

2009 Review of Books

January 3, 2010

[Original link](#)

Well, it's time for my annual look back thru the books I read this year. (Previously: [2006](#), [2007](#), [2008](#).) I've included links to reviews, where I have them, and italicized the titles of the books I recommend without reservation.

1. The Liberal Hour ([my review: 3 stars](#))
2. Depression Economics ([4](#))
3. The Great Derangement ([4](#))
4. Politics the Wellstone Way ([4](#))
5. Who Really Rules? ([5](#))
6. Fat Cats and Democrats ([3](#))
7. For Common Things
8. Who Governs?
9. Supreme: The Story of the Year ([2](#))
10. Changing the Powers that Be ([4](#))
11. New Kings of Nonfiction
12. On Writing Well ([3](#))
This book is really dreadful, mostly because the author actually cannot write well.
13. *The Power Broker* ([5](#))
I cannot possibly say enough good things about this book. Go read it. Right now. Yes, I know it's long, but trust me, you'll wish it was longer. I think it may be simply the best nonfiction book.
14. What Are Intellectuals Good For?
15. Priorities in Health ([4](#))
16. Invisible Hands
17. The Option of Urbanism

18. Getting There
19. On Directing Film (4)
Not just a great book about directing, but a great book about *writing*.
20. The High Cost of Free Parking (4)
21. The Leftmost City
22. Outliers
23. The Hearts of Men (4)
24. The Power Elite and the State (3)
25. Southern California Country
26. Seeing Like a State (4)
27. Traffic
28. Fast Food Nation
29. Building Rules (2)
30. Urban Fortunes (4)
31. Falling Behind
32. [The Sources of Social Power, Vol. 2](#)
Not an easy book, but Michael Mann continues to amaze.
33. Divided Highways
34. Prisoner's Dilemma
35. Running After Antelope
36. Cities of Tomorrow
37. Suburb (4)
38. [The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces](#)
If Feynman was a sociologist, this is probably the book he'd write. A delightful little thing.
39. Downtown
40. Radical Innocent
41. Suburban Nation
42. Zoned Out

43. [*American Apartheid*](#)

This book is criminally under-publicized. Everyone has their own crazy theories about why it is that blacks are disadvantaged in our society. Massey and Denton show it's much more obvious than any of that: they're victims of extreme segregation, with all the negative effects that entails. An absolutely brilliant book.

44. Crabgrass Frontier

45. Human Consequences of Urbanism

46. The Essential William H. Whyte

47. Gridlock Economy

48. Barbed Wire: A Political History

49. Market Rebels

50. Blockbusting in Baltimore

51. Chicago: A Biography of the City and Its Region

52. The Zoning Game

53. Zoned American

54. Bourgeois Nightmares

55. The Zoning of America

56. The Sun Also Rises

57. Bourgeois Utopias

58. Planned Sprawl

59. Block By Block

60. Opus 300

61. [*The Path to Power*](#)

After you finish *The Power Broker*, if you want more, read this.

62. Means of Ascent

63. Death at an Early Age

64. A City Transformed

65. Master of the Senate

66. City of Quartz

67. [*The Liberal Defence of Murder*](#)
This book is like a little miracle. I'm not even sure how to describe it, except to say that it turns one's understanding of history completely upside-down.
68. [Categorically Unequal](#)
If you're interested in inequality, this little overview is the place to start.
69. Side Effects
70. [*The Fox and the Hedgehog*](#)
Absolutely delightful.
71. The Threat to Reason
72. Plunder and Blunder
73. The Waxman Report
74. Who Rules America? (6th ed.)
75. [Angler](#)
Great introduction to how to use "the bureaucracy" and Cheney's utter deviousness.
76. Chief of Staff
77. [Showdown at Gucci Gulch](#)
Best book I've found on how positive bills actually get passed.
78. So Much Damn Money
79. Return of the L Word
80. The Way We Live Now
81. American Project
82. Streetcar Suburbs
83. Creating the Second Ghetto
84. Strangers in a Strange Land
85. Economic Growth and Neighborhood Discontent
86. The Federal Bulldozer
87. The Life You Can Save
88. Justice (Sandel)

- 89. Acme 18
- 90. The World We Have Lost
- 91. [Reason & Persuasion: Three Dialogues by Plato](#)
Great fun.
- 92. Two Memoirs (Keynes)
- 93. *Bat Boy: The Musical*
If you ever get a chance, go see it. It's the greatest musical ever.
- 94. John Maynard Keynes (Skidelsky)
- 95. Facing Unpleasant Facts
- 96. *Bad Samaritans*
The best introduction to the real issues of globalization and international development.
- 97. Reclaiming Development
- 98. Kicking Away the Ladder
- 99. Democracy and Disobedience
- 100. Infinite Jest
- 101. Elegant Complexity
- 102. Inequality and Industrial Change (4)
- 103. Network Power
- 104. *The General Theory of Employment, Money, and Interest*
- 105. Created Unequal
- 106. The Roseto Story
- 107. Political Economy of Industrial Policy
- 108. Deception and Abuse at the Fed
- 109. Balancing Acts
- 110. The Global Class War
- 111. Untitled New Deal Manuscript (Domhoff)
- 112. Acme 17
- 113. Secrets of the Temple

114. Supercapitalism
115. Political Control of the Economy
116. Freshman Orientation
117. Congressional Procedures and the Policy Process
118. The Political Economy of Trust
119. The Audacity to Win
120. Googled
121. Fantastic Mr. Fox
122. Dismantling Utopia
123. Rub Three Times
124. [The Latke Who Couldn't Stop Screaming: A Christmas Story](#)
125. Adventures in Cartooning
126. The Composer is Dead
127. Horseradish
128. [Nemesis](#)
A wonderful book for anyone interested in how science is actually done.
([chapter 1](#), [chapters 2-4](#))
129. Keynes: Return of the Master
130. Chris Ware (Raeburn)
131. [Gaming the Vote](#)

Poundstone's really become an amazing writer. While this isn't as good as [Fortune's Formula](#) it really is quite fun. Poundstone takes a rather novel tack in making the argument for voting system reform. Instead of saying that it will allow for third-parties to get a fair hearing, he argues it will protect the major parties from the insidious effect of spoilers.

Furthermore, instead of IRV, Approval, or even Condorcet voting, he endorses Range Voting as the best voting system, arguing against Condorcet on some weird grounds about determinant ballots that just doesn't make sense to me (p. 226).

Both of these seem reasonable when Poundstone lays them out, but are totally insane upon further inspection. Voting reform may protect against spoilers in the short-term, but in the long term it'll likely doom us to some kind of fractured multiparty system. (That's not to say it's a bad thing.)

And range voting, like its proponents, is totally batshit insane. (He even passes on their ridiculous claims about it being better than democracy with a straight face.)

Let's think about this for a second. Strategic voting with a range ballot (which even range voting's proponents say they'll do) is simply approval voting (plus maybe some meaningless nursery effect — if you want that, just have a nonbinding approval box or something). So for the system to work, it depends on people voting astrategically. But obviously those people's votes will count less than strategic votes. So range voting's only advantage over approval voting is that it counts the votes of naive voters less. How is that fair?

I think the Range Voting comparison with Condorcet is rigged; you'll notice they never provide any explanation for why their supposedly strategic Condorcet behavior is actually strategic. And the only strategic Condorcet behavior Poundstone provides is trying to create a tie to force it into sequential dropping, which seems wildly implausible in a real-life scenario. So it still seems Condorcet outperforms them all.

132. [If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?](#)

I really enjoyed this book. It starts with a simple thought experiment: imagine you had a long-lost identical twin who grew up in a conservative home and became a conservative. You, by contrast, grew up in a liberal home and became a liberal. Wouldn't meeting him make you question your beliefs? And thus, shouldn't the possibility that you *could* meet him make you question your beliefs? (I'm not totally convinced by this; my beliefs are much more shaken by converts — people who were strong believers in X but converted to believing in Y.)

From this, Cohen heads to a reminiscence of his own upbringing, which I found especially touching, perhaps because he has the identity I wish I had: a Canadian communist in an antireligious Yiddish-speaking home. In the middle there's a good bit on Hegel, Marx, and why not to heighten the contradictions, and he concludes by refuting Rawls with the same argument Matt Yglesias used on Kent Conrad: Rawls says that in a just society, everyone would embrace the Difference Principle, but the Difference Principle allows for differences because some people will work harder if they get more, but if those people embrace the principle then why wouldn't they give their money to the poor and embrace egalitarianism? He ends by addressing the title question and accepting a sort of Yglesian approach to politics: an overriding concern with the structure of political institutions, but also a strong sense of moral demands for people to achieve the best they can within existing structures.

Finally, it got me wondering: a lot of Marx (and, I would add, Keynes) thinks about the future as some sort of society where industrial products give us abundance and economic laws loosen their hold on us. The indus-

trial revolution didn't do that, but perhaps the post-scarcity technological future might?

And my first book of the new year is Daniel Ellsberg's *Secrets*, which I'm already loving.