

**Poe Yu-Ze Wan (2011) *Reframing the Social: Emergentist Systemism and Social Theory*. Ashgate, Surrey, England. ISBN: 978-1-4094-1152-9, 256 pages, price: \$99.95.**

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The last few years have witnessed a virtual efflorescence of increasingly sophisticated writings on the meta-methodological, epistemological, and ontological foundations of Social Science. This renaissance of “foundational” inquiry has been buoyed by the rise, growth, and institutionalization of such scientific-intellectual movements as Critical Realism, Analytical Sociology, “the mechanisms movement” (among others) and by the contributions of such figures as Mario Bunge, Peter Hedstrom, Charles Tilly, Christian Smith, Phillip Gorski, Dave Elder-Vass, and Daniel Little (among many others). The main motivation of this variegated line of work has been to move beyond the methodological strictures of classical positivism by providing the social sciences with renewed epistemic and ontological foundations. These foundations are characterized by returning to realism (as opposed to empiricism) moving beyond correlational view of causation (and towards a concern with powerful particulars, causal powers, and social mechanisms) and a renewed appreciation for the precedence of ontological considerations over epistemic guidelines or operational conventions.

Poe Yu-Ze Wan’s *Reframing the Social* is one of the most sophisticated entries into this now burgeoning literature. Wan’s intellectual achievement in this book stands out from comparable entries in the marketplace for at least two reasons.

First, there is just the sheer amount of ground covered in the book. Wan manages a rare feat here: not only does he address essentially *every* major debate in the methodological foundations of social science today (e.g. on causation, emergence, the status of mechanistic explanation, and analytical sociology), but Wan manages to do this in a sophisticated, constructive, and even-handed manner, ranging over a bewildering large number of authors, schools and positions. Even if the book had been confined to simply reviewing the state of the field today, it would have been an impressive accomplishment. Every scholar interested in this literature needs to read this book simply to be able to claim that he or she is acquainted with the state of the art and with the now staggering breadth of writings on the various inter-related subjects. Wan not only appears to have read everything and everyone, but he has done the field a great service by providing a characterization of the various positions that is at once critical (without ever being uncharitable) and that gets at

the key axes of division among the various proposals without getting lost in irrelevant details and secondary disputes.

Second, there is the fact that Wan goes beyond reviewing other people's proposals to offer his own positive project; he does this via a general introduction to Mario Bunge's meta-methodological writings (as they pertain to the foundations of Social Science). In itself, this is a contribution that deserves to be lauded. For it is clear that Mario Bunge's overall set of proposals constitute as impressive and as comprehensive a "system" for meta-methodological inquiry in social science as any of the other extant programs of comparable ambition and scope (e.g. Analytical Sociology or Critical Realism). This book does a fantastic job of introducing Mario Bunge's "emergentist systemism" to a wider audience in an accessible way without ever sacrificing rigor for the sake of ease of exposition.

Wan's treatment of Bunge's emergentist systemism shares the same virtues as the book as a whole. Most impressive is its sheer breadth; the reader is introduced to essentially *all* (relevant) facets of Bunge's meta-methodology for social science, across an intimidating range of writings covering more than 50 years. This includes his views on the questions of realism, mechanistic explanation, the status of "systems", and the twin problems of emergence and causation. In Wan's treatment Bunge's approach emerges as a powerful alternative to such movements as Analytical Sociology, especially in its capacity to retain a place for strong emergence, multi-level causation and anti-reductionism, without collapsing into holism and all the while accepting the importance of understanding causation in mechanistic terms. In that respect, it is Critical Realism that emerges as the contemporary approach most compatible with Bunge's overall Philosophy of science and the one that would most benefit with a more concerted effort to seriously engage it.

There are a couple of organizational and rhetorical devices, however, that detract from the larger contribution of the book. The most glaring one is Wan's decision to structure his introduction to Bunge's emergentist systemism as *polemic* pitting Bunge's version of systemism against Niklas Luhmann's "constructivist" systems theory. Luhmann (1927-1998) was one of the most prolific and most widely cited of twentieth-century sociologists, being the author of scores of major books in social theory and sociology, and whose system has grounded countless research programmes in numerous countries, nevertheless Wan's chosen contrast fails for one glaring reason, which becomes apparent fairly early on in the discussion (e.g. pp. 25-37): Luhmann's systems theory is a generally non-sensical, scientifically retrograde, and thoroughly speculative approach to the prosecution of social science. This approach is so obviously out of step with all of the convergent developments mentioned above, as to make its inclusion (and worse its placement front and center as serious fodder for argumentation) into a book of otherwise such fine caliber a very bad idea.

Once subject to a systematic comparison to the work of Bunge, Luhmann's contribution shrinks dramatically; the only outstanding question is why Luhmann has been taken so

seriously. After Wan's exposition the very idea that there could have been a "choice" between Bunge and Luhmann is fanciful. Another unfortunate consequence of structuring the first part of the book as a Bunge/Luhmann (non)polemic, for instance, is the inclusion of a disappointing (and ultimately rather alien given the contents of the rest of the book) entitled "Systems Theory as the Anti-Thesis of Planning?" This is certainly one that should have ended up in the editorial cutting-room floor.

The best chapters in the book however, survive as standalone treatments and are clearly separable from the Bunge/Luhmann "debate" that occupies the first half of the book (as noted above, even within the polemical parts, the segments dedicated to an expository overview of Bunge's work are nothing short of excellent, so they deserve close reading). I refer primarily to the outstanding chapters on emergence (Chapter 4), causation (Chapter 6), and mechanistic explanation (Chapter 7), minus the (thankfully rather brief) parts of these chapters dedicated to discussing Luhmann's work. The emergence chapter sees Wan at his best, ranging across a wide range of literatures in Analytical Philosophy, Philosophy of Biology and Philosophy of Science to come up with a sophisticated characterization of the range of positions developed around this controversial notion. Wan closes by offering his own constructive positive proposal for incorporating a workable notion of emergence in social science inquiry. Finally, the last chapter of the book (a "coda") is one of the best critical evaluations of the (full range of writings on the) Analytical Sociology program currently on offer. On its own it would be worth the price of admission.

In sum, *Reframing the Social*, in spite of some organizational and rhetorical flaws, is an impressive achievement. This book should be required reading for anybody interested in becoming acquainted with the best contemporary work on the meta-methodological foundations of social science, the debates and controversies opened up by advocates of the various programmatic movements that have emerged in the way of the dissolution of positivism, and Mario Bunge's equally ambitious—but rather unheralded—proposal to bring order to the proceedings.