people's everyday lives. Indeed I am still fascinated even today by sociology's potential