

Book Review: Meštrović, Stjepan G., *The Postemotional Bully*. London: Sage Publications Ltd. 2015. ISBN: 978-1-4739-0780-5 (Hardback). 119 Pages. \$73.00.

Reviewed by B. Garrick Harden¹

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Stjepan Meštrović's *The Postemotional Bully* is a targeted extension of his concept of postemotionalism first fully articulated over two decades ago in *Postemotional Society* to the on-going conversation about bullying in the United States. Meštrović aptly weaves classical and contemporary sociological theory into a coherent model of the results of creating a society where emotions, the root of the social bond, are highly managed and calculated for effect, inauthentic, divorced from behaviors, personal and individual rather than communal and social, and for sale for entertainment. The monograph can be broadly situated in a sociological tradition that dates to Emile Durkheim; a counter-tradition polemicizing the Enlightenment Project's insistence on a naïve and unrealistic belief that knowledge must be "objective" in order to be true. William James' vicious abstractionism is invoked in the book as a critique of approaching scientific or really any type of conceptualization from an absolutist perspective. Meštrović is continuing a tradition inaugurated by Durkheim in the social sciences where subjectivity, specifically in terms of emotional realities, is understood to be more socially and culturally salient than any "objective," systematized production of knowledge created in sterile and limiting laboratory experiments could ever be (here I am reminded of Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar's classic study in the social construction of scientific facts, *Laboratory Life*, and the irony of belief systems of scientific objectivity through epistemological approaches such as reductionism). The point in *The Postemotional Bully*

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is not to only further long-standing analyses of epistemological absolutism, but to also to point out that any categorization, such as “the bully,” is necessarily artificial and incomplete and should be understood as such. Max Weber, from whom Meštrović also draws, reconceptualized ideal types from Kantian deontology and re-situated the idea within a more materialist perspective. Ideal types are general abstractions used to build social scientific theories by coalescing dominant characteristics of social phenomena that reoccur to form an identifiable pattern (such as Weber’s “bureaucracy”).

The Postemotional Bully begins with a statement defining the problem of bullying within the context of Thorstein Veblen’s critique of modern Western cultures and social systems as being “barbaric” rather than the presumed “civilized.” Veblen turned ethnocentric models of social evolution from nineteenth century anthropology (generally believed to go from primitive to savage to barbaric to civilized with, of course, only modern Western cultures being eligible for the “civilized” moniker) on their heads with his forceful and anthropologically rich critique of Western “predatory culture.” Veblen’s barbarian is our contemporary bully. The bully, then, is a naturally occurring character type (in the sense of David Riesman’s, another theoretical influence on Meštrović’s work, character types) under barbaric institutions and cultures. Bullying is not an individual problem and treating the individual bully will never address root social issues that create bullies. A contemporary bully is one who asserts his or her will through force or manipulation without regard for the cost to others. Bullies are a predictable result of the erosion of the social bond in hyper-rationalized, bureaucratized social systems replacing more communal and collectivistic ways of organizing social relations. “Barbaric” social characteristics used to be common in human societies. This observation is also in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche with his distinction between barbarian morality and ascetic morality. Nietzsche characterized barbarian morality as being more direct and emotionally honest than ascetic morality but too simplistic and literal in its interpretation of morality. Ascetic morality is deeper, metaphoric, and philosophical but forces humanity to internalize and redirect the will to power at ourselves in the name of civilization. Nietzsche calls ascetic morality sick and an example of bad conscience. Ascetic morality forces sublimation of barbaric impulses into abstract institutional policies and practices. As Nietzsche put it and I paraphrase, ascetic morality finally made humanity interesting. The interesting thing about Veblen’s understanding of barbarism, and Nietzsche was one influence on

B. Garrick Harden

Veblen's thinking, is that it places the barbarism of ascetic morality under scrutiny.

Meštrović draws from a wealth of personal experience working as an expert witness for the defense in the trials of soldiers involved in the prisoner abuse scandal at the Abu Ghraib detention center in Iraq as well as other examples of institutional bullying through military tribunals and other official actions. He takes Philip Zimbardo's argument in *The Lucifer Effect* to task for forcing the Abu Ghraib abuses into the context of his classic Stanford prison experiment from the 1970s that situated abuse of authority as a problem of blind obedience. Meštrović points out that Abu Ghraib of the first decade of the 21st century was fundamentally different from a mock prison in a basement on Stanford University's campus in the late 20th century. The biggest difference is that obedience and authority were still more or less operating in a modernist framework in the 1970s. In the nearly 35 years from the Stanford Prison Experiment to Abu Ghraib, American society had grown increasingly anomic with a more forced division of labor. Meštrović extends Durkheim's model of problematic divisions of labor to the contemporary situation where unclear authority structures with confusing and contradictory norms are common in cultures that have embraced postemotionalism. In the Abu Ghraib example, soldiers had no clear and unambiguous chain of command, orders were given that violated international law, and resources and supplies were not readily available. Soldiers took pictures of themselves smiling and pointing at tormented and suffering Iraqi prisoners and posted them on social media. These were social events, yet individual soldiers at the bottom of the chain of command were the ones punished. The emotions displayed by soldiers in the pictures were postemotional, a decontextualized smile of an American tourist divorced from any concrete meaning and the suffering of prisoners was understood in a postemotional context not as human suffering but the objectified suffering of vicious abstractions: prisoners, enemy combatants, and through the Bush administration's conflation of Osama bin Laden with Saddam Hussein, even terrorists.

Postemotionalism draws from a wide range of theorists, philosophers, and other intellectuals. In *The Postemotional Bully*, Meštrović borrows from perspectives that at times seem wildly divergent from one another. Readers are presented with a complex and nuanced theoretical application directly influenced by the likes of Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss (his analyses of the decline of the gift in modern societies was of particular importance to the present work), Charles Darwin, Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, various

members of the Frankfurt School, Georg Simmel, Thorstein Veblen, William James, George Herbert Mead, various members of the Chicago School, Pitirim Sorokin, Talcott Parsons, C. Wright Mills, Richard Rorty, Zygmunt Bauman, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, George Ritzer and many more. Meštrović weaves insights from these disparate scholars while consciously dismissing arbitrary lines between schools of thought that many of the scholars under discussion rejected for themselves. These artificial boundaries between theoretical perspectives leads to an oxymoronic situation where social scientists can become devotees or disciples to a particular scientific theory and end up re-inventing concepts across schools or simply missing the insights from theories defined as out-of-bounds for scholars working within different traditions. Postemotionalism is not limited in this way.

As Meštrović points out throughout the monograph, postemotionalism hinges on the fungibility of everything in contemporary Western culture. American children's culture and educational programs that teach children they are unique, special, and irreplaceable is belied by the reality of human fungibility in modern social systems, such as occupational structures, where everyone is ultimately replaceable (in many ancient cultures, former members of the social collective were seen as so irreplaceable that they were kept ever-present through ritualized ancestor worship- some modern cultures have preserved these ancient traditions such as in China). Considering Weber's contention that bureaucratic social organization comes to dominate all modern social organizations as an "iron cage of rationality" and the substitution of primary social bonds with secondary social bonds (even in terms of informal relationships organized through the inherent messages of superficial bonds in social media) where "hot" personal experience is translated into a "cold" and secondary experience. While Meštrović's argument is complex and theoretically rich, his style reads conversationally and could be easily understood by people new to sociological theories. The three case studies looking at systemic bullying in the military serve as compelling examples. The author is not presenting a simple condemnation of the bully or bullying; he is clear that the postemotional bully is a social problem but also discusses the difficulty in separating bullying from ritualistic suffering in the name of achieving a higher social status that dates to premodern societies' practices such as initiation rites or today's legal concept of hazing. The difference here is initiation rites were grounded in the social bond; while acts of predation by the postemotional bully are due in part to the weakness of social bonds in contemporary Western culture. I would like to add, there is the further complication of

B. Garrick Harden

the postmodern habit of drawing false equivalencies where those who uses force or manipulation to resist bullying become the bully while also being celebrated as heroes in popular American culture (such as Hollywood revenge fantasies like most of Quentin Tarantino's films) in which viewers can find a cultural logic where the violence of the bully morally obligates and is in this way exchangeable with the violence of the hero where the broken and mutilated body of the bully is intended to provide emotional and moral satisfaction. In application, the determination of the postemotional bully through legal rituals such as military trials are matters of language games and vying attempts to affix labels and clear definitions to complicated and ambiguous actions and motivations. Throughout the book, the author is calling for greater compassion and empathy for people (both those who are constructed as the victim and as the bully) through the deconstruction of viscous abstractions like the bully.

In the interest of full transparency, Meštrović was my mentor in graduate school and through works like this, I am still learning from him. There were, however, a few issues in the book that were minor and do not detract from the overall argument but nevertheless they are important to mention because of persistent issues regarding the characterization and over-generalization of scientific research into attention-grabbing and overly simplified conclusions by popular media outlets as well as the proliferation of online sites that mix scientific research and current events with conspiracy theories and alarmism in order to sell products like nutritional supplements to particular sub-cultures. In two places, the author writes, "Recent research suggests/indicates [...]" (pp. 16 & 24) and in the first instance cites a YouTube video that is no longer available at the cited URL and the second cites an article from the website of the British newspaper Daily Mail. While in several other places in the book, popular media sources are cited for the cultural data Meštrović was analyzing, these two instances stand out because they are cited for the actual scientific research they were reporting. Toward the end of the work, the author discusses the higher rates of drug usage by soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan (pp. 94) to make a much larger point about weaker social bonds, increased dehumanization, and the connection to higher rates of suicide first outlined by Durkheim and while I do not doubt that soldiers in both conflicts were self-medicating at higher rates than in the past (though self-medication and systematized cruelty have been common for soldiers in every war where such things have been recorded-as a famous story about Winston Churchill has him summarizing to a naval commander all of naval history as "rum, sodomy, and the lash"),

the author however, cites the website Natural News as the source. I had not previously heard of this site but after reading through it, the site appears to be set up to sell dietary supplements and other “lifestyle” products to members of conspiracy groups like the anti-vaccine movement where one can also find stories of the sort about abortion providers stockpiling human fetuses in their homes and how “the LGBT mafia” is trying to ruin women’s athletics. After giving these references much thought, I think Meštrović is being playful in a Nietzschean sense and tongue-in-cheek with boundaries of what is considered epistemologically “legitimate” or “illegitimate” in the academy, with marginal perspectives, and with media representation in America’s so-called “Culture Wars” rather than giving academic credence to groups who cherry-pick and misrepresent scientific research and procedures for commercial and/or political gain.

I recommend *The Postemotional Bully* to all interested in social theory and philosophy. The work is a cogent extension of Meštrović’s postemotionalism applied to the social problem of bullying; it is also a retelling of the intellectual history of sociology with special emphases being placed on scholars who have had a significant impact on the discipline but have received little credit as well as lesser known but no less important works by well-known scholars such as Durkheim’s work on pragmatism. Readers are also presented with little known biographical connections between major intellectuals such as George Herbert Mead having babysat William James’ children. *The Postemotional Bully* is an important contribution to contemporary sociology and represents much needed theoretical insight into current social issues. At a time when suicide and drug overdoses, especially among younger generations, has reached epidemic proportions, merely treating the symptoms of bullying will never be sufficient to change underlying social structures and cultures that bully individuals and encourage individuals to bully one another. In conclusion, Meštrović discusses the need to resist postemotional culture and points to Sorokin’s research on Veblen’s “peaceable types” as a potentially fruitful avenue but informs readers that the purpose of the present work was not to offer solutions but to clearly outline the problem.