

BOOK REVIEWS/RECENSIONS

Aiming to Explain: Theories of Policy Change and Canadian Gun Control

B. Timothy Heinmiller and Matthew A. Hennigar, University of Toronto Press, 2022

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Aiming to Explain offers a contradictory analysis of five theoretical frameworks in the realm of Canadian firearms policymaking. Rather than attempting to synthesize a singular “super-theory” of policymaking, the authors use a combination of qualitative and quantitative research to create a tailored evaluation of each theory’s explanatory power. The book’s methodological rigour provides a nuanced exploration of the interplay between theory and practice, underpinning its contribution to the literature on public policy development and Canadian gun control.

The authors’ self-imposed criteria for selecting theoretical frameworks required portability to Canadian policymaking, a *prima facie* chance of explaining Canadian firearms policy and a “scientific” basis that was “empirically based and causally orientated” (p. 13). This set of criteria yielded five theories: rational choice institutionalism (RCI), the social construction framework (SCF), the advocacy coalition framework (ACF), the multiple streams framework (MSF), and punctuated equilibrium theory (PET). The authors’ sidelining of the explanatory power of critical theories is curious (see pp. 13–14), particularly given the unique sensitivity of criminal justice policymaking to the social structures, power dynamics and ideologies captured by these theories (see Livingstone, 2024). However, drawing on the book’s own approach, I ground this review in what *Aiming to Explain* sets out to accomplish rather than dwelling on what it does not.

The authors’ choice of Canadian firearms policymaking as their analytical showground is commendable. Empirically, the book provides a welcome remit from the comparative neglect of criminal justice policy within studies of Canadian policymaking. Additionally, as the authors point out, Canadian firearms policy presents a natural sphere for a contradictory analysis of the selected theories: it is sufficiently entwined with Canada’s societal values and political debate to make it fertile ground for fruitful examination, but it is not uniquely beholden to any of the five theories’ underlying rationale. Although the varied ontological assumptions and fundamental purposes of each theory ultimately limit the authors’ ability to directly compare the five theories, this “Goldilocks Zone” of case selection bolsters the authors’ ability to provide a fair and rigorous testing ground for each theory, affording an extremely effective side-by-side comparison of what each attempts to explain and how each succeeds and falters in its application.

In addition to its welcomed empirical contributions to the field of Canadian firearms policy, the book’s greatest contribution is its clear and well-structured application of each theoretical framework. The authors provide comprehensive reviews of each theory’s foundational premises, operational mechanisms, and scope of application. Through careful exposition, the authors test the explanatory power of the theories in a way that marks it as a valuable resource for students and practitioners of public policy while also remaining accessible to a wider audience. The findings, which reveal both the conditional success and limitations of each theory, emphasize the critical role of context, scope and methodological fit in the analysis of policy change. Additionally, the authors’ refusal to conform to a singular theoretical perspective

provides a striking commentary on the multifaceted nature of policymaking. Overall, the authors' framework demystifies complex theoretical concepts and invites readers to engage with the material in a way that is both informative and thought-provoking.

Aiming to Explain presents as a must-read for scholars and practitioners interested in policy processes, Canadian politics and the issue of Canadian gun control. The authors' work is a testament to the value of rigorous, theory-driven analysis. While the book's broad scope occasionally challenges the reader's ability to maintain focused engagement with each theory's application, its overall contribution to the field is undeniable. Overall, their study advances our theoretical understanding of policy processes and contradictory analyses while also offering rich insights into the dynamics of Canadian firearms policy, making it a significant resource for both theorists and policymakers alike.

Competing interests. The authors declare none.

Reference

Livingstone, A. M. 2024. "Racism Versus Culture: Competing Interpretations of Racial Inequality in Canadian Public Policy." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 47 (6), 1329–50.

The Peace by Romeo Dallaire

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Lt. General Romeo Dallaire, a Canadian icon, who knows more about the “worst of humanity” than anyone should, penned yet another deeply personal, meaningful and, at times, even poetic account of not only his experience in Rwanda, but his personal transformation and renewed sense of hope. Published on April 2nd, 2024, or mere days before “Kwibuka 30”¹, or the 30th anniversary of the beginning of the genocide in Rwanda, this account is about the author's journey of rediscovering his own “humanness.” As he notes, “the warrior in me had to give way to the human” (pg. 173). His original “intention was to come up with ... a new conceptual framework for conflict prevention ...” but that the journey “has become a spiritual quest” (pg. 231-2).

Armed with a plethora of insights, the author offers vivid glimpses into the dynamics of statecraft, global North-South relations, military leadership and affairs and the effects of institutional permanence and change in global affairs. The key premise of the book is that since the dawn of contemporary global relations—or since the end of the Second World War, but more specifically the end of the Cold War—global relations have become, and are still becoming, more and more complex. Yet, humanity is “mired in the same vices ... using the same tools that” (pg. 101) perpetuate age-old realities, such as wars. What really is the culprit, in the author's mind, is unbridled self-interest.

In this very accessible book, organized into short chapters, the author uses imagery from Dante's *Divine Comedy* to chart his personal transformation. In the first section, the author recounts the dynamics through which the genocide took place in Rwanda, and the ways in which it was enabled to take place due to institutional failures—domestically and internationally. In part two, Dallaire shows why humanity has not embraced change. At times he even strikes a poetic tone borrowing a line from *Macbeth* for example, when noting that some of the “multilateral” tools used in the 1990s “were merely sounds and fury, signifying nothing” (pg. 106). In this very vivid, descriptive and analytical account of stagnation, or “purgatory,”