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Book Review: Theory for the Working Sociologist

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Fabio Rojas

Theory for the Working Sociologist. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. 232 pp. \$30.00.

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Like all practitioners of social science, sociologists are continually challenged to step out of their ivory towers and make their scholarly work practical. Analogously, in teaching the foundations of the discipline, sociologists are challenged to expand their own horizons (and those of our students) by including neglected and forgotten voices in our curricula, transcending the “male and pale” canonical thinkers of social theory. This generally entails assigning readings beyond those by the so-called founding fathers Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. Yet, as Raewyn Connell (1997) once observed, the problem with canons is that their formation, no matter who is included, tends to reproduce the same cycle of foreclosure and approval that makes the endorsement of certain theoretical texts over others problematic in the first place.

An alternative method to teaching social theory, and one taken up by Fabio Rojas in his recent book *Theory for the Working Sociologist*, is to eschew this Great Man approach altogether. Rojas argues in the book’s preface that all too often social theory veers into the realm of intellectual history, where students view ideas and classical texts with neither consideration of their immediate relevance nor their connection to contemporary sociology. Instead, Rojas employs what he calls a mechanism-oriented approach to social theory, which focuses on how theories help connect cause to outcome in the social world. Rojas’s mechanism-oriented approach is both pragmatic and data-driven such that no one theoretical orientation (e.g., Marxist, Weberian, etc.) has precedence over another. Instead, mechanisms prioritize the use of social theories that can most plausibly frame patterns of empirical data to develop coherent analyses of social phenomena. Rojas also emphasizes that mechanisms are non-universalistic: They are

neither laws nor grand theories. Mechanisms instead serve the more modest goal of providing explanations, using logical causal chains, for observations about the behaviors of people in the social world. Further, mechanism-based approaches do not disregard larger theoretical paradigms but instead engage in dialog with them, effectively connecting different mechanisms together to develop the best fit with empirical data.

This is precisely what *Theory for the Working Sociologist* does most effectively in its presentation of four broad areas of social theory. After its preface and first chapter, which lay out the book’s approach to theory, define the concept of a mechanism, and contrast mechanism-based approaches with Mertonian middle-range theory, Rojas introduces his four approaches to sociology, structuring the bulk of the book. These include power and inequality, strategic action, values and social structures, and social construction, each with its own chapter. Within every chapter, Rojas introduces each approach with an example before moving to describe its theoretical tenants.

Along the way, Rojas is careful to weave together the more abstract theoretical concepts composing each of the four approaches with empirical evidence and real-world examples. This makes up one of the book’s many strengths: a commitment to clarity and illustration that focuses on showing the reader how theory explains social behavior rather than dwelling at a higher level of abstraction. As an example, in Rojas’s first substantive chapter, which covers theories of inequality, his aim is to outline contemporary theoretical attempts to understand the persistence of racial, gender, and economic inequalities given that in many advanced capitalist societies, “overt forms of repression, such as lynching or the exclusion of women from the professions, have to a considerable extent been replaced by new social processes” (p. 25). Rojas argues that while classical theories of inequality focus on overt violence or exclusion, inequalities today are largely perpetuated through unconscious biases and mechanisms of privilege: unbalanced access to educational resources, cultural inclusion, or knowledge of institutions. Rojas

then sketches two of what he determines to be the most influential new theories of inequality, intersectionality and Pierre Bourdieu's work on habitus, field, and capital. The remainder of the chapter provides readers with an exposition of three bodies of research that draw on intersectionality and habitus. These include Annette Lareau's scholarship on class reproduction in schools, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's writing on color-blind racism, and Cecilia Ridgeway's work on the way that gender frames and constrains women's opportunities across different social domains. Rojas closes the chapter with a discussion of recent theories of social power, touching briefly on Michel Foucault's ideas before reconstructing the ways that self-regulation and social power intersect with the reproduction of inequalities. Moving from one idea to another, Rojas explicates each of these scholars' arguments, emphasizing how new theories of power and inequality function while always taking apart the ways that theories explain the phenomena they address.

What is particularly useful about Rojas's selections is that they comprise a representative spread of important contemporary social theories and thinkers so that students will be exposed to some of the discipline's most up-to-date ideas. Readers will find that Rojas focuses almost entirely on contemporary sociological theory, ranging from Bonilla-Silva's recently published work to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's scholarship on social construction from the 1960s. Within each chapter, Rojas briefly sketches the chronological development of theories under each of his four groupings but pays significantly more attention to how recent theoretical developments repurpose and reinterpret the ideas of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim rather than dwelling on these thinkers' ideas by themselves.

The final substantive chapter of the book focuses on theoretical syntheses as Rojas takes up different mechanisms discussed throughout the book's four chapters and uses recent sociological scholarship to illustrate how new social theories are the product of fruitful combination. Bourdieu is revisited in this chapter as Rojas argues that concepts like distinction and capital are indebted to social construction and rational choice theories as well as theories of inequality. The closing pages of the chapter examine the work of sociologist Alondra Nelson, whose scholarship Rojas considers a successful contemporary fusion of theoretical mechanisms from the four approaches featured in the book.

I was first acquainted with *Theory for the Working Sociologist* when I began work designing a sociological theory course using Rojas's book as its textbook. The course is designed to present the material such that students can test social theories through a series of activities where students are asked to use methodological techniques to evaluate empirical evidence. The book was selected for the course because it speaks substantively to modern social problems and his mechanism-based approach focuses on how theories are constructed from observations of social behavior. In selecting other texts for the course, I found that the book went best paired with a sociological theory reader. Charles Lemert's (2016) *Social Theory: The Multicultural, Global, and Classic Readings* has provided me with a variety of excerpts that both supplement Rojas's examples as well as fill in the book's gaps.

Though the book's intended audience is inclusive of undergraduate students, I found that certain curricular adaptations were required to both use *Theory for the Working Sociologist* and include all the foundational sociological concepts necessary for an introductory course. For instance, some instructors may be put off by the almost complete absence of mention given to symbolic interaction, though its ideas are integrated into the chapters on values and institutions and social construction. While Marxism is mentioned and briefly explicated at the beginning of the book, in the introductory chapter as well as throughout the chapter on inequalities, thorough discussion of the concept's contemporary relevance is absorbed into Rojas's lengthy consideration of Bourdieu's theories. Stratification specialists and political and economic sociologists may find the omission of neo-Marxist scholarship odd, especially in our era of growing socioeconomic inequality.

Last, the way that Rojas presents and classifies certain sociological mechanisms within his four approaches framework may lead to some confusion for students new to the discipline. In the chapter on values and social structures, cultural sociology is presented as a theory of how norms and institutions are malleable and subject to individual reinterpretation. This idea appears again in a different form at the end of the subsequent chapter as Rojas argues that theories of social construction "provide ample examples in which individuals can resist the sorts of pressures described by institutionalists because they are always interpreting or adding meaning to the practices that are part of the ritual chain" (p. 137). These sorts of conceptual overlaps are, however, rare.

Despite these minor points, I recommend *Theory for the Working Sociologist* to instructors looking to provide students with an approach that breaks with more conventional presentations of social theory. The book is equally useful for new graduate students entering sociology doctoral or master's programs from other disciplines. For this reason, graduate instructors may also consider adding this book to their introductory social theory courses for the purpose of orienting students to contemporary social theoretical ideas. What Rojas manages to provide with this book is a refreshing take on a commonly written about subject. His mechanism-based approach is a useful vehicle for

explicating social theory at an appropriate level of abstraction coupled with a plethora of examples derived from contemporary social research to support his explanations. For these reasons, *Theory for the Working Sociologist* is well worth educators' attention.

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