

ON THE VALUE OF SIMPLE IDEAS

Brian Martin

Rather than building complex social theory and then drawing conclusions for making a better society, it is more productive to find, develop and promote simple ideas that empower people and then build up theory that is compatible with these ideas.

Simple ideas have a bad reputation. People often think simple ideas are simplistic : wrong, incomplete, inaccurate, misleading. I agree that many simple ideas are no good , but many are quite useful. This is easy to overlook because complex, sophisticated systems of knowledge are thought to be better.

The usual scholarly approach to knowledge goes like this. Sophisticated models of atoms, mental processes, society or whatever are proposed, analysed, elaborated, tested and negotiated. The best available model is then used to draw conclusions. If appropriate, it is applied to practical problems. This usually means lots of the complexities have to be ignored. The simple, practical version of the theory is never as good as the fully elaborated version.

The areas of knowledge that especially interest me are theories about how to make society more just and equal, in particular to eliminate various forms of domination. There's lots of high-brow theory about this. Most social science journals, for example, are theoretically daunting. The jargon can be frightening enough on its own, and the ideas expressed by the jargon often do not make much sense to outsiders. Consider, for example the following impressive sentence :

"It's TV then, not just as a technical object which we can hold apart from ourselves, but as a full technical ensemble, a social apparatus, which implodes into society as the emblematic cultural form of a relational power, which works as a simulacrum of electronic images recomposing everything into the semiurgical world of advertising and power, which links a processed world based on the exteriorisation of the senses with the interiorisation of simulated desire in the form of programmed need-dispositions, and which is just that point where Nietzsche's prophetic vision of twentieth-century

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experience as a 'hospital room' finds its moment of truth in the fact that when technique is us, when TV is the real world of postmodernism, then the horizon finally closes and freedom becomes synonymous with the deepest deprivals of the fully realized technological society."¹

If you are brave enough to criticise the analysis, a common responses is that "you don't really understand." Occasionally some pearls of wisdom for activists come down from the great scholars. What is one to make of these, not really understanding where they came from ?

In summary, the usual procedure for many intellectuals is to first develop a good theory and then work out its implications. To be sure, there is a lot of talk about the importance of "learning from practice," namely not theorising in a vacuum. The key thing, though, is the great importance put on developing a good theory. Simple interpretations of complex theory are denigrated, as in the case of "vulgar Marxism." My argument is that this emphasis is wrong.

Simple ideas and associated actions should be the centre-piece, the foundation for theoretical development. The goal should be to develop effective actions and simple, effective ideas to go along with them. Sophisticated theory should be built up in a way that is compatible with the simple ideas.

SIMPLE IDEAS

Simple ideas are ones that are relatively easy to understand, communicate and use. Some simple ideas in our society are :

- **money,**
- **roundness of the earth**
- **birthdays,**
- **melodies,**
- **telephones.**

Most people (at least in industrialised societies) are familiar with these things at an elementary level.

Needless to say, most people do not understand their full complexities. Not many people are familiar with advanced bodies of knowledge associated with these simple ideas, such as

- **Econometric modelling,**
- **geophysical measurement techniques,**

1. Arthur Kroker, "Television and the triumph of culture : three theses," **Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory**, Vol. 9, No. 3, Fall 1985, pp. 37-47, at p.37.

- **the origins of the calendar,**
- **musicology,**
- **electronic engineering.**

Unfortunately, even the concept of a simple idea isn't all that simple ! What's simple for one person to understand may be quite difficult for another. What is simple depends on experiences, formal education, social class, mass media/gender, and many other factors.

Michael Schudson in a book on advertising makes some points about how products are democratised. These points also apply to ideas.

- "First, they become more standard as they come to be produced for a mass audience. They are easier to handle, easier to 'do it yourself' without great skill on the part of the user; both a mediocre cook and a great cook make equally good cakes from a cake mix".

Simple ideas are like this. Anyone can grasp them and use them to get results.

- "Second, products become not only more standard but milder and easier to use." Children can grasp and apply the ideas.

- "Third, there is democratization when goods are consumed in increasingly public ways."² When people use ideas at work or in discussions on the bus, they have been "democratised," and this commonly happens only for simple ideas. For example, the idea that bodies and behaviours are influenced by genetic factors is becoming ever more widely used, especially when media stories tell of genes for alcoholism or aggressiveness. Biologists may cringe when they hear inaccurate interpretations of genetic theory, but there is no doubt that the simple version is widely used.

Just because I'm commenting on the value of simple ideas doesn't mean that what I have to say is simple itself. Because I'm questioning the standard way of thinking about ideas. Most intellectuals, I'm convinced, think in terms of quite simple models. But few of them express themselves equally simply, since that would undermine their credibility as sophisticated, even great, thinkers.

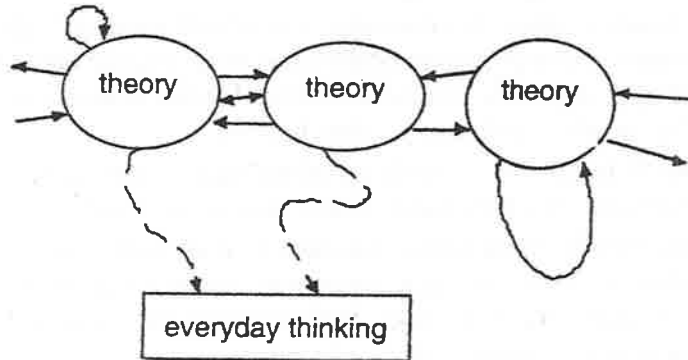
Here, in outline, is my basic idea :

- The most important thing is developing effective methods of action and simple ideas to think about them.
- Theory should be built up around these simple ideas.

The usual approach is shown in this diagram. Sophisticated theory is shown as a cloud of concepts, relationships, puzzles, interactions. Below

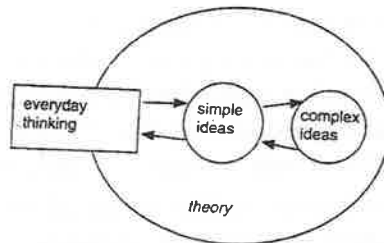
2. Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion* (New York : Basic Books, 1984), p.181

the cloud are few spin-offs for action, often based on a simplified version of complex theory. This might be called the trickle-down model of theory and action.



Some bodies of theory are so esoteric that there are no obvious spin-offs : the cloud can float along without much application at all. A large amount of current work on poststructuralism - which involves "deconstructing" standard concepts - seems to fit this description.³

An alternative approach is to develop a solid set of practices and simple ideas, and develop theory that is compatible with it.



When I was developing my thoughts about simple ideas, I wrote to Chris Rootes, a sociologist who has written excellent analyses of the value of theory for social activists. He wrote back with some helpful comments :

"As far as the value of simple ideas is concerned, I would simply caution that simple ideas may be devastatingly wrong and even have extremely coercive regimes erected around them. The fact that there was little enough in the way of coherent theory behind it scarcely prevented Nazism from being a totalitarian force, and very simple, scarcely intellectualised notions of race or nation have been perfectly adequate to motivate some of the nastiest regimes in history. I think maybe 'common sense' whether it be of the liberal or the conservative sort has much to recommend it because at

3. A good critique is Barbara Epstein, "Why poststructuralism is a dead end for progressive thought," **Socialist Review**, Vol. 25, No. 2, 1995, pp. 83-119.

least it allows people to behave decently toward one another".

This was helpful advice. Simple ideas can be helpful to murderous regimes and lead to disastrous policies. I certainly didn't want to suggest that all simple ideas are good.

But Carl Hedman, a philosopher and community activist living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, solved the problem. He said, "Of course not all simple ideas are valuable. But some of them are. The task is to find the ones that are helpful for socially beneficial purposes." A logician would say that simplicity is a necessary condition but not a sufficient one.

That's basically my argument. Rather than judging ideas according to sophisticated theory, we should **judge sophisticated theory according to whether it builds on and contributes to simple ideas that are helpful in practice for achieving the things we value.**

Case studies

I've picked out a number of examples that show the value of certain simple ideas, even though in some ways the ideas are misleading, incomplete or even just plain wrong. These examples are just illustrations. No doubt some of them can be interpreted differently or used to draw different lessons. New information or analysis may invalidate them. There are lots of other possible examples; each person needs to find the ones most appropriate for them.

Sexual harassment

For untold decades, women have suffered a range of unwelcome behaviours by men. These include verbal comments of a sexual nature, staring or touching and grabbing, demands for sexual favours (sex in order to get or keep a job), sexual assault and rape. Most women learned how to ignore or avoid these behaviours. Or suffer the violation in silence as most world social-religious traditions put the female in inferior position.

The resurgence of the feminist movement in the 1960s however led women to reexamine their lives. The term "sexual harassment" was coined to refer to a variety of behaviours that are unwelcome, unsolicited and unreciprocated. The idea of sexual harassment captured the experiences of many women. The term was soon used widely and campaigns began to stop it, by telling women that they didn't have to put up with it, by setting up committees to deal with complaints and by passing legislation against it. Sexual harassment still continues to occur, but it is increasingly stigmatised, resisted and in most countries a legal offence.

"Sexual harassment" has become a simple idea, a name for a common problem that once had no name. Like all simple ideas, there are difficulties with the idea of sexual harassment. Does a sexually explicit photograph on

a shopfloor wall constitute sexual harassment? Do the perpetrators have to be told that their behaviour is unwelcome? Does a single incident count as sexual harassment, or does it require repeated instances? These and other questions can be answered according to particular sexual harassment policies or legislation. There are deeper questions, though. For example, does it make sense to include such a wide range of behaviours - from staring and casual touching to assault and rape - under one category?

Two feminist activists and scholars, Sue Wise and Liz Stanley, wrote a detailed critique of the idea of sexual harassment. Their basic theme is that sexual harassment has been defined in a narrow fashion that leaves out the harassment of women in everyday life and ignores women's practical means of resistance. They show that "sexual harassment" has been packaged in a framework oriented to the workplace in which blatant acts of harassment are dealt with through formal mechanisms. They use anecdotes and arguments to illustrate more commonplace forms of harassment and some practical ways of responding to them. They argue that the conventional idea of sexual harassment presents women as victims, with men as the saviours via formal procedures. They argue instead that women should take action themselves. They argue that idea of sexual harassment doesn't really grapple with the problem of male domination.⁴

I think Wise and Stanley have wonderful insights. They have shown weaknesses in the concept of sexual harassment. Nevertheless, for all its weaknesses, "sexual harassment" is a useful concept because it helps people understand everyday problems and enables campaigns to be mounted against undesirable behaviours. "Sexual harassment" may be flawed as a concept but it is still quite useful. For practical purposes, replacing it with a more sophisticated conception of male domination would not necessarily be better.

Quantum theory

In the 1920s, theoretical physicists developed powerful new ways to describe the behaviour of atoms and their component parts such as protons, neutrons and electrons. Models from the everyday world didn't seem to apply all that well. One standard model is the particle : in some ways an electron behaves like a tiny billiard ball with an electric charge. In other ways, though, an electron behaves more like a wave, for example in causing diffraction patterns. Quantum physicists developed a mathematical way of explaining both these behaviours, symbolised by Schrodinger's equation.

Many physicists are happy just to use the equations to work out energy levels and other results. Some ask, though, what the equations mean.

4. Sue Wise and Liz Stanley, **Georgie Porgie : Sexual Harassment in Everyday Life** (London : Pandora, 1987).

Physicists in the 1920s largely reached agreement on one particular interpretation - the so-called Copenhagen interpretation - of the equations. This interpretation is based on indeterminism. The wave function in Schrodinger's equation provides a set of probabilities for where a particle might be, but the actual position is not determined until there is an observation, causing a collapse of the wave function.

In the 1930s, the talented mathematician John von Neumann proved that a deterministic interpretation of Schrodinger's equation, using hidden variables, was not possible. For most physicists this proof was irrelevant, since they considered the matter closed anyway.

Then in 1952 along came physicist David Bohm. He developed a deterministic, hidden-variable interpretation of quantum theory. This was impossible according to von Neumann. It wasn't until 1966 that a flaw was found in von Neumann's proof. Bohm had already shown, through practical example, that the proof didn't apply. As in many cases, doing the impossible is easier than proving that a theory is wrong.

Quantum theory has caused many a physics student perplexity and anguish. Of greater interest, though, is the widespread interest in quantum theory among critics of social institutions. The Newtonian model of the universe - rule-bound, predictable, regular - has long been used as a metaphor for society. The classical physicist's orderly universe underpins and orders society in which everyone knows their place and keeps things running smoothly. If nature is "really" orderly, then it's appropriate that society is too, so the logic goes.

Some members of the new social movements of the 1960s looked to quantum theory for a different inspiration. If nature is inherently unpredictable and interactive, then this is a better model for society. Fritjof Capra in *The Tao of Physics* argued that quantum theory has strong analogies to eastern mysticism.⁵ Writers on political theory, psychology, and social change have looked to quantum theory for inspiration.

Personally I don't think it makes much sense to apply ideas from quantum theory to society. After all, the Copenhagen interpretation is just one interpretation, though admittedly the dominant one. Alternatives exist, such as Bohm's hidden variable theory. One historian of science argues that if things had been a bit different in the 1920s, a hidden variable interpretation might have triumphed then.⁶ The use of quantum theory to inspire insights into society is built on quicksand.

5. Fritjof Capra, **The Tao of Physics : An exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism** (London : Flamingo, 1992, 3rd edition.)

6. James T. Cushing, **Quantum Mechanics : Historical Contingency and the Copenhagen Hegemony** (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1994)

Does this matter? The application of models from science to society is always a process of simplification. The theory of evolution is another example. Darwin's analysis of natural selection was corrupted and simplified into "The survival of the fittest." Darwinian ideas applied to economics and the social sphere are used to justify capitalism. By contrast, quantum theory applied to social arenas is usually used to criticise established institutions. In my view, whether ideas are true scientifically is largely irrelevant when they are applied to society. Quantum theory can validly be used for inspiration, but not for justification of any particular perspective on society.

One way to proceed is to start by picking what we think are desirable characteristics of society, such as self-reliance, freedom, compassion and innovation. Then we can look at nature, whether at other species or subatomic particles, for analogies to these characteristics. These analogies may then provide ideas for understanding or promoting the desirable characteristics of society. The key is to use simple ideas about society and nature for our purposes.

The consent theory of power

What is power? We are concerned here with social power or political power, not power as defined in physics. Most people think of power as something that is possessed. It can come through wealth, formal position (president, general, corporate director, guru or pope), sometimes charisma. Powerful people have it - they are the "powerholders". Powerless people don't have much. In this perspective, the struggle for power is a struggle for the levers to control others, such as money and position.

For those who want to help create a more just and equal society, this picture is not very hopeful.

The usual academic approach is to build a comprehensive analysis of society and then see what implications this has for action. In the case of theories of power, I think it makes more sense to start with nonviolent activists and build theories on the basis of what they are doing. The consent theory is a good place to start.

Yes, I know that the very idea of "nonviolent action" is problematic theoretically. That's another area where I think it's better to build theory around action.

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