CHAPTER THREE

SOCIAL THEORY AS PRACTICE

In this chapter and the next, I want to argue that we could gain a great deal by examining our theorizing about social matters as a *practice*. My claim is that the activities of searching for, creating, espousing and rejecting theories are too little understood, and that they are far from being unproblematic, as we often assume in our concern to focus on the *content* of our theories.

Moreover, I want to maintain that gaining clarity about the practice of theorizing will help us to understand more about the scope and validity of our theories. Being more reflectively clear about what we do in our theoretical activity will help us to answer questions which we cannot even properly pose as long as we remain convinced that social theory is a straightforward matter of designing hypotheses and comparing them to the facts.[1]

In particular, I hope to throw light on two important questions in what follows. The first concerns how we validate social theories. The second starts from the answer to the first and asks what is involved in offering a theoretical account of societies very different from our own.

I

What makes the whole matter appear unproblematical to us is the hold of what I want to call the natural science model, the widespread view that the natural sciences can provide us with paradigms for the methods and procedures of social science. We *think* we understand the activity of exploring nature. Here, too, we are certainly over-complacent. But we tell ourselves a tolerably clear story of what goes on in natural science, and the very success of our research seems to indicate that we have here the

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[1] I realize that there are important points of convergence between the views I'm defending here and the thesis of Pierre Bourdieu in his very interesting book, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977), but he has a somewhat different starting point and works within a different tradition.

norm for science in general. The prestige of this norm then stops further enquiry.

But this is in fact disastrous. I want to try to show this first by examining the relation of theory to practice, that is, of the practice of theorizing to the other practices which theory guides. Let us look first at the model the natural sciences offer of this relation.

Let us take the example of physical theory. This gives us, among other things, a picture of underlying mechanisms or processes which explain the causal properties and powers of the things we are familiar with. We know that the kettle will heat up in contact with the fire; the kinetic theory will tell us what underlies this heat transmission, so that we understand it as consisting more fundamentally in a transfer of kinetic energy. But in some cases, the picture of the underlying reality turns out to be surprising, or strange, or paradoxical, in the light of our ordinary common-sense understanding of things. We have to adopt quite a radically revised view about the nature of things to explain what goes on.

But part of what is involved in having a better theory is being able more effectively to cope with the world. We are able to intervene successfully to effect our purposes in a way that we were not before. Just as our common-sense pre-understanding was in part a knowing how to cope with the things around us, so the explanatory theory which partly replaces and extends it must give us some of what we need to cope better. Theory relates to practice in an obvious way. We apply our knowledge of the underlying mechanisms in order to manipulate more effectively the features of our environment.

There is a constant temptation to take natural science theory as a model for social theory: that is, to see theory as offering an account of underlying processes and mechanisms of society, and as providing the basis of a more effective planning of social life. But for all the superficial analogies, social theory can never really occupy this role. It is part of a significantly different activity.

There is, of course, an analogy. Social theory is also concerned with finding a more satisfactory fundamental description of what is happening. The basic question of all social theory is in a sense: what is really going on? We have to ask this question because our common-sense descriptions of what is happening are inadequate, or sometimes even illusory. They fail to give us an explanatory grip on our situation, or to help us act effectively. And the answers offered by theory can be surprising, strange, even shocking to common-sense.

But the big disanalogy with natural science lies in the nature of the

common-sense understanding that theory challenges, replaces or extends. There is always a pre-theoretical understanding of what is going on among the members of a society, which is formulated in the descriptions of self and other which are involved in the institutions and practices of that society. A society is among other things a set of institutions and practices, and these cannot exist and be carried on without certain self-understandings.

Take the practice of deciding things by majority vote. It carries with it certain standards, of valid and invalid voting, and valid and invalid results, without which it would not be the practice that it is. For instance, it is understood that each participant makes an independent decision. If one can dictate to the others how they vote, we all understand that *this* practice is not being properly carried out. The point of it is to concatenate a social decision out of individual decisions. So only certain kinds of interaction are legitimate. This norm of individual independence is, one might say, constitutive of the practice.

But then those who carry on this practice must, in general and for the most part, be aware of this norm and of its application to their own action. As they vote, they will generally be capable of describing what is going on in terms like these: 'this is a valid vote', or 'there is something dubious about that', or 'that's foul play'. These descriptions may of course be mistaken; but the point is that awareness of this kind is an essential condition for a population's engaging in this practice. If no one involved had any sense of how their behaviour checked out on this dimension, then they would not be engaged in *voting*. They would have to be carrying on some other activity which involved marking papers, some game that we do not yet understand.

In this way, we say that the practices which make up a society require certain self-descriptions on the part of the participants. These self-descriptions can be called constitutive. And the understanding formulated in these can be called pre-theoretical, not in the sense that it is necessarily uninfluenced by theory, but in that it does not rely on theory. There may be no systematic formulation of the norms, and the conception of man and society which underlies them. The understanding is implicit in our ability to apply the appropriate descriptions to particular situations and actions.

In a sense, we could say that social theory arises when we try to formulate explicitly what we are doing, describe the activity which is central to a practice, and articulate the norms which are essential to it. We could imagine a society where people decided things by majority vote, and

had a lively sense of what was fair and foul, but had not yet worked out explicitly the norm of individual independence and its rationale in the context of the practice. In one clear sense, their doing so would amount to a step into theory.

But in fact the framing of theory rarely consists simply of making some continuing practice explicit. The stronger motive for making and adopting theories is the sense that our implicit understanding is in some way crucially inadequate or even wrong. Theories do not just make our constitutive self-understandings explicit, but extend, or criticize or even challenge them. It is in this sense that theory makes a claim to tell us what is really going on, to show us the real, hitherto unidentified course of events.

We can distinguish some of the forms this kind of claim can take: it may be that we see what is really going on only when we situate what we are doing in a causal matrix which we had not seen or understood. Marx's theory provides a classic example of this kind of claim: the proletarian is engaged in making contracts with independent owners of capital to exchange his labour power for wages. What he fails to see is that the process in which he so engages by contract is building the entrepreneur as owner of capital, and entrenching his own status as an agent without other recourse than selling his labour for subsistence. What looks like an activity between independent agents is actually part of a process which attributes to these agents their relative positions and status.

In this case, the constitutive self-understanding which is upset is that which belongs to the activity of making and fulfilling contracts between independent agents. On one level, this self-understanding is not wrong; and it is certainly constitutive of a capitalist society in Marx's view. That is, workers have to understand themselves as free labourers in order to be proletarians. But when we see it in the broader matrix, its significance is in an important way reversed. What seemed a set of independent actions are now seen as determined and forced. What seemed like one's making the best of a bad job now is seen as a yoke imposed on one.

But the Marxist theory also upsets the political self-understanding described above, that of decision by majority vote in 'bourgeois' society. For in fact the matrix of the capitalist economy severely restricts the choices open. Options which reduce profitability threaten everyone with economic decline, and potential mass unemployment. These severe limits will in general mean that the very options which are offered to voters will be pre-shrunk, as it were, to be compatible with the continued unhampered operation of the capitalist economy. So once again, what looks like

a collective decision freely compounded out of the autonomous indi-
vidual choices is in fact structurally determined. Or so the story goes
according to this theory.

This is one kind of claim, which alters or even overturns our ordinary
everyday understanding, on the grounds that our action takes place in an
unperceived causal context, and that this gives it a quite different nature.
But there are also theories which challenge ordinary self-understanding
and claim that our actions have a significance we do not recognize. But
this is not in virtue of an unperceived causal context, but because of what
one could call a moral context to which we are allegedly blind.

Plato's picture of the decay of the polis in the Republic provides a
well-known example of this: what seems like the competition of equals
for place and fame is in fact a fatal abandonment of moral order, engen-
dering a chaos which cannot but deepen until it must be brought to an end
in tyranny. The inner connection between democracy and tyranny is
hidden from the participating citizen, because he cannot understand his
action against the background of the true order of things. He just
stumbles from one to the other.

In our day, there are a number of theories of this kind abroad. We can
think on one hand of Freudian-influenced theories, which portray the real
motivations of political actors, and the real sources of political power
and prestige quite differently from the rational, instrumental, utilitarian
forms of justification that we usually provide for our choices and allegi-
ances. Or think on the other side of the picture often presented by oppo-
nents of the culture of growth: we blind ourselves to the importance to us
of a harmony with nature and community in order the more effectively to
sacrifice these to economic progress. Indeed, some of the most influential
of these theories critical of growth find their roots in Plato. We have only
to think of the late E. F. Schumacher.

Critical theories of this kind often propound some conception of false
consciousness. That is, they see the blindness in question as not just
ignorance, but in some sense motivated, even wilful. This is not to say that
theories which portray our action as taking place in a broader causal
context cannot also invoke false consciousness. Marxism is a case in
point. They must do so to the extent that the causal context is one that
ought normally to be evident, so that its non-perception is something we
have to explain. But this need for a special explanation of non-perception
becomes the more obvious when what we allegedly fail to appreciate is
the moral or human significance of our action.

There is a particular kind of theory which is sometimes invoked to

challenge our everyday understanding that I would like to single out here, because it will be important in the later discussion. Theories of this kind refer to what I will call shared goods. By 'shared good', I mean something different and stronger than mere convergent good, where people may have a common interest in something. A good is shared when part of what makes it a good is precisely that it is shared, that is, sought after and cherished in common. Thus the inhabitants of a river valley have a common interest in preventing floods. This is to say that each one has an interest in the same flood prevention, and this is so irrespective of whether they have some common understanding of it, or indeed, whether they form a community at all. By contrast, shared goods are essentially of a community; their common appreciation is constitutive of them.

The well-known example is the one central to the tradition of civic humanism, the citizen republic. This takes its character from its law; so that the citizen's action takes on a crucial significance by its relation to the laws: whether it tends to preserve them, or undermine them, to defend them from external attack, or to weaken them before enemies, and so on. But the good here is essentially shared. The laws are significant not *qua* mine, but *qua* ours; what gives them their importance for me is not that they are a rule *I* have adopted. The culture in which this could confer importance is a quite different one, a culture of individual responsibility, perhaps even incompatible with that of the republic. Rather the laws are important because they are *ours*. And this cannot simply mean, of course, that our private rules converge on them; their being ours is a matter of our recognizing them as such together, in public space. In other words, that the significance is shared is a crucial part of what is significant here. Public space is a crucial category for republics, as Rousseau saw.

Some theorists in our tradition have taken shared goods seriously. They include, I believe, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Rousseau, de Tocqueville; in our day, Arendt and Habermas, to mention just two. A rather diverse lot. But a central notion they share is that having important meanings in common puts us on a different footing with each other, and allows us to operate as a society in a radically different way. The thinkers of the civic humanist tradition were interested in how men could become capable of acting together in a spontaneously self-disciplining way, the secret of the strength of republics. Machiavelli, indeed, saw this as the secret of strength in the most direct and crude military terms. But the general insight shared by all thinkers of this cast is that

our way of acting together is qualitatively different when we act out of shared significance. This is the basis of what Hannah Arendt called 'power', attempting to redefine the term in the process.

This can be the basis for a challenge to our everyday understanding, where this takes on an atomist cast, as it frequently does in contemporary Western society. People often tend to construe the political process, for instance, as constituted by actions for purely individual goals. The only common goods recognized are convergent. Society is understood as the interaction of individual agents. This self-understanding is challenged by theories of shared goods, with the claim that our actions also take place in a context of shared ends, which our everyday conception does not acknowledge. What we do may strengthen or undermine our shared goods, but this significance of our action escapes us. So that we can, for instance, be in process of destroying our republican political community blindly. The destructive import of our action is lost on us. Of course, this kind of theory can appear paradoxical, since it seems to be supposing that some goods which are shared are not fully perceived. But I hope to show later on how this paradox can be resolved, and that a theory of this kind must be taken quite seriously.

In any case, we have seen several ways in which theory can claim to tell us what is really going on in society, challenging and upsetting our normal self-descriptions, either through identifying an unperceived causal context of our action, or by showing that it has a significance that we fail to appreciate. And I suppose, in order to make this list a trifle less incomplete, I should add that theories are not necessarily as challenging to our self-understanding as the ones I have mentioned here. They can have the function just of clarifying or codifying the significance which is already implicit in our self-descriptions, as I indicated earlier. For instance, some elaborate theory of the order of being, and the related hierarchy of social functions, may fit perfectly into the practices of a stratified society. It may simply codify, or give explicit expression, to the habits of precedence and deference already in being.

And the theories of the causal context can play the same unchallenging role. Since the eighteenth century, our culture is saturated with theories of the economy, which show the train of transactions effecting the production and distribution of goods as following laws. These purport to make us aware of regularities in the social process of which we would otherwise be ignorant. But this knowledge may just complement our self-understanding, not overthrow it. Not all theories of political economy are revolutionary. This was Marx's complaint.

Relative to the 'democratic' picture of ourselves above as deciding matters through majority vote, certain theories of the economy are not at all upsetting. They present us, for instance, with a picture of 'consumer sovereignty', matching in parallel our political image of voter sovereignty. These theories of the economy promise to show us how to design policies which are more effective, which intervene with greater awareness and hence success in the underlying processes of the economy. To do this, as with any application of technology, we have to respect the scientific laws governing this domain. But this is not seen as making a sham of choice, as in the Marxist picture.

II

These theories challenging or not, all claim, to tell us what is really going on. This was the analogy with natural science. But the disanalogy emerges when we see what introducing social theory brings about. The case is different here, because the common-sense view which theory upsets or extends plays a crucial, constitutive role in our practices. This will frequently mean that the alteration in our understanding which theory brings about can alter these practices; so that, unlike with natural science, the theory is not about an independent object, but one that is partly constituted by self-understanding.

Thus a challenging theory can quite undermine a practice, by showing that its essential distinctions are bogus, or have a quite different meaning. What on the 'democratic' picture looks like unconstrained choice is presented as unyielding domination by Marxist theory. But that means that one of the constitutive norms of the practice of majority decision is shown as in principle unfulfillable. The practice is shown to be a sham, a charade. It cannot remain unaffected. People will treat this practice and the connected institutions (e.g., legislatures) very differently if they become convinced of the challenging theory. But this is not a matter of some psychological effect of further information. The disruptive consequences of the theory flow from the nature of the practice, in that one of its constitutive props has been knocked away. This is because the practice requires certain descriptions to make sense, and it is these that the theory undermines.

Theory can also have the radically opposite effect. An interpretation of our predicament can give added point to our practices, or show them to be even more significant than we had thought. This is, for example, the effect of a theory of the chain of being in an hierarchical society. Relative to our 'democratic' picture, some theory which showed that important

economic or other issues are up for grabs, and await our determination, would have the same heightening effect.

But a theory can do more than undermine or strengthen practices. It can shape or alter our way of carrying them out by offering an interpretation of the constitutive norms. Let us start again from our picture of 'democratic' decision by majority rule, the picture which is implicit in our practices of elections and voting. There are a number of ways of understanding this process. We can see this by contrasting two of them.

On one hand, we have an atomist model, which sees society as a locus of collaboration and rivalry between independent agents with their individual goals. Different social arrangements and different dispositions of society's resources affect the plans of members differently. So there is naturally struggle and competition over policy and position. 'Democratic' decision-making allows people equal input and weight in determining how things are disposed, or tolerably near to this. This view might be made more sophisticated, so that we see the political system as open to 'inputs' in the form of 'demands' and 'supports', and as producing as output an 'authoritative allocation of values', in which case we could develop quite a complex intellectual grip to describe/explain the political process.[2]

Quite different from that would be a republican model, issuing from one of the theories of shared goods mentioned above. From this standpoint the atomist theory is ignoring one of the most crucial dimensions of social life, viz., the degree to which the society constitutes a political community, that is, the kind and degree of shared ends. A society in which all goals are really those of individuals, as they are portrayed in the atomist scheme, would be an extreme case, and a degenerate one. It would be a society so fragmented that it was capable of very little common action, and was constantly on the point of stasis or stalemate.

A society strong in its capacity for common action would be one with important shared goods. But to the extent that this was so, the process of common decision would have to be understood differently. It could not just be a matter of how and whose individual demands are fed through to the process of decision, but would also have to be understood at least partly as the process of formulating a common understanding of what was required by the shared goals and values. These are, of course, the two

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[2] David Easton, *The Political System* (New York, 1953), and *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York, 1965).

models of decision that are invoked in the first two books of the *Social Contract*. Rousseau's aim is to show how one can move from the first to the second; so that we no longer ask ourselves severally, what is in our individual interest (our particular will), but rather what is the proper content of the general will. The proper mode of social choice is where the policy selected is agreed upon under the right intentional description. It is vital that it be adopted as the right form of a common purpose, and not as the point of convergence of individual aims. The latter gives us merely *la volonté de tous*, whereas a true community is ruled by its *volonté généralé*.

Rousseau thus presents in very schematic sketch the notion of a certain form of social decision, which for all those thinkers who fall in the civic humanist tradition is seen as normative. Societies fail to have true unity, cohesion, strength to the extent that their decisions emerge from the will of all as against the general will. The immense gap between the atomist and general will theories is thus clear. What the second sees as a defining feature of the degenerate case is understood by the first as a structural feature of all societies. Which is just another way of saying that what is for the second the crucial dimension of variation among societies is quite unrecognized by the first.

But it ought to be clear that the general acceptance of either of these models will have an important effect on the practices of social decision. These practices may be established in certain institutions, which may be the same from society to society, or in the same society over time. But within this similarity, the way of operating these institutions will obviously be very different according to whether one or the other model is dominant, that is, has become the accepted interpretation. Where the atomist model is dominant, decision-making of the general will form will be severely hampered, suppressed and confused. Where on the contrary some self-understanding of common meanings is dominant, the scope for will-of-all decisions will be circumscribed within the bounds of explicit common goals.

Indeed, there might be no quarrel with this point about the effect of these theories. The problem might be seeing why their effect is not greater; why, for instance, the dominance of atomist theories does not put paid to general will decisions altogether. The answer lies in the fact that a theory is the making explicit of a society's life, that is, a set of institutions and practices. It may shape these practices, but it does not replace them. So even though some feature may find no place in the reigning theory, it may still be a constitutive part of a living practice.

The notion of the general will can be seen as a way of formulating the constitutive norm of decision-making for communities with shared goods. Even if this norm remains unformulated and unrecognized, it may still be that the community retains certain shared goods. These will still be central to certain of its practices, for example, to the kinds of arguments that are acceptable/unacceptable in public debate, even if there is no theoretical formulation of why this is so. Shared goods may be reflected in the norms strongly held to govern public life, or in the ceremonial surrounding the state, even where they have dropped out of the accounts of politics that citizens give to themselves and others.

Of course, these goods will be considerably restricted, and much less vigorous in public life than where they are explicitly acknowledged. And they will certainly be in danger of eclipse. But they may nevertheless still be operative. Theory can never be the simple determinant of practice. I want to claim later that something like this gap between theory and practice is true of our society.

This is the striking disanalogy between natural science and political theories. The latter can undermine, strengthen or shape the practice that they bear on. And that is because (a) they are theories about practices, which (b) are partly constituted by certain self-understandings. To the extent that (c) theories transform this self-understanding, they undercut, bolster or transform the constitutive features of practices. We could put this another way by saying that political theories are not about independent objects in the way that theories are in natural science. There the relation of knowledge to practice is that one applies what one knows about causal powers to particular cases, but the truths about such causal powers that one banks on are thought to remain unchanged. That is the point of saying that theory here is about an independent object. In politics, on the other hand, accepting a theory can itself transform what that theory bears on.

Put a third way, we can say that while natural science theory also transforms practice, the practice it transforms is not what the theory is about. It is in this sense external to the theory. We think of it as an 'application' of the theory. But in politics, the practice is the object of theory. Theory in this domain transforms its own object.

This raises different problems about validation in political theory. We cannot think of this according to a simple correspondence model, where a theory is true to the extent that it correctly characterizes an independent object. But it is also totally wrong to abandon the notion of validation altogether, as though in this area thinking makes it so. The fact that

theory can transform its object does not make it the case that just anything goes, as we shall see below. Rather we have to understand how certain kinds of changes wrought by theory are validating, and others show it to be mistaken.

But before trying to show how this is so, I have to acknowledge that a powerful current in our culture resists strongly the idea of political theory as transforming its object. Partly because of the very puzzlement about validation just mentioned, and partly for other reasons, the temptation has been strong to assimilate political theory to the natural science model. This would then aspire like physics to yield knowledge about the unchanging conditions and regularities of political life. This knowledge could be applied to effect our ends more fully should we find occasion and justification.

Of course, it is difficult to present theories which claim to identify the true significance of our actions in this light. And so the attempt is usually made with theories of the causal context. The various theories of the political economy have tended to be of this form: certain consequences attend our actions regardless of the intentions with which they are carried out. So no alteration in our self-understanding will alter *these* regularities. Our only way of changing the course of things is by *using* these regularities to our own ends. In short, practice must apply the truths of theory. We have here exactly the relation of natural science.

We have been brought generally to consider economics as a science of this kind. People believe, for instance, that monetarism is true or false as a proposition about how certain economic transactions concatenate with others. If true, it could thus be the basis of a policy which would bring about its effects in a given economy regardless of the intentions and self-understanding of the agents in that economy. The policy would be merely technical, in the sense that it would work entirely without altering the way people conceive their predicament or understand the alternatives open to them. For the economic laws the policy banks on allegedly operate quite irrespective of such changes.

Perhaps there is some justification for this as far as economics is concerned. There are certain regularities which attend our economic behaviour, and which change only very slowly. But it would be absurd to make this the model for social theory in general and political theory in particular.

First, there are cultural conditions of our behaving according to these regularities. Economics can hope to predict and sometimes control behaviour to the extent that it can because we can be confident that in

some department of their lives people will behave according to rather tightly calculable considerations of instrumental rationality. But it took a whole vast development of civilization before the culture developed in which people do so behave, in which it became a cultural possibility to act like this; and in which the discipline involved in so acting became widespread enough for this behaviour to be generalized. And it took the development of a host of institutions, money, banks, international markets, and so on, before behaviour of this form could assume the scale it has. Economics can aspire to the status of a science, and sometimes appear to approach it, because there has developed a culture in which a certain form of rationality is a (if not the) dominant value. And even now, it fails often because this rationality cannot be a precise enough guide. What is the rational response to galloping inflation? Economics is uncertain where we ordinary agents are perplexed.

Second, we could not hope to have a theory of this kind, so resistant to our self-understanding (relatively resistant, as we have seen), outside of the economic sphere. The regularities are there, and resistant, to the extent that behaviour responds to narrow, circumscribed considerations. Economic behaviour can be predictable as some game behaviour can be; because the goals sought and the criteria for their attainment are closely circumscribed in a given domain. But for that very reason, a theory of this kind could never help explain our motivated action in general.

Various attempts to explain political behaviour with an economic-model theory always end up either laughable, or begging the major question, or both. They beg the question to the extent that they reconstruct political behaviour according to some narrowly defined conception of rationality. But in doing this, they achieve not accuracy of description of political behaviour in general, but rather they offer one way of conceiving what it is to act politically, and therefore one way of shaping this action. Rather than being theories of how things always operate, they actually end up strengthening one way of acting over others. For instance, in the light of our distinction above between atomist and general will constructions of democratic decision-making, they help to entrench the atomist party. Setting out with the ambition of being natural science-type theories of an independent reality, they actually end up functioning as transforming theories, as political theories normally do, but unconsciously and *malgré elles*. They thus beg the interesting question: 'Is this the right transforming theory?' because they cannot raise it; they do not see that it has to be raised.

If, on the other hand, they try to avoid this partisanship by becoming

rather vague and general in their application, allowing just about any behaviour to count somehow as rational, then they become laughable. Theories of this kind generally hover between these two extremes. An excellent example is the conversion theory of politics mentioned above in connection with the name of David Easton.

What emerges from this is that the model of theory as of an independent object, or as bearing an object resistant to our self-understanding, has at best only partial application in the sciences of man. It can apply only in certain rather specialized domains, where behaviour is rather rigid, either because largely controlled by physiological factors, or because a culture has developed in which what is done in a given department is controlled by a narrow range of considerations, as in games or (to some degree) economic life. But this could never be the general model for social science, and certainly not that for a science of politics.

III

Which brings us back to the question of validation. What is it for a theory to be right? We cannot just reply that it is right when it corresponds to the facts it is about. Because, to oversimplify slightly, political theories are about our practices (as well as the institutions and relations in which these practices are carried on), and their rise and adoption can alter these practices. They are not about a domain of fact independent of, or resistant to, the development of theory.

Put tersely, our social theories can be validated, because they can be tested in practice. If theory can transform practice, then it can be tested in the quality of the practice it informs. What makes a theory right is that it brings practice out in the clear; that its adoption makes possible what is in some sense a more effective practice.

But this notion of validating theories through practice may seem even more bizarre and suspect than the idea that theories may not be verified by the facts. What we need in order to make it less strange is to come to a better understanding of the uses of theory.

Our reflections on natural science familiarize us with the idea that theories describe and explain the phenomena of some domain, and help us to predict them. But it should be clear from the above discussion that this cannot be all that social theory does for us. I argued above that social theory can affect practice, just because it can alter our self-descriptions, and our self-descriptions can be constitutive of our

practices. One of the things social theory does, I suggested, is make explicit the self-understandings which constitute our social life.

But then it is clear that our formulations can serve more than descriptive purposes. We may be led to formulate some self-understanding in order to rescue a practice, to make it possible to continue it, to put it on a securer basis, or perhaps to reform it, or purify it. The point, one might say, of the formulation here is just to provide the constitutive understanding necessary for the continuing, or reformed, or purified practice.

This of course is true first of all of many of our pre-theoretical formulations in myth and ritual. A founding myth, or our public ceremonial, expresses in public space our common ends, or shared goods, without which we would be incapable of acting together in the way our institutions call for. For example, we are capable of fighting together in war, or sharing power in some particular way, only because we have a common understanding, to which some public expression is indispensable, and these formulations are its public expressions.

But with certain advances in culture, there may arise the need for theoretical formulations, that is, we feel the need to submit our discourse of self-understanding to the special disciplines of objectivity, rigour, and respect for truth which are constitutive of the activity we know as theorizing. This may be the case as much with our common understandings as with the individual attempts at orientation, by which we try to define our place in society and/or history.

There is no doubt that modern culture makes this demand. Ours is a very theoretical civilization. We see this both in the fact that certain understandings formulated in modern theories have become incorporated in the common understandings by which political society operates in the West, and also in that, however oversimplified and vulgarized these theories may become in attaining general currency, an important part of their prestige and credibility reposes on their being believed to be correct theories, truly validated as knowledge, as this is understood in a scientific age.

For instance, I would claim that atomist theories of the polity, and even more obtrusively, corresponding theories of the economy, have entered into the common understanding of modern Western democracies, perhaps in a debased and garbled and oversimplified form, but with the prestige of theoretical truth behind them. These views are indeed not without rivals in the general understanding; it is not simply atomist. But part of the challenge to them comes from rival theories propounded by minorities, for instance Marxism. This too may be thought vulgarized

and oversimplified, but essential to its appeal is the prestige of Science, to which it lays claim.

Ours is an inescapably theoretical civilization. Some of the reasons for this are not too hard to identify. One of the basic underlying conditions, of course, is the prestige of science in our way of life. But on top of this, the rise and prominence of political economy has been of great importance.

We are all convinced that there are mechanisms of social interaction which are not clear on the surface, regularities which have to be identified through study and research. Even people who are not at all uneasy about the implicit understanding of the society's institutions, and are not tempted at all to think that this understanding is somehow illusory, nevertheless accept that there is more to social interaction than can meet the eye. There are laws of society which have to be laid bare in a theory.

But people also turn to political theory because they feel the need to get clearer what society's practices involve. These practices seem problematic because they are already the locus of strife and trouble and uncertainty, and have been since their inception. I am thinking in particular of the central political practices of modern Western democracies: elections, decisions by majority vote, adversary negotiations, the claiming and according of rights, and the like. These practices have grown in our civilization in a context of strife, replacing sometimes violently earlier practices which were incompatible with them. And they are practices which by their nature leave scope for struggle between different concep- tions, policies, ambitions. Moreover, their introduction was justified by polemical theories which challenged the dominant views of the pre- modern era. Hence by their nature and history these practices constantly push us to find and redefine their theoretical basis.

And so our society is a very theory-prone one. A great deal of our political life is related to theories. The political struggle is often seen as between rival theories, the programmes of governments are justified by theories, and so on. There never has been an age so theory-drenched as ours.

In this situation, while political agents may turn to theories as guides, or as rhetorical devices of struggle, many others turn to them in order to orient themselves. People reach for theories in order to make sense of a political universe which is full of conflict and rival interpretations, and which moreover everyone agrees is partly opaque. When in addition, people's purposes are frustrated in unexpected ways, for example when they are beset with intractable stagflation, or anomic violence, or

economic decline, the sense of bewilderment is all the greater; and the only cure for bewilderment seems to be correct theory.

Theory thus has an important use to define common understandings, and hence to sustain or reform political practices, as well as serving on an individual level to help people orient themselves. Let me coin the term 'self-defining' for these uses of theory, in contrast to the explanatory ones that we usually focus on.

Then two points emerge from the above discussion: this self-definition is essentially also a definition of norms, goods, or values; and there are in each case practices of which it is the essential enabling condition.

This is pretty obvious with theories which formulate common understandings. A theory of the self-governing republic gives us a certain notion of our shared good, which as we saw is constitutive of certain practices. But its principal rival, the atomist theory, which gives us an instrumental picture of political society, involves no less of a definition of the political good.[3] This is seen quite differently, and reposes principally in the efficiency of the political system in satisfying our demands, as well as in the responsiveness of political institutions to the demands of different categories of people, and thus in the distributive justice of demand-satisfaction. Some of the central features of modern society, such as the trend towards rationality and bureaucratization in government, are essentially linked to this instrumentalist understanding.

But the same points can be made about individuals' attempts at orientation. In fact, people seek orientation in their political world not just to have a cognitively tidy universe, but for much more powerful reasons. In some cases, it will be because they need the political realm to be a locus of important significance. Either they want political structures to reflect their central values, or they require that political leaders be paradigms of these values, or they seek a form of political action which will be truly significant, or they require the political system to be the guardian of the right order of things; be it in one way or another, they are reluctant to look on political structures simply as instruments which are without value in themselves – albeit an influential strand of modern political theory tends in just this direction.

Others desire to feel in control. They want to objectify the social world by science, so as to have the confidence that they can cope with it, manipulate it given the right conditions. This is, of course, one of the strong motives for natural science modelled theories. Still others seek to establish

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[3] See chapter 2 above.

a sense of their own worth by espousing theories which show themselves to be clearly separate from, perhaps even in combat with, the evil, muddle, ambiguity, or failure they see around them. This is especially evident in theories which justify terrorist violence. But then the very satisfactions of becoming oriented, in one or more of these ways, may give one a sense of having achieved more clairvoyant practice which is quite specious. This can generate very powerful mechanisms of self-delusion. And these orientations are the basis of certain practices, just because they define our relation to the good, to what is really or potentially of value in political life.

In any case, it is clear that theories do much more than explain social life; they also define the understandings that underpin different forms of social practice, and they help to orient us in the social world. And obviously the most satisfying theories are those that do both at once: they offer the individual an orientation which he shares with his compatriots, and which is reflected in their common institutions.

But we might be tempted to reply that all this, while true, has nothing to do with our question, how do we validate theory? Sure, there are all sorts of self-defining uses of theory, but these have nothing to do with its truth. Naturally, granted what is at stake, human beings will always be tempted to espouse theories that give them a sense of moral orientation, and perhaps even more theories which support the practices they find advantageous. So that those who are doing well in capitalist society, and to whom governments are responsive, will easily warm to an atomist, instrumentalist theory, while those who are pushed to desperation as victims of systematic deprivation may well be attracted to theories of extreme conflict, and accept some justification of terrorism.

In short, the self-defining uses of theory are simply ideological in the pejorative sense. One can scientifically explain why certain theories serve the self-definition of certain people, but that they do so says nothing of itself for their truth. Of their truth, we can only judge by seeing how they describe and explain. In the end, all our objections to validating by corres-pondence with the facts must be swept aside. If we are talking scienti-fically, that is what it comes down to. So runs the reply.

Social theories would be in this respect exactly like theories in the natural sciences. If someone told us that he accepted a theory in physics or chemistry because it gave him a satisfactory moral orientation to his world, or supported the right political practices, we should judge him irrational or corrupt. These are motives of the crimes against science, such as the suppression of Galileo, or the propagation of Lysenko's theories in

the Soviet Union. These considerations cannot be allowed as relevant to truth.

My central claim is that this reply, and the parallel it invokes, is deeply mistaken. Of course, nothing could be more common than the interested and 'ideological' use of social theory. How could it be otherwise when so much is at stake? But this is not the same thing as saying that there is no such thing as the objective validation of a theory in its self-defining use. The fact that we have an overwhelming temptation to fudge in this domain in the service of our material and psychological interests does not at all mean that there is no truth of the matter here, and that the self-defining uses of theory are nothing but the reflection of these interests.

My thesis can perhaps best be expressed here in two related propositions:

1. There is such a thing as validating a social theory in its self-defining use, as well as establishing it as explanation/description.
2. Validating a theory as self-definition is in an important sense primary, because understanding what is involved in such validation will frequently be essential to confirming a theory, even as an adequate description/explanation.

Theories as self-definitions cannot just be seen as reflections of interest, because they make a certain kind of claim. They claim to offer a perspicuous account of the good or norm which is the point of a certain practice. Rousseau's republican theory of the general will offers a certain conception of the shared good informing the practices of republican self-rule. The atomist theories define conceptions of rationality and efficacy. If I accept an orientation towards my political society as rightfully the guardian of the correct order of value, then I define a certain notion of guardianship, which I see as the point of certain laws, ceremonies, structures.

Now this is the kind of claim that can be right or wrong, and that in principle at least, we can validate or disconfirm. It is something we can test in practice. This is so, because since theories enable practices to take a certain shape, a theory which badly misidentifies the goods we can seek in a certain domain will ground a practice which will fail to realize these goods. The practices informed by wrong theories will be in an important way self-defeating.

And this is, I would argue, the essence of the claim made by opponents of a given theory in real political debate. Thus people who are sceptical of a Rousseauian view hold that his conception of the shared good in the general will is too simplistic and unitary. Precisely for this reason they see

the practice it grounds as self-defeating, because it fails to achieve a generally acknowledged freedom, but on the contrary degenerates into despotism. This is rightly thought of as self-defeating, because freedom was the point of the practice. On the other side, opponents of atomist views argue that a truly atomist polity would be utterly devoid of civic spirit; it would therefore require a maximum of bureaucratic surveillance and enforcement to function. It would thus defeat the ends of freedom, justice and demand-satisfaction.

These examples are, I believe, representative of real debate between living theories. It is rare that one sees two utterly independent goods, whose definition is not in dispute, but which define rival policy goals, at the centre of a major political debate. As one looks at the Soviet system from the outside, a Westerner may feel that it would make more sense if they defended their society on the grounds that it minimizes disorder, while we prefer ours for its freedom and democracy. But in fact, this is not what the debate is about between the two systems. It concerns the nature of freedom and democracy, whose definition is in dispute.

Between two quite independent rival goods, the practice criterion could not select. But between two rival conceptions of the goods we can seek in societies of a certain kind, practice can allow us to arbitrate in principle. Of course, when something big is at stake, both sides will have every motive to lie, and fudge, and suppress the truth and confuse the issues. But this is not to say that the issue cannot be arbitrated by reason.

On the contrary, it can; and we can now perhaps see better how. First, it should be clearer why the disputes are not like those between rival causal hypotheses, where one affirms and another denies a hypothetical: if p happens, then q will befall. This latter kind of dispute supposes that we agree on the descriptions 'p' and 'q'. But it is the basic terms of politics which are in question when theories clash. The contestants will probably disagree over certain hypotheticals in the course of the argument (e.g., whether pursuing certain objectives will lead to bureaucratization, or will undermine stability). But what is at stake is not a set of hypothetical propositions, for example, of the kind: if we carry out the practices as the theory prescribes, the good will ensue. Because we are dealing with an ordinary hypothetical here, where the condition described in the protasis is independent of that described in the apodosis. Rather the good sought under the description offered by the theory is constitutive of the practice we seek to realize. What is at stake is more like rival maps of the terrain. One might say, the terrain of possible practices is being mapped in contour, and this purports to give the shape and slope of the heights of value.

The proof of a map is how well you can get around using it. And this is the test of theories considered as self-definitions. In this they are closely analogous to the pre-theoretical understandings we have of things. When I overcome some confusion I may be in about the disposition of my limbs, or the way I am moving my body, or the lie of the land, and have a more perspicuous view of things, this shows its superiority in enabling me to act more effectively. I know I have a better grasp of things when I am able to overcome the muddle, confusion, and cross purposes which affected my activity hitherto.

Analogously, I want to argue that to have a better theoretical self-definition is to understand better what we are doing; and this means that our action can be somewhat freer of the stumbling, self-defeating character which previously afflicted it. Our action becomes less haphazard and contradictory, less prone to produce what we did not want at all.

In sum, I want to say that, because theories which are about practices are self-definitions, and hence alter the practices, the proof of the validity of a theory can come in the changed quality of the practice it enables. Let me introduce terms of art for this shift of quality, and say that good theory enables practice to become less stumbling and more clairvoyant.

We should note that attaining clairvoyant practice is not the same thing as being more successful in our practices. It may be that there is something deeply muddled and contradictory in our original activity, as for instance Marxism would claim about the practices of 'bourgeois' democracy. In which case, theoretical clarity is not going to enable us better to determine our own fate within the context of bourgeois institutions. Rather what the theory will have revealed is that this enterprise is vain; it is vitiated at the very base. But practice can be more clairvoyant here because we can abandon this self-defeating enterprise, and turn to another goal which makes sense, that is, revolution. Of course, if we bring this off, we shall have been more successful overall; but not in the practices we originally set out to understand, which we have on the contrary abandoned. And just getting the right theory does not ensure that we can bring off the revolutionary change. We may just be stymied. Still, if the theory is right we would be capable of more clairvoyant practice, which in this case would just consist in our abandoning the muddled, self-stultifying effort to determine our fate freely within the structures of the capitalist economy.

My second thesis is that for some theories understanding what is involved in validating the self-defining use will be essential to their confirmation.

This can be the case in two ways. First, there can be cases in which the historical evidence is insufficient, in the sense that certain possibilities have not been tried. Or in any case, this is what one side in the argument can often claim. This always arises in debates about radical social theories, for example of egalitarian participatory democracy, or anarchism. Their opponents ask us to look at the historical record: when have these theories ever been successfully applied? Their protagonists reply that the conditions have never been right; the real test case is yet to come.

To the extent that the protagonists are right, then the validation we are waiting for is of the theory in its self-defining use. We are awaiting a case in which our social life can be shaped by it, and it can show its value in practice.

But of course the hotly contested question in this kind of debate will bear on just this, how incomplete is the historical record? To what degree can past experiences be deemed valid predictors of new possible experiments? Does the virtual absence of anarchist societies from the historical record show this form to be impossible? Does the fact that the experience of mass democracies up to now exemplifies to a large degree the elite competition model show more participatory forms to be impossible?

How do you decide this kind of question? Presumably the answer turns on how you interpret the historical record. But this is relevant precisely as a record of *stumbling or clairvoyant practice*. The conservative claim is just that the failure of previous attempts amounts to a case of the self-defeat that attends a practice informed by a wrong theory. The radical answer will always be that the failure springs from other sources, external factors, lack of propitious economic, or educational, or military conditions, and so on.

The argument about a general will theory mentioned above is a case in point. For its opponents, the disaster which has attended various attempts to supersede 'bourgeois' representative democracy is sufficient proof of the error of this theory. But its defenders will argue that it has only been tried in the most unfavourable economic, cultural or military conditions; where it ought never to be attempted; and that the obstinate refusal of those responsible for these attempts to acknowledge the unpropitiousness of the conditions has turned their theory itself into a travesty of the original idea. It is in these terms that the debate is frequently engaged between conservatives and socialists about the lessons to be drawn from the Soviet experience. For the former, this experience is a crucial negative test; for the latter, it is a grotesque caricature of socialism.

I do not want to try to show who is right here. My point is rather that

one cannot make and argue for a reading of this kind unless one under-
stands what it is for a wrong theory to render a practice self-defeating, or
a more correct theory to make it relatively unimpeded. In other words,
you have to understand what it is to validate a theory as self-definition in
order to glean from the historical record some defensible view of the
theory's future prospects.

This kind of validation of a theory against the historical record is thus
quite different from what is normally understood as the verification of a
theory by comparison with an independent domain of objects. Here the
confirmation has to take account of the way in which theory shapes
practice. To test the theory in practice means here not to see how well the
theory describes the practices as a range of independent entities; but
rather to judge how practices fare when informed by the theory.

My claim is then that testing theories in practice plays an essential part
in validating social theories. In the immediately preceding discussion, I
have been talking about reading history to settle disputes about theories
as self-definitions. But the same theories serve both for self-definition and
for explanation. To give good grounds for a theory in an argument about
either is to give good grounds for it *tout court*.

For in fact disputes about self-definition are inextricably bound up
with questions of explanation, and vice versa. The argument whether the
inhumanities of the Soviet system are to be put to the account of socialist
theory, or rather attributed to other factors, is also an argument about
how various developments of Soviet history are to be explained. And the
reverse: any explanatory hypotheses about Soviet history have inescap-
able relevance to the question, what lessons are to be drawn about the
theories which ought to inform our future practice.

A little reflection will show why this must be so. What makes it the case
that there is such a thing as the self-defining use of theory, and that it can
be validated in practice, viz., the fact that human beings frame self-
understandings which shape their activity, this same basic feature has to
be taken into account wherever it is relevant when we are trying to
explain human action in history. In other words, where and to the extent
that social action has been informed by self-understanding, this will have
to figure in any valid explanatory account, together with an assessment of
the way and degree to which this understanding facilitated or impeded the
action.

It follows that explanatory theories have to be concerned with the same
basic inter-weaving of theory and practice which we examine when we
test self-definitions. Explanation also involves inescapably an appraisal

of how theory has shaped practice, and of whether or how this has been self-defeating. Thus whether we examine the record for purposes of explanation of self-definition, we have to ask largely over-lapping questions. The same core of judgements will be central to both enquiries.

And that is why I have spoken above of theories which have explanatory or self-definitional *uses*. This is to take the core of judgements at the heart of both enquiries and identify it with the theory. But even if we think of the two enquiries as issuing in distinct theories, the close connection emerges in the fact that adopting a given self-definitional theory has strong consequences for the explanatory theories one can consistently adopt, and vice versa. The two orders of questions are logically linked via their common core. You cannot establish something in relation to one debate without deciding a great deal about the other.

Thus the activity that I am calling testing theories in practice is indispensable to the validation of our social theories. It is not just that we may sometimes be called on to test theories as self-definitions in our own practice. What is of much more general relevance, we have to make use of our understanding of what it is to test in practice when we examine the historical record; and this whether our interest in the disputed theories is explanation or self-definition.

And this is what distinguishes social from natural science, where testing theories in practice plays no role at all. Of course, the contrast is not complete. Some social theories can be at least partly tested on a simple verification model. Certain economic theories, like monetarism, are of this kind. One might think that monetarism can be refuted if controlling the money supply does not succeed in slowing inflation while leaving growth unimpeded.

But economic theories of this sort are the exception rather than the rule in social science. Most theories are not of the kind that can simply be *applied* in practice; they affect practice only in shaping or informing it. And for these, simple verification against an independent domain is impossible.

And even these seemingly clear cases of verifiable theory may turn out to be muddy. Suppose the defenders of monetarism try to save it from the discredit of its failure as a policy by arguing that extraneous cultural or political factors – managerial practices, trade union rigidities – prevented its beneficent effects from ensuing. Won't we have to follow the argument back into the domain where theories as self-definitions shape our practice?

As a matter of fact, the entire debate about inflation in the last decade

can be seen as an illustration of this shift. Economists started off with an unshaken faith in their science as the source of verifiable explanations. Inflation was explained by factors that could be manipulated, that is, by factors which could be adjusted without any change in people's self-definitions: the level of demand, levels of taxation, size of government deficit, growth of money supply. At the beginning of the 1980s, we are more ready to ask ourselves whether inflation isn't largely fuelled by our political relations, in other words, in part by the self-definitions implicit in our dominant practices. From the point of view of our discussion here, this reappraisal means a shift from reliance on theories which still fit the natural science models to theories which are self-consciously about practices.

What I have been arguing in the preceding discussion is that theories about practices are validated in a way special to them. And this way can only be understood, if we see more clearly what we are doing when we create, espouse, propound social theories. In this way, I am trying to redeem my opening claim, that we need to see social theory as practice in order to understand what its validation amounts to.

In the next chapter I will turn to another issue which I think is also illuminated by this understanding.