

Book Review: What is Political Sociology? by Elisabeth S. Clemens

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*In **What is Political Sociology?**, Elisabeth S. Clemens produces a definitive and inspirational standard text for students at all levels. Her work offers a concise overview of political sociology as the human face of politics: the politicised interactions that take place within and between the domains of family, work, civic culture and structures of government. Clemens presents key concepts, theories and schools of thought to build an excellent grounding in the field. Vividly and accurately, she harnesses the stuff of political life – conflict, collusion, manipulation, rivalry, co-operation, trust and betrayal – to convey the complexity and dynamism we bring to the organisation and management of our communities, writes Patricia Hogwood.*

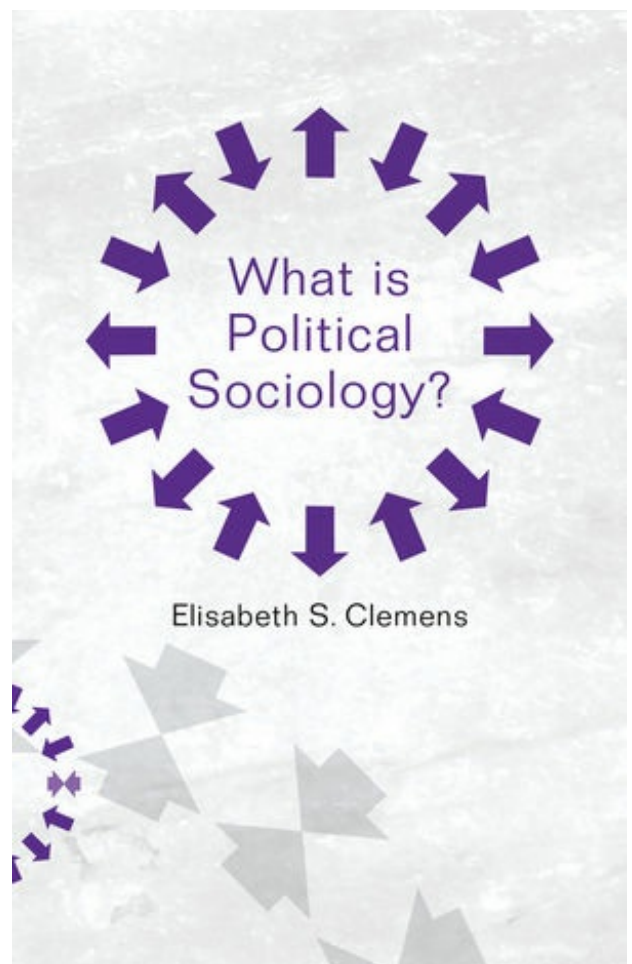
What is Political Sociology? Elisabeth S. Clemens. Polity. 2016.

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Writing a textbook for use on taught courses involves a number of challenges, including the delimitation of coverage, clarity of communication and finding a balance between the representation of the field of study and the interpretation of material. Elisabeth S. Clemens meets all of these challenges with aplomb. In *What is Political Sociology?*, Clemens delineates the field of political sociology with reference to political science. Throughout the work there is a strong emphasis on the organisational and institutional structures of political life. This emphasis begins with the chapter structure.

Chapter One leads with a discussion of the conceptual base of political sociology centred around the concept of power and its direct and indirect application in the construction and maintenance of social orders. Chapters Two through Four trace the overarching organising structures of 'politicised' sociology from the conceptual-territorial superstructures of state and empire; attempts to capture, implement, destabilise and redefine these through regimes and regime change; and the routing of voice and vote that is a hallmark of the democratic, reflexive model of governance.

Chapter Five takes a step back from these fundamental structures to consider their interpretation. Here, Clemens introduces the shift in academic literature from a behaviouralist ontology with its strong assertion of human agency as the originator and driver of political outcomes to a new focus on political structures and institutions as sites of political interaction. Emergent approaches have prioritised state agency and stressed the constraints and opportunities presented by institutional structures for political decision-making. Chapter Six considers a further strand of academic interest in political sociology: the literature of social movements and social change, with its focus on individual and collective agency in the context of such structures.



In her final chapter, Clemens uses concepts and practices of transnationalism in order to evaluate the potential erosion of the superstructures of our political lives. With this, she examines the unravelling or rescaling of the 'social cages' or restrictive patterns of behaviour we have designed and maintained to preserve customary political communities and to minimise the risks of living as a collective.



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Naturally, the delimitation of coverage begins with the chapter structure, but it does not end here. Having established a sound basis for reviewing the key organising principles of politicised social life and the major schools of thought in the field, Clemens expertly weaves in coverage of game-changing events, leading concepts in the field and academic developments. All of this is achieved quite seamlessly and without a hint of self-indulgence. Yes, Clemens references her own interests and works as relevant, but these are never allowed to distort the overview that she wants the student of political sociology to master.

A running theme in Clemens's work concerns the construction and operation of channels of communication between governing authorities and the governed. Here we learn, for example, that the apparently irrational voting behaviour of lower-income groups in US presidential elections may not originate in '[derangement](#)' (a deep-seated, values-driven cultural backlash), but in the simple miscommunication and misunderstanding of the benefits that the state provides for citizens. Elsewhere we encounter the '[embedded autonomy](#)' that helps to account for the effectiveness or otherwise of state officials and agencies. If officials become too distanced from society, they lack leverage or consent for their preferred actions; but if they are too firmly ensconced in the social milieu they serve, their work will be 'captured' by non-state interests and they will lose their autonomy. The key to officials' effective and informed performance is therefore the right level and quality of engagement with society.

In passing, Clemens conveys essential scholarship skills for students of political sociology. These include, for example, her demonstration of how to 'unpack', using Max Weber's original concept of power (*Macht*), an apparently hollow concept in order to understand its depth of meaning. Her treatment of the concept of power – such a minefield for teachers of political science and sociology – is therefore exemplary. So is her explanation of the way in which informal mechanisms of 'social closure' function to route patterns of social acceptance, forge bonds of loyalty and inhibit autonomous and random expressions of free will that might otherwise destabilise established orders. Throughout her work, she also draws on excellent case studies to show how empirical examples may help to set the

parameters of the possible in social relations and demonstrate the limits of key concepts and practices. For example, she uses [Julia Adams's 1996](#) study of the Dutch Empire of the 1700s to account for the erosion of loyalties within the nepotistic structures that were designed to uphold order and stability during rapid imperial expansion.

The work lacks only a more comprehensive overview of the academic interdisciplinary insights now filtering into political sociology: insights from behavioural economics, psychology, criminology and international relations. Having said that, given the meticulous planning behind this book, it may well have been a conscious decision rather than an oversight to exclude material that might dilute the impact of the political institutional focus and possibly undermine its suitability as a text for undergraduate students.

Clemens writes beautifully with great clarity and without ambiguity or recourse to jargon. Too often textbook writers trudge drearily to the point of their chapter via masses of standard background material. Not this one. Clemens cuts straight to the point, conveys complex concepts with ease and relates her examples and interpretations with such immediacy that her sociological perspective really comes to life. This work is challenging, but the challenge does not arise from the writing. Just as the trick of setting good exam questions is to make sure that every student can develop their full potential and has the chance of attaining an outstanding grade, so Clemens brings us ideas and elaborates every nuance in a way that will pose taxing questions for readers at every level, from undergraduate to postgraduate students and beyond. Without a doubt, students will want to read and reread this work.

Patricia Hogwood is Reader in European Politics at the University of Westminster. She has published on UK devolution and EU policy-making in a comparative context. Her other research interests include EU immigration policy and the externalisation of internal security and the impacts of German unification on German identity, democracy and public policy. [Read more by Patricia Hogwood](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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