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Doing Theory Realistically Dietrich Rueschemeyer, *Usable Theory: Analytical Tools for Social and Political Research* (Princeton/Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2009).

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DOING THEORY REALISTICALLY*

USABLE THEORY IS like sensible shoes: less sexy than the high heels of methodological purism, but functional and convenient for long walks in the empirical mud of the real world. The book is a paragon of reasonability and moderation, and it is not least this that makes it so interesting and indeed extraordinary. It is on method, but in a way that is far from the *Methodenterror* of standard methods textbooks. Reading it we learn as much about society and social theory as we learn about the logic of inference or the nature of theory as such. The book is radically middle-of-the-road, in every respect: it adheres to rational choice, but only to a moderate version with which no reasonable person can disagree; it concedes that sociology is less theoretically advanced than one might want it to be, but at the same time insists that theory, even general-causal-predictive theory, remains a realistic objective; and it is also adamant that sociology-as-is is much better than it is often said to be.

Rather than dictating to practicing sociologists what they are to do or not to do, Rueschemeyer offers constructive suggestions as to how they can do better what they are doing anyway, not by applying fancy principles, but by building on and learning from the accumulated achievements of their discipline. Instead of giving up on sociological theory, Rueschemeyer suggests that we lower the demands we make on it, so we can recognize the very real beauty that already exists. Rather than top-down, theory-building à la Rueschemeyer proceeds bottom-up: from the rich fount of empirical research and theoretical insight that has over the decades been produced by sociological scholarship. In short, this is a methods book for the sociologist, not the methodologist; it is constructive rather than forbidding; it encourages pragmatic experimentation instead of preaching dogmatic prescriptions; it teaches by examples, illustrations, and summaries of substantive results of sociological research – and is, not to forget, a pleasure to read.

The argument of the book is built on a three-fold lead distinction, separating “full-fledged theories” described as “logically integrated sets of hypotheses with definite empirical implications” from “comprehensive

* About Dietrich RUESCHEMEYER, *Usable Theory: Analytical Tools for Social and Political Research* (Princeton/Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2009).

theoretical orientations”, or “frameworks”, and those from “focused theory frames”. It is the latter that the book considers eminently “usable” as analytical tools, and it is to clarifying their nature and demonstrating their general usefulness that the book, and in particular its first chapter, “Analytic Tools for Social and Political Research”, is devoted. Rueschemeyer defines his terms and makes his case preferably by example, displaying in doing so enviable erudition in the literature of the discipline. Merton and Stinchcombe come in as sages on theory and method, and Skocpol and Moore, together with Stephens and Rueschemeyer himself, as role models for how to do empirical work. Theory frames are described as falling “short of presenting (or implying logically) a full range of testable empirical propositions” (p. 27, Footnote 1) (pp. 12-17) while building on past research, thereby providing for some degree of knowledge accumulation; coming “in clusters”, making it possible to “imagine a nesting of frames that leads from comprehensive orientations to ever more specific and efficient frames for the analysis of particular problems”; settling, to some extent, “the old problem of induction”, by making it possible to derive new hypotheses from empirical observation; being “open to revision”, due to their high flexibility and loose logical coupling; and providing welcome “openings for do-it-yourself theorizing”, which for Rueschemeyer clearly is the most important activity of practicing sociologists.

Usable Theory has fourteen chapters, in addition to its introduction and a “Conclusion” that summarizes what we should have learned after reading the book. This is a lot, but Rueschemeyer writes well and is never boring. Chapter II develops the most general of “frames”, the notion of social action. The four chapters that follow deal with “Knowledge”, “Norms”, “Preferences” and “Emotions”, *i.e.*, with agency and the micro-level. Their sequence is concluded by a chapter revisiting, interestingly, G. C. Homans’ *The Human Group*. The subsequent chapter is titled “Midpoint”; it summarizes the discussion so far and leads on to seven chapters devoted to macro-sociological “frames”, namely: “Aggregations”, “Collective Action”, “Power and Cooperation”, “Institutions”, “Social Identities”, “Macrocontexts”, and “Cultural Explanations”.

Rather than abstracting a general message from a set of chapters that give us good reasons to beware of excessive generalization, not to mention defining “focused theory frames” more sharply than their discoverer, I will rely on Rueschemeyer’s method of argument by example and briefly report what he has to say about two select themes on which this reviewer feels less incompetent than on the others: collective action and institutions. As to the former, the relevant chapter

(Chapter X, pp. 168-182) sets out from Olson's seminal insight on the fundamental gap between individual interests and collective aspirations, a gap that makes it systematically difficult to get individuals to act together with others in pursuit of goods that, even though highly desired by everybody, are collective in nature. Rueschemeyer reviews Olson's argument, paying his respect to its rational choice core, but then goes on to show why it is "too restrictive" to account for important phenomena in the real world. Based on the more than thirty years of sociological research after the appearance of *The Logic of Collective Action*, Rueschemeyer points to the proven capacity of moral and ideological commitments to suspend rational-economic incentives to free-ride. In walking through the literature, he lists the known conditions under which such suspension may be effective while being conscious of the possibility that they may exhaust themselves at some point, reinstating the basic Olsonian "logic". By introducing one qualification and distinction after the other, also in relation to the concept of rationality (Footnote 2), Rueschemeyer turns Olson's predictive "theory" into one of his empirically grounded "focused theory frames" from which he derives empirically testable propositions on when collective action may be more or less likely. This is a deeply revisionist program that, for all the modifications it introduces, lets the original theory stand as a powerful force operating in the background of a wide variety of social contexts. Factors like group size, group structure, group heterogeneity, leadership, the formation of social movements and the like are reviewed in turn; emotions and normative commitments are allowed in to add more "complications". For example, Albert Hirschman's discovery, no doubt based on his personal experience in the resistance against Nazi Germany, is recalled, to the effect that joining with others to do something that one deeply believes is good for all can be "pleasurable, in fact intoxicating, in itself" (p. 176). The chapter ends in a summary exposition of what Rueschemeyer calls "the inherent ambiguity of collective action" and in a "conclusion" that pulls together what one could call a constructive critique, based on empirical evidence, of a theory that may be unable to predict but instead can inspire practical research and theorizing.

On to institutions. Rueschemeyer starts with Hall and Taylor's "three institutionalisms", paying tribute on the way to Stinchcombe's "old institutionalism" and "such giants of an integrated historical social science as Gustav Schmoller, Otto Hintze, and Max Weber" (p. 205). For my taste, he is a bit soft on "rational choice institutionalism". He does, however, nicely explore the overlaps and complementarities between the three strands of ("neo-") institutionalist reasoning,

while at the end concluding, rightly I believe, that they remain “alternative theory frames” (p. 210). Rueschemeyer then goes on to develop his own conceptualization of institutions as “norms with teeth”, and of societies as configurations of institutions that, unlike in Parsonian functionalism, are not normally and necessarily free of “contradictions, contamination, and tensions” (p. 211). Following this, Rueschemeyer explores varieties of institutions and the way they cluster, normally, into incoherent social systems; discusses what institutions do (their functions, in other words), reminding the reader that they standardize behavior (although never completely), provide societies with legitimate organizational forms and facilitate collective action and cooperation, among other things. Again rational choice serves as a baseline that is modified by introducing and taking seriously beliefs, preferences, norms, and emotions. A number of truly brilliant paragraphs are devoted to the issue of institutional design vs. institutional emergence, in part following and concisely summarizing work by Paul Pierson. The conclusion confirms the conciliatory, peace-making spirit of the book in that it suggests using the different concepts of institution “jointly as a single theory frame, if a somewhat kaleidoscopic one”, which seems a little out of line with the author’s position earlier in the chapter. (But, of course, theory frames are supposed to be “flexible”!) In any case, Rueschemeyer urges his readers not to waste time on deploring the unsettled state of conceptualizations in the field. Rather than continuing “with well-known meta-theoretical polemics”, he advises us “to accept, at least for the time being, a deficit in systemic elegance” and “use the current richness in orienting ideas to best effect in theoretically oriented research” (p. 227).

Dietrich Rueschemeyer’s approach to methodology and theory-building is a humane one: it speaks to practicing sociologists enthusiastic about sociology and interested in sociological theory, rather than to methodologists. The demands it makes on the theoretical rigor of sociological work are such that they can actually be fulfilled. Nobody needs to be ashamed of himself or his discipline after reading the book; in fact serious sociologists can feel much appreciated and encouraged. By assigning the book to students, we can provide them with well-argued reasons to invest above all in profound knowledge of their field of empirical research and what the sociological tradition has to say about it. Working through the book, students will learn that those who rely on empirically inspired intuition supported by respectful appreciation of the state of sociological art cannot completely go wrong. Theory-building, they will begin to understand, is a collective-communitarian

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exercise, and it proceeds gradually. No need for anyone to reinvent sociology anew from scratch; and no need at all to succumb to the physics envy cultivated by professional methodologists. Theories are tools, methodology tells us how to use them to understand what we see in the world, and there really is nothing mysterious about sociology-as-science. Just do it!

W O L F G A N G S T R E E C K