Review Essay/Essai bibliographique

Imagining Sociological Theory

Charles Turner, *Investigating Sociological Theory*. London & Los Angeles: Sage, 2010, 216 pp. $US 42.95 paper (978-1-84920-375-3), $US 99.95 hardcover (978-1-84920-374-6)

Conceptually rigorous, rich in content, grounded in wide and deep reading, thoughtfully written and judicious, Charles Turner's new book is a major addition to sociological theory. Even its limitations are instructive.

Sociology, says Turner, is "understood here as a mode of encounter with the social world and a mode or orientation within that world." Sociological *theory* is "the articulation of the moves, problems and themes that arise in connection with this encounter." Theory requires the cultivation of distance from social life and the refinement of perspectives on it that augment, rather than debunk, everyday understanding. Theorists are people who offer conceptual tools to expedite this task and these in turn express a writer's attitude of mind and "intellectual style."

Turner divides *Investigating Sociological Theory* into seven substantive chapters: on classic and canon, description, categories, metaphors, diagrams, cynicism and skepticism as intellectual styles, and sociological theory and the art of living. While all of the chapters discuss in some way the linkages between conceptual tools and styles of thought, the first five focus mainly on the former whereas the last two deal chiefly with the latter. The distinctiveness of this organizing framework is plain. Most books on sociological theory are a parade of schools of thought, of traditions, or of authors. A thematic approach to sociological theory cutting through all of the above is rare.

In the opening chapter on "Classic and Canon," Turner argues that no canon in sociology exists because sociology is neither closed nor inherently dogmatic. But classics are real and vital. They are works with intellectual authority, aesthetic power, and "foundationality" — meaning that they make a basic statement that is exciting enough to induce emulation by other sociologists. Classics are also inexhaustible. Unlike texts

for which one reading suffices, classics invite constant re-reading and reappraisal. All this, of course, we knew already. Turner goes further. In the chapter on "Description" he says that classic authors are those who combine, at a high cognitive level, formal and substantive theorizing. That is, they offer both "conceptual devices on the basis of which further investigation may take place" (Parsons's pattern variables and AGIL schema, Weber's ideal type method, Mary Douglas's grid and group, etc.) and systematic accounts of the social world that tie together substantive phenomena such as religion and the economy, conflict and cohesion, identity and difference. Authors who focus entirely on substantive and localized areas of investigation — say, education, science, the family, risk — or who offer cultural diagnosis without a corresponding methodology are unlikely ever to attain classic status. Their work may be provocative in the short term but it will never be fertile enough to nourish a research tradition. Turner's analysis enables us to grasp why writers we personally deem great may be forever debarred from the classical pantheon. Consider Raymond Aron. On my estimation, his work dwarfs that of his protégé, the power-obsessed Pierre Bourdieu, in subtlety, breadth, and angularity. But Aron's aversion to formulating a suite of concepts for sociology, together with the cautious, un-dogmatic cast of his mind, creates major difficulties for the appropriation of his oeuvre. In contrast, Bourdieu's ultra-formulaic sociology of *habitus, field, doxa, symbolic violence* etc., is easy to absorb, easy to apply, easy to recycle, and gives enthusiasts a single key to every door. It is exhilarating to believe that one has understood events in advance of their happening.

Among the very best chapters in Turner's book are those on "Metaphors" and on "Cynicism and Skepticism" as intellectual styles. Metaphors and similes are integral to theorizing. They exist as words or phrases ("liquid modernity," "the iron cage," "panopticon," "social capital") or as the guiding thread of an entire discourse ("system," "drama," "organism," "game"). Either way, they help energize an argument by establishing productive connections between objects and ideas that are otherwise dissimilar. Something that is poorly understood in one domain of enquiry is clarified figuratively by comparing it to something better understood in another. Yet, as Turner shows, metaphors can succeed or fail, endure or collapse, depending on the fecundity of the image evoked and the author's talent in exploiting it. Dramaturgy is an example of a theoretical approach with enormous revelatory potential, at least in the hands of a master such as Erving Goffman. In contrast, the cloakroom community and caravan site metaphors summoned in Zygmunt Bauman's interpretation of liquid modernity are of limited utility. As soon as one tries to extend them, the imagery becomes stale, the dic-

tion forced. Of special importance in sociology, and the human sciences more generally, is the metaphorical dualism between depth and surface: latent and manifest functions, unconscious and conscious mind, base and superstructure, interests and values, values and interests. The inexorable result of this distinction is to "rob surface phenomena of their significance" as they become residual, epiphenomenal, parasitic. Some of the best modern theorists have opposed this approach, denying that what is putatively deeper is therefore generative and focusing instead on rule governed realities that are explicable in their own right. Each of these realities — politics, sexuality, morality, economics, social life — are governed by logics that are internal to them or boundaries that establish their specificity. These are the life-orders that Max Weber and Carl Schmitt wrote about. Or they comprise the public, private and social domains that Hannah Arendt articulated. Such writers are perfectly aware of, indeed assiduously document, the effect of these orders on each other. But none of them is archeologically deeper in a causal sense.

Depth metaphors are especially attractive to the thought style Turner dubs "cynicism," an approach he contrasts with skepticism. The distinction is between theorists who relentlessly debunk human ideals, re-describing them as camouflage of particular interests, and theorists who believe that human ideals are too complex, too mercurial, and too conflicting to be debunked. The cynic is a misanthrope who will liberate us from illusion. He views everything elevated as "a vehicle for baser motives;" the putatively majestic is in fact banal and squalid. The skeptic notes human weakness, admires human greatness, is moved by the ineradicable pathos of events, and believes that liberation is itself an illusion because the "gap between intention and fulfillment can never be closed."

One way of closing it, or seeking to do so, is through creating one's own utopia, the subject of "Sociological Theory and the Art of Living," the last, and for this reviewer the least cogent chapter. Utopias are, for Turner, not dreamscapes to straighten the crooked timber of humanity or exemplifications of an ideal community or even, as in Robert Nisbet's cheekily titled "new laissez-faire," more robustly free human associations but, rather, idiosyncratic post-community visions of how to live artfully: "strategies and procedures, the techniques and the tools by which an individual orients his or her conduct, and shapes or directs his or life." This rather odd conflation of utopia and self-shaping leads Turner to imply improbably that Weber's "holding fast to ultimate values while acknowledging the tragedy of human existence" is itself a utopian position. In fact, it is an agonistic one. It will only look utopian if utopia is treated so elastically as to lose most of its conceptual boundaries, a theoretical tactic that the meticulous Turner otherwise eschews. Other

utopian models examined by Turner are Alfred Schutz's Well-Informed Citizen and Robert Musil's triad of exact living, hypothetical living, and everyday life. Musil's in particular are utopias that have given up on "collective utopian energies."

My complaint against this chapter is not only its conceptual amorphousness (e.g., on p. 170 Turner appears to elide a normative bias with a utopian one) but also the mawkishness to which it leads. Hence, summarizing Musil's utopia of everyday life, Turner says that it may prompt students "to tell their teachers how 'learning' was for them, what they learned from the process through which they learned how to learn, and to blog their way into the future." I almost expected a footnoted disclaimer from the publisher: "The author's views are his own and should in no way be taken to imply Sage's endorsement of post-coital theorizing between teacher and student." It is also worth noting that utopian postures often impoverish thought rather than make it richer or more nuanced. A case in point is the near ubiquitous use of the term "progressive" in sociological writing that claims political relevance. At a stroke, populations are divided into the enlightened and the benighted. Hence Americans who are proud of their nation's armed forces; who are Tea Party supporters; who believe same-sex marriage has downsides for children and for religious freedom; who favor cultural assimilation; who would vote for Paul Ryan in preference to Barack Obama; and who prefer Bill O'Reilly to Katie Couric, FoxNews to CBS; people like this — or, more precisely, attitudes and orientations like this — have no place in the American Sociological Association's Public Sociology except as objects of incredulity and re-education. The modern sociological imagination, it transpires, is woefully lacking a political counterpart.

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The cheapest shot in textual criticism is to tax a book for what it does not attempt to do. Let us, then, recall Turner's enterprise: to discuss the nature, scope and purpose of various tools and styles of theorizing. Yet if a basic task of sociological theory is to animate sociology, and a basic task of sociology is to explain social life, then it is legitimate to ask how theory itself might illuminate the social tendencies and conundrums that sociology documents. Let me offer a suggestion intended to augment Turner's analysis.

In his chapter on "Categories," Turner recounts how categories — classificatory, dialectical and ideal-typical — "are the most basic devices we have for making a world." A later chapter on "Diagrams" shows how categorization takes graphic form. Category collision, I suggest, is evident in the European imbroglio over the full-face veil known as the *burqa* or *niqab* (to be distinguished from the *hijab* or head scarf). The Pew

Global Attitudes Project conducted in April and May of 2010 showed majorities of respondents in France (of course) but also Spain, Germany and Britain wishing to ban the burqa and niqab. What explains a generalized annoyance that encompasses far more than traditional French *laicité*? The conventional and thoroughly unsociological answer is Islamophobia. Sociological theory points elsewhere. In tribal and Muslim cultures of the Middle East, the full veiling of women in public is normal and, as such, unobtrusive and unobjectionable to those who see it. It epitomizes a certain view of women's public capacities and obligations as categorically different to those of men's. Women's faces and the contours of their bodies are sights restricted to the domestic sphere. Conversely, in non-tribal and non-Muslim cultures, "face-work" is fundamental to social interaction and applies to males and females alike. The face is, after all, the most important sign-vehicle of human emotions. To cover a face, we think, is to mask it. To mask it is to disguise it. In Goffman's terms the burqa is an involvement shield. Even if we can see the eyes of the facially covered woman, as with the niqab, we may not be able to see the frame that gives her glance meaning: the forehead, the eyebrows, the mouth and the cheeks that, in various combinations of muscular movement or fixity, impart emotional information to the viewer. Somatic communication between interactants is thus impeded. I see your face, and thereby intuit your emotions, but you can't see mine. In the absence of reciprocity, solidarity is unlikely to materialize. Indignation takes its place. Visibility is also fundamental to Western notions of ethics and citizenship. This expectation is strongly registered in our ideas of moral appraisal (consider the role played by the "spectator" in Adam Smith and Kant's theories of judgment) and our most potent democratic/republican vocabulary and metaphors: enlightenment, openness, transparency, illumination, lucidity, recognition, social legibility, accountability, "publicity" and, not least, public. Negating these images are opacity, the Dark Ages, the dark arts, dark times, heart of darkness, id, living in the closet, a shadowy realm, a troglodyte world (Paul Fussell's depiction of World War I trench warfare), cave-like illusion, Stygian gloom, moral blindness, concealment, inscrutability, subterfuge, murkiness, obscurantism, and backroom deals — notions which variously imply states of ignorance, menace and deceit. It is, I venture, the categorical dissonance between the expectations of maximally visible citizens and the behaviour of occluded ones that is the likely source of discomfiture about the full veil, not fear or loathing of Muslims as such.

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When, occasionally, Turner seeks to typify his own style of theorizing he invokes the idea of "theoretical liberalism" (pp. 3–4, 87–88).

What might this mean? In the spirit of Max Weber and Isaiah Berlin, Turner says that the liberal is a person who is aware that the great values of justice, freedom, equality, beauty, and truth are impossible to weave into one seamless cloth. Life is intrinsically, not contingently, out of joint. As an approach to sociology, Turner continues, liberalism is the recognition of theoretical plurality and selectivity. Concepts restrict our vision by the very focus they give it. The grander the sociological theory, the more one can be sure of the swathes of experience it ignores. A choice among perspectives is inevitable and it is not the only valid choice. Turner's counsel also reminds me of Philip Rieff's worry in *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist* (1959: xi) that the "days of liberal culture are numbered, its true life over, when it can incorporate no new and hostile insights." Theoretical liberalism, by contrast, I take to be an attitude that is curious, open-minded, fastidious, and serious. It is an attitude unimpressed by scholarly fashion. It is an attitude that insists on intellectual independence. It is, in short, an attitude that enlivens almost every page of Turner's enquiry. Its last sentence fittingly urges students and teachers to "keep reading." For those unfamiliar with Turner's new book, I add: put *Investigating Sociological Theory* at the top of your reading list.

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