

[Book review] Donatella della Porta and Michael Keating (eds), *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences. A Pluralist Perspective*, 2008

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► **To cite this version:**

François Briatte. [Book review] Donatella della Porta and Michael Keating (eds), *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences. A Pluralist Perspective*, 2008. Graduate Journal of Social Science, Amsterdam University Press, 2008, 5 (2), pp.158-161. halshs-00348853

HAL Id: halshs-00348853

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00348853>

Submitted on 22 Dec 2008

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Book Review

Donatella della Porta and Michael Keating (eds), *[Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences. A Pluralist Perspective](#)*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. ISBN-13: 9780521709668 (pbk). 384 pp. RRP: £19.99.

Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences is advertised by its publishers as a “revolutionary new textbook” and, even though the book aims at describing existing approaches rather than transcending them, it will certainly strike the postgraduate student (its first intended audience) as a remarkably up-to-date, concise and legible discussion of current methodologies and theoretical frameworks of social inquiry. What might qualify as “revolutionary,” and for which the editors deserve the highest credit, is the book’s success in presenting a truly pluralist perspective of possible research techniques, ranging from ethnographic methods (chap. 15 by Zoe Bray) to game theoretic analysis within Bayesian frameworks (chap. 8 by Christine Chwaszcza), along with a detailed discussion of current epistemological considerations in social and political research. Having read a few chapters in close-to-final draft form as their respective authors posted them on personal electronic pages, I was pleased to read the remainder of the book in paperback form, even more so at a relatively inexpensive price by current market standards.

Enthusiasm is probably not the first feeling conveyed by the literature on research design and methodology, as a lot of it is plagued by the joint and recurring issues of redundancy and low cumulation. Specifically, the need to achieve a careful balance between theoretical and practical issues in methodological texts makes it a difficult exercise to write concisely and intelligibly on that topic, as every student who has submitted his or her board paper (or research design extended essay) is critically aware of. As Peter Mair notes in his chapter on concept formation (chap. 10), no radical approach to such issues can take credit for producing the best research outputs: while precise and coherent conceptualisations are an essential requirement of academic endeavour, “immutable definitions” and overly strict standards lack the “pragmatism and flexibility” which research calls for in practice (p. 196).

There is more than one way of resolving the dilemmas of research design (see, for

instance, Martin 2008), and one of the merits of *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences* is to prove this thesis right through a detailed examination of existing approaches and methodologies. In addition to their personal accounts, the authors also supplement their contributions with further pointers to the most insightful existing texts, with multiple references to the works of John Gerring, David Collier or Gary Goertz, to name only a few. By that virtue, the book also constitutes an excellent starting point to any inquiry into the methods of social inquiry.

As its title suggests, the book is divided into two broad categories that deal respectively with the epistemological approaches (chaps. 1—9) and methodological designs (chaps. 10—16) that support social inquiry. Each section gives different treatments to critically important orientations of research methodology. Case selection, for instance, is examined by both Donatella della Porta and Philippe Schmitter. In the first case (chap. 11), the author contrasts the purposive nature of case selection in small-*N* research with the statistically-inclined tradition of randomization and strictly-no-interference approach to dependent variables (see King, Keohane and Verba 1994). In the latter case (chap. 14), the author briefly examines how empirical instances from the material world can become cases, through property specification and attention to comparability. Readers of the Oxford Handbooks of Political Science (such as Goodin and Tilly 2006 or Moran, Rein and Goodin 2006) will recognize several chapter headings from the first section: institutional and cultural constraints, ideational perspectives, etc. — just as readers acquainted with the Palgrave series in Political Analysis (such as Burnham *et al.* 2008 or Marsh and Stoker 2002) will easily browse through the methods exposed in the second section.

The book finishes with a synthetic essay jointly authored by the editors on the balance and respective merits that characterise the different approaches to social science research. Their reflection addresses critiques of triangulation and pluralism on the grounds of epistemological incommensurability between existing methodologies. In Chapter 2, they provide a detailed answer to such critiques and adequately dismiss non-purposive forms of methodological eclecticism, where multiple methods betray uncertainty and incomplete research designs. Instead, the authors claim that “there is scope for synthesis,

triangulation, multiple perspectives and cross-fertilization,” insofar as “different methods can be equally valid, depending on the question we are asking” (p. 322). One might regret that the authors do not emphasize the richness of nested research strategies (see, for instance, Lieberman 2005), except for a brief mention in Philippe Schmitter’s chapter (p. 278). Their main argument, nevertheless, is both clear and persuasive: well-formed questions about the past and present state of affairs of the material world should lead researchers towards precise approaches to their research problem (a process acknowledged in the French research tradition as identifying one’s *problématique*, although that term unfortunately lacks a clear definition). Readers struck by the importance of social science concepts as an essential tool in the intellectual exploration of — and travel between — research questions, problems and analytical angles will find Peter Mair’s discussion of concept formation a particularly interesting and enlightening read in that respect.

The pluralistic perspective in support of which Donatella della Porta and Michael Keating present such a compelling case takes its roots in the culturally and methodologically diverse environment of the [European University Institute in Florence](#), where the book was crafted. Against this backdrop, their final essay rightly stresses the weight of national specificities, observing that “relatively young disciplines as sociology and political science still reflect the impact of different disciplines that nurtured them” (p. 317). A challenge for the postgraduate student may then be to take stock of such national proclivities and depart from them as soon as they begin to prove counter-productive in terms of diminishing attempts towards originality and innovation within research designs. Overall, and with respect to the large scope of issues covered by the book, *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences* stands out as an excellent, comprehensive contribution to the existing (and vast) literature on research methodology. The book seems a very apt candidate for the bookshelves of virtually any social scientist.

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