

EDITORIAL

Theory and Social Action

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Over the years I have known quite a number of dedicated social activists. One thing that has amazed me about many of them is how little attention they seem to pay to social theory.

Joan, for example, is an environmental activist who is intelligent, hard working and often extremely astute. She reads a lot, but it is usually practical material about the issues that she deals with day to day. She is continually rushing about attending meetings, preparing submissions and media releases, calling supporters, attending to requests, planning demonstrations and so forth. It is a hectic, stimulating, usually satisfying but sometimes very draining life. There is little opportunity to relax and ponder over volumes by Habermas or Foucault.

What would be the point anyway? Habermas and Foucault, and most other theorists, seem to have nothing practical to say to Joan or most other activists. Or do they?

That is something that has intrigued me for a long time. While I have been a social activist some of the time, I have also read a fair bit of theory, and *sometimes* there seem to be insights to be gained from the theory. Unfortunately there is usually a lot of "translation" required. It is no good giving a busy activist an issue of *Sociological Review* or *Telos*. Most academic Journals are simply unintelligible to all but academics.

There is an additional problem. Even lots of the material that seems like it might be relevant to activists turns out to be nothing special—either obvious points or irrelevant observations. At least that was my impression back in the 1970s of the academic writings about the anti-nuclear power movement. But, here and there, a few insights appear. The difficulty is passing these insights on to the activists.

In this context, my colleague Richard Sylvan refers to the "trickle-down" theory. High-level theorists produce abstruse writings, decipherable by only a few. Somehow this theory needs to get down to the activists at

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the grassroots. This requires "interpreters", who help to popularise the theory, for example by using it in more accessible lectures, articles or textbooks. Other interpreters may give talks to or even be members of activist groups. Gradually, the key ideas—often in altered form—trickle down to activists.

"Trickle-down" theory in economics does not have a promising record. Helping the rich to get richer, in the hope that prosperity will trickle down to the poor, seems simply an excuse for inequality. Why should activists expect that high-level theory would be relevant to them anyway? Wouldn't it be more appropriate to develop theory out of day-to-day experiences?

Clearly there is much to be discussed on these questions. At this point it is appropriate to turn to the contributions to this issue of *Philosophy and Social Action*. Chris Rootes deals with the central issues of the usefulness of theory for social action. His insights are many and far-ranging. What he has to say will not be easy reading for many, but his text is worthy of careful study, especially by activist.

One of the theories that has been long linked to radical social action in the West is Marxism. The debates about Marxism are extensive, to say the least. Although the theory has many documented limitations, it can still provide insight. Maduabuchi Dukor tackles the issue of the relevance of Marxism to Nigeria today. His assessment deserves to be supplemented by assessments of many other theoretical perspectives applied to Third World countries.

David Orton writes on a more practical level. He tells a story, with rich detail, of how a particular concept—the concept of informed consent or informed rejection of pesticide use—can be used in environmental campaigning. A concept by itself is not a theory, but incorporates an implicit theoretical perspective; in this case, a commitment to public participation is part of this perspective. Many more analyses like Orton's are needed, including examination of concepts that did *not* serve the goals of social action.

Yet another approach to social action is to look at the assumptions underlying our behaviours and beliefs—what Timothy Doyle calls "myths". As well as exposing a number of the myths that he thinks underlie current ecological problems, Doyle proposes an alternative myth: the pot at the end of the rainbow. He thus raises the issue of whether activists have to work within the dominant social myths, or whether it is possible to propagate more appropriate myths.

These articles are a contribution to the important task of linking theory and social action. That task will continue to be important and, as both theory and social action develop, to require new developments. Dealing with these issues, in the widest sense, is one of the central goals of this journal, *Philosophy and Social Action*. □