

## Book review

Party Politics

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Cedric de Leon, Manali Desai and Cihan Tugal (eds), *Building Blocs: How Parties Organize Society*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016; 256 pp.: ISBN 9780804794923, £17.99 (pbk)

**Reviewed by:** Gyda M Sindre, *Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge, UK*  
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This is an edited volume that does something as rare as represent itself as a manifesto for a new school of thought about party–society relations. While conventional approaches present political parties primarily as reflections of already existing divisions in society, the authors of *Building Blocks* argue that, instead, political parties are influential agencies that structure social divisions. The ‘political articulation approach’ is ‘an alternative programmatic statement’ that ‘defines political parties as . . . *usually the most influential agencies that structure social cleavages*’ (italics in the original) (p. 2). Thus, as an edited volume the authors set out an ambitious agenda. While this is not the most common format for making grand theoretical claims, the editors have successfully created a coherent argument that is illustrated by empirical contributions that clearly pull in the same direction.

The book consists of an Introduction, five empirical chapters and a concluding theoretical chapter. The empirical chapters each illustrate how parties articulate, and disarticulate, social divisions, and include discussions about left-wing politics in the United States and Canada, religious parties in Turkey and Egypt and divisions in Indonesia and India. The case discussions provide a party-sensitive approach to key political processes such as class formation, the transition to liberal capitalist democracy, the role of religion in politics, regime change and development.

In the introductory chapter, the authors persuasively present and discuss the articulation approach. The chapter begins by providing a critical overview of the main approaches to individual voter choice and political behaviour more generally. For instance, they take particular issue with the widespread use of surveys underpinning conventional approaches. ‘Survey answers’ they argue ‘are mediated through political articulation, so that expressed

interests, values and social relations cannot be taken at face values’ (p. 12). Further, if voter motivations change over time, it is because parties ‘refashion themselves’ or ‘emerge’, often at a specific critical juncture to ‘shape the very logic of political right-mindedness; they (parties) offer(ed) the “correct basis” for political judgement in their struggle for power’ (p. 12). Implicit in their critique is the notion that most of these theories fall short of explaining the success or failure of parties to politicize social differences beyond the Western contexts from which they emerged.

Following on from this critique, the chapter also provides a short discussion about how alternative sociological approaches contribute to our understanding of the state on the one hand and social movements on the other. Regarding the politics of the state, the authors make the point that most approaches have failed to take into consideration ‘how political parties are formative of the social and the state itself’ (p. 15) while social movement theorists have tended to view parties as ‘secondary to the explanation of specific political outcomes’ (p. 17).

Although short, and at times somewhat sweeping, the critique is effective and builds the foundation for the formulation of the volume’s main contribution, which is the specification of the articulation approach. In this regard, the introduction should be read together with the final concluding chapter, in which Dylan Riley explains how the approach derives from Gramsci’s notion about the relationship between party hegemony and democracy. Although it stands apart from the rest of the volume, this final chapter is also an interesting read about the ‘neo-Gramscian current evident in political sociology, political theory, international relations and “sociological Marxism.”’ (p. 175).

The empirical chapters are individually very strong. The case selection is efficient because they each serve to challenge the main assumptions underpinning the approach itself. De Leon’s and Eidlin’s chapters use the articulation model to discuss the absence and presence of left-wing political parties in the United States and Canada, respectively. They both emphasize the importance of seeing parties as active ‘organizers’ with ‘articulatory projects’ of class interests and coalitions. Tugal’s chapter sets out to explain the autonomous role that political parties can play

in ‘crystallizing and prioritising certain cleavages and rebuilding society around them’ (p. 87). The chapter efficiently shows how parties fulfilled that role in Turkey, but failed to do so in Egypt.

Slater’s chapter on Indonesia and Desai’s chapter on India further demonstrate the two alternative trajectories of the articulation approach: disarticulation in Indonesia and weak articulation in India. Slater’s chapter provides an explanation for weakened party–society ties and the upsurge in populist and anti-system challengers in Indonesia proposing that the extensive return to power-sharing has led to the disarticulation of an otherwise robust party system. Instead of disarticulation, Desai’s chapter argues that the main parties in India have converged on the dominance of market liberalization, thus leading to the eclipse of socialism. All in all these chapters serve their purpose very well: They streamline the approach outlined in the introduction and are detailed enough so as to be read on their own.

The volume makes a notable and refreshing contribution that places the party at the centre of analysis of major political processes. It is particularly useful for providing analytical tools to understanding political parties beyond the Western contexts and historical periods that most conventional theoretical approaches evolved from. Moreover, by selecting cases from among newly democratizing countries, the volume speaks to a broader set of problems related to democratization and development than is common.

Some issues remain unresolved and might be addressed in future research. First, what I miss from the introduction – and, indeed, the final chapter – is a clearer definition of what constitutes and distinguishes the processes of political articulation from disarticulation and weak articulation. Moreover, while the case selection is sound, the volume lacks a discussion of how the articulation model might explain similar dynamics in Western Europe, both historically and in the current party landscape.