

Book Review

Richard Swedberg: The Art of Social Theory.

Princeton 2014: Princeton University Press.

ISBN: 9780691155227

by Andreas Tutic

What is sociology? And if so, how many? (cf. Precht 2011) While basically all social scientists agree on the answer to the second question, there is no consensus with respect to the first. Richard Swedberg, well-known for his work in economic sociology (Granovetter and Swedberg 2011) and one of the doyens of the rising movement in analytical sociology (Hedström and Swedberg 1998), would probably answer: “Boring!”

In his recent monograph “The Art of Social Theory” Swedberg deplores the state of the art in sociological theorizing. In comparison to methods of empirical research, sociological theory has seen little advancement in the last six decades. On the one hand there is empiricist research in which references to tiny bits of theory figure as attempts in mere window-dressing. On the other hand, we have abstract theory, which is utterly disentangled from empirical reality, typically in form of vague orientation hypotheses concerning metatheory (“The notion of ... should be in the centre of sociological theory, because ...”), grand theory, or writings about the writings of other theorists. First and foremost, Swedberg misses original, creative thoughts in dealing with social phenomena. With this monograph and its companion volume (Swedberg 2014b) he primarily aims at providing practical guidelines on how to theorize well.

“The Art of Social Theory” is organized in two parts (“How to Theorize” and “Preparing for Theorizing”). Each part contains five chapters of approx. 20 pages. A short introduction and a small essay on Charles Sanders Peirce’s life and methodological views complement the book. There is no need to go through the book chapter by chapter. Instead, we can quickly summarize its main points as follows.

A theory is a statement about the explanation of a phenomenon and it is the outcome of theorizing (Swedberg 2014, 17). Theorizing is indispensable in the research process and should be conducted before a concrete research design is set up. Swedberg suggests the term “prestudy” for this early stage of theorizing. On this stage, the researcher tries to identify an interesting phenomenon to study, gives a name to the phenomenon, defines relevant concepts as well as typologies, and finally formulates an explanation. It is important to understand that the prestudy adheres to the logic of discovery and not to the logic of justi-

fication or verification. Hence, anything goes. It is all about coming up with an original idea—play around with language, compare things that are *prima facie* completely unrelated, make heavy use of heuristics, analogies, and metaphors, etc. You have to think outside the box. Naturally, reading much related work by other social scientists would just harm your imagination at this stage of the research process. Instead, you should try to get a solid grip on the phenomenon, i.e., observe the parts of social reality related to the phenomenon as close as possible using all kinds of data (anecdotal, qualitative, quantitative) at hand. This is important, since the researcher has to get rid of “*prénotions*” (Durkheim 1964), i.e., commonly held beliefs about the workings of the social.

By and large, as a methodological guideline this notion of *prestudy* should be hardly controversial among social scientists. A bit harder to swallow is Swedberg’s idea on how good explanations come about: *Abduction*. Swedberg borrows this and other ideas from Peirce, which is why the pragmatist philosopher appears frequently in the text. “Abduction is the process of forming an explanatory hypothesis.” (Peirce 1934, 171–72) While this quote seems innocent, Swedberg runs into serious difficulties in explicating the meaning of abduction (cf. Swedberg 2014, 101ff.). This is not necessarily his fault, since Peirce is not known for his accessibly way of writing. In brief, as far as I can tell, abduction means guessing. According to Peirce, humans have an inborn capacity to guess right, which he calls *lume naturale*. All we have to do is train this capacity and trust in it. Swedberg embraces this thought and links it to Kahneman’s ideas regarding the intuition of experts. Recall, according to Kahneman (2011) there are two systems of thinking. System 1 relies on intuition and is fast. The rational and methodical system 2 is rather slow. By gaining experience in a certain area, you can boost the chances of your system 1 to do the job correctly. This idea of trained intuition also resonates with Gladwell’s 10.000-Hour rule (Gladwell 2008), according to which you have to spend at least 10.000 hours on a certain activity to excel in it. And in fact, this is Swedberg’s main advice in becoming a good theorist. You have to study the works of classic sociologists such as Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel and get a deep understanding of social action, social facts, and social forms. This studying exercise does not aim at the scholastic goal of encyclopaedic knowledge of any detail in say Weber’s explanation of the rise of capitalism. Instead, we should strive for an intuitive grasp of sociological core concepts and train ourselves in handling these notions. This way we adopt “the sociological eye” (Hughes 1984), master “the sociological imagination” (Mills 1959), and prepare ourselves for successful abduction.

So much for Swedberg’s core argument. Of course, his monograph also contains some other material, for example on how to teach theorizing or what sociology can learn from the arts. However, these passages are only of secondary interest to the main course of argument.

While I sympathize with Swedberg’s notion of *prestudy* and his advocacy of strengthening the role of theorizing in the research process, his exposition suffers from two quite severe drawbacks. The first relates to Swedberg’s aim of providing practical guidelines for theorizing. Put blatantly, the monograph actually

does not contain much useful material on how to theorize well. The problem is that Swedberg writes about phenomena which are notoriously hard to deal with intelligibly: Creativity, the emergence of original ideas, moments of epiphany. Traditionally, the methodological literature evaded this difficulty by remaining silent on the logic of discovery. For example, Popper regarded scientific creativity as a simple matter of empirical psychology, which little can be said about (cf. Swedberg 2012, 4). While Swedberg repeatedly claims that modern cognitive psychology sheds light onto the logic of discovery, his monograph does not deliver much on the specific details of these insights. As a consequence, his exposition tends to get rather vague when touching upon his main theme. For example, we learn that good theorizing requires “a good eye for what is social” and “you have to open yourself up for what is happening, with all your senses as well as with your subconscious” (Swedberg 2014, 30). In a nutshell, reading “*The Art of Social Theory*” has not fully convinced me that there is much to say about the origin of creative scientific ideas.

My second major point of criticism refers to Swedberg’s assessment of the main problem in current sociological theorizing. Definitely, Swedberg’s diagnosis of the dismal state of sociological theory is convincing. It is true that many empirical studies basically work without any real theoretical underpinning. At the same, much work that runs under the heading ‘theory’ is useless for an empirical science, since it contributes only little to the understanding and explanation of social phenomena. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule—consider, for example, the research program on conditions for cooperation and trust as initiated and run by Werner Raub and his collaborators such as Vincent Buskens and Jeroen Weesie (cf. Raub et al. 2015). Over decades these researchers theorized on the social conditions of the emergence and sustainment of cooperative relationships via elaborate and fine-grained formal models, mostly of game-theoretical provenience. In addition, their theoretical results are put to strict empirical tests using the full range of techniques of empirical research, i.e., from small-scale experiments to representative samples. From my point of view, this is sociological research at its best, which avoids both the trap of abstract, empirically irrelevant theory and the trap of empiricism. However, this kind of theoretically grounded, yet empirical research is rather rare. The bulk of sociology suffers from a mismatch between theory and empirical research and Swedberg hits the nail on the head when he identifies theorizing as the underdeveloped part.

So, how to improve on the state of the art in theoretical sociology? Swedberg argues that theorizing should figure more prominently in the research process and pleads for creativity. While I agree fully with the former, Swedberg’s idea that current theorizing suffers mainly from a lack of scientific originality seems beside the point. From my point of view, the main problem of current theorizing in sociology is that sociologists do not embrace techniques of theory construction such as formal modelling, agent-based simulations, and computational social science. Just like there are methods for empirical research, there are methods for building social theory as well. The mismatch of sociological theory and

empirical research stems from the fact that sociology adopted the former but neglected the latter. Of course, this is not a very original idea of mine. The program of mathematical sociology and the theory construction movement (cf. Lave and March 1973; Stinchcombe 1968) argued along these lines decades ago. When discussing the theory construction movement, Swedberg notes some similarities to his point of view. However, he also criticizes the approach as “mechanical” and states that “[...] the capacity to innovate could not be properly cultivated” (Swedberg 2014, 32). Also he argues that theory construction tends to some kind of arm-chair research in which the importance of observation while theorizing is neglected (Swedberg 2014, 33ff.). Both arguments seem rather weak to me. Concerning the relationship between innovative ideas and modelling two thoughts come to mind. First, techniques of theory construction allow to spell out the details and to derive consequences from ideas. Second, as any practitioner can assure, thinking in terms of abstract models generates many new ideas. In fact, it is more or less generally accepted among modellers that a good model has both expected implications as well as counterintuitive and hence unexpected consequences. So the generation of new ideas is an integral part of formal theory construction. Moreover, the fact that economics and political science, both of which are less reluctant than sociology in adopting modelling techniques, generated impressive families of theories with plenty of counterintuitive implications, shows that Swedberg’s claim is empirically unsound.

Swedberg makes a better point when he criticizes that modellers tend to underestimate the importance of observation while theorizing. It is true that often modellers get seduced by their powerful tools, quickly turn their back on social reality, and explore the consequences of their initial idea, which might have been empirically questionable in the first place. Related to this is the tendency to devote more effort in improving the methods of theory construction than in using these methods for the explanation of social phenomena. As an example, consider the myriads of solution concepts in cooperative game theory, a majority of which will probably never find a single application. However, these are just empirical tendencies in the usage of models. As the exemplary research by Raub, Buskens, Coleman, Braun, Montgomery, Willer, Macy, Flache and many other social scientists working with formal models shows, there is no inherent tension between formal theory construction and a “sociological eye” for social reality.

Make no mistake, as a prime proponent of analytical sociology Swedberg is far from opposing modelling techniques in theorizing. However, in his monograph he highlights the importance of the mysterious Peircian notion of abduction and somewhat downplays the more practical approach of formal theory construction. Considering that it might be fair to say that at the moment physicists, mathematicians, economists, and computer scientists outperform sociologists in terms of sociological theorizing, I feel that leading figures like Swedberg need to make a strong case for a revival of mathematical sociology and push the discipline in the right direction. From this perspective “The Art of Social Theory”, while an inspiring read with noteworthy thoughts on the role of theorizing in the research process, does not find exactly the right tone.

References

- Durkheim, E. (1964), *The Rules of Sociological Method*, New York: Free Press.
- Gladwell, M. (2008), *Outliers: The Story of Success*, New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- Granovetter, M. and R. Swedberg (2011) (eds.), *The Sociology of Economic Life*, 3rd edition, Boulder: Westview Press.
- Hedström, P. and R. Swedberg (1998) (eds.), *Social Mechanisms. An Analytical Approach to Social Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hughes, E. C. (1984), *The Sociological Eye: Selected Papers*, New Brunswick: Transaction Press.
- Kahneman, D. (2011), *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Lave, C. and J. March (1973), *An Introduction to Models in the Social Sciences*, New York: University Press of America.
- Mills, C. W. (1959), *The Sociological Imagination*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Precht, R. D. (2011), *Who Am I? And If So, How Many?*, New York: Spiegel & Grau.
- Peirce, C. S. (1934), *Vol. 5 of Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, edited by C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss, Cambridge: Belknap Press.
- Stinchcombe, A. (1968), *Constructing Social Theories*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Swedberg, R. (2012), "Theorizing in Sociology and Social Science: Turning to the Context of Discovery", *Theory and Society* 41, 1–40.
- (2014b) (ed.), *Theorizing in Social Science: The Context of Discovery*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Raub, W., V. Buskens and R. Corten (2015), "Social Dilemmas and Cooperation", in: Braun, N. and N. Saam (eds.), *Handbuch Modellbildung und Simulation in den Sozialwissenschaften*, Wiesbaden: Springer VS.