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# On the value of simple ideas

**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 frighten-

ing 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 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.”<sup>1</sup>

If you are brave enough to criticise the analysis, a common response 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,

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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.

as in the case of “vulgar Marxism.” My argument is that this emphasis is wrong.

Simple ideas and associated actions should be the centrepiece, 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,
- 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. Nevertheless, I'm going to proceed using “simple ideas” as a simple idea, trying not to get bogged down in complexities.

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.”<sup>2</sup> 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, what I have to say may be hard to grasp at first. I’ll do my best to explain it.

Most intellectuals, I’m convinced, think in terms of quite simple models. But few of them express themselves equally

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

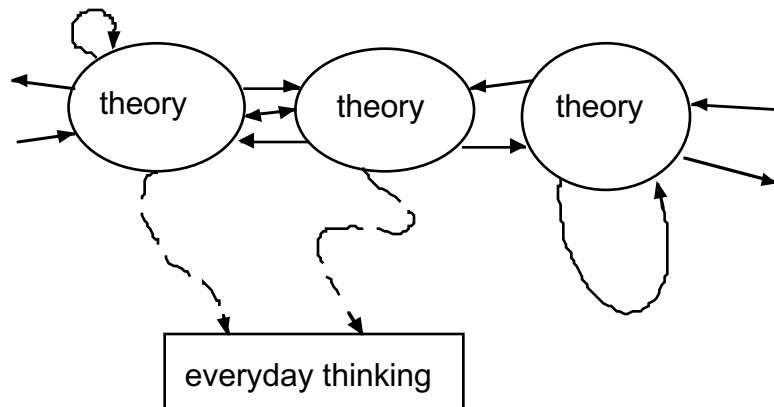
simply, since that would undermine their credibility as sophisticated, even great, thinkers.

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.

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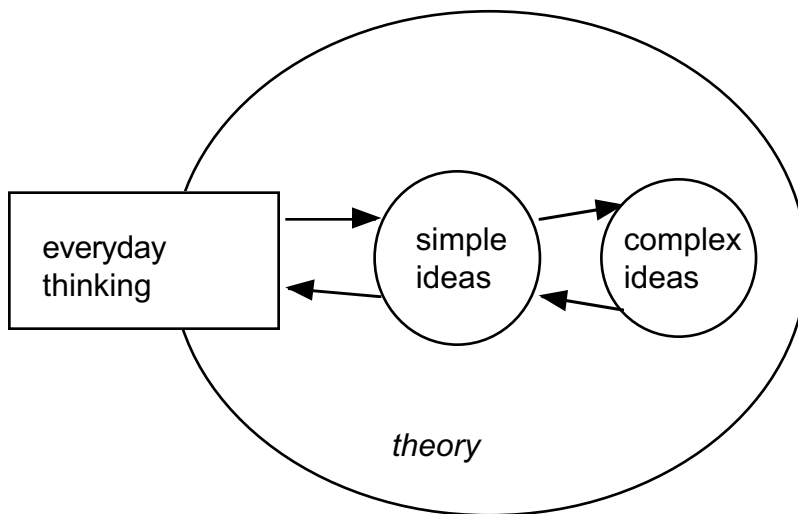
The usual approach is shown in this diagram. Sophisticated theory is shown as a cloud of concepts, relationships, puzzles, interactions. Below the cloud are a few spin-offs for action, often based on a simplified version of complex theory. This might be called the trickle-down model of theory and action.



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 poststruc-

turalism—which involves “deconstructing” standard concepts—seems to fit this description.<sup>3</sup>

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

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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.

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 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.

Later, I was talking about this to Carl Hedman, a philosopher and community activist living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He immediately 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 (“hey bitch!”), staring at breasts or crotch, 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. The boss who made crude sexual jokes, leaned closely over one's shoulder, patted one's backside and grabbed a kiss when everyone else had gone home was just part of the job.

The resurgence of the feminist movement in the 1960s 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 and resisted.

"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.<sup>4</sup>

I think Wise and Stanley's critique is superb. They have wonderful insights. They have shown weaknesses in the concept of sexual harassment. Nevertheless, for all its weaknesses, I still think "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 Schrödinger'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. 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 Schrödinger's

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

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 Schrödinger'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 an orderly 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.<sup>5</sup> Writers on political theory, psychology, and social change have looked to quantum theory for inspiration.

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

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.<sup>6</sup> The use of quantum theory to inspire insights into society is built on quicksand.

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? I'm 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,

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

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. It suggests that the best way to bring about change is to capture power in order to make improvements. This of course is the standard strategy adopted by reformers, who attempt to rise in government bureaucracies, to promote election of progressive political parties and to adopt enlightened stands in professional associations. The danger is that the process of seeking power tends to corrupt the leaders of the progressive movements. As progressives attempt to obtain power in order to change social institutions, they are changed sooner than the institutions.

There is, though, a different perspective on power that is much more suited for challengers. This is the consent theory of power. The basic idea is that people don’t hold power—rather it is ceded to them by others. In short, people give their consent to being ruled. If they withdraw their consent, then even the most ruthless ruler will be powerless.

Gene Sharp is the world’s most influential living writer on nonviolent action. (Only Gandhi, who died in 1948, is as influential.) He analysed the dynamics of nonviolent action and catalogued 198 different methods of nonviolent action—including many varieties of strikes, boycotts, symbolic action, sit-ins, etc.—each with historical examples. Sharp’s analysis is built on the consent theory of power, which he has modified, elaborated and applied for the purposes of understanding how nonviolent action works.<sup>7</sup>

Sharp’s development of the consent theory of power has had a big impact among nonviolent activists. It has been taught in

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7. Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973); Gene Sharp, *Social Power and Political Freedom* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1980).

workshops to thousands of activists as the way to understand power in society. It is linked to more practical training in group dynamics, campaign planning, and preparation for direct action.

In spite of his enormous influence among activists, Sharp's ideas have had minimal impact among political scientists. The consent theory of power has little scholarly support. I am a supporter of nonviolent action but, having looked at other sorts of analyses, I also was not so sure about the consent theory. So I undertook a closer study of the theory.<sup>8</sup> I concluded that the theory is flawed because it doesn't take into account social structures. Most people cannot simply "withdraw consent" because they are enmeshed in complicated systems in which they are partly under the authority of others and partly have authority over others. Furthermore, in systems where power is "built in" to mechanisms—such as the market in capitalism—there are no obvious rulers from whom to withdraw consent. The consent theory is most plausible when there is an obvious ruler, such as a military dictator, and is less plausible in more complicated systems of power.

I concluded that the consent theory of power is deeply flawed. Intellectuals could probably tear it to shreds if they wanted to, but they ignore it since it has no visibility in scholarly circles. In spite of its theoretical weaknesses, the consent theory is admirably suited for activists. It is just what they need to give them both insight and hope that taking action will make a difference. Moreover, the theory is not applied in a vacuum. There are activists who have an acute intuitive grasp of local political realities. For these activists, the theoretical weaknesses of the consent theory don't matter so much.

For activists, the consent theory is a simple idea. It basically says, "you can make a difference by withdrawing consent from

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8. Brian Martin, "Gene Sharp's theory of power," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 1989, pp. 213-222. See also Kate McGuinness, "Gene Sharp's theory of power: a feminist critique of consent," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1993, pp. 101-115.

dominant interests.” It makes sense of what activists do and what they want to achieve. It is a theory that is tied to a particular type of action. A more sophisticated theory, such as Althusser’s structural theory of ideology or Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, would not necessarily be more useful.

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.

### ***Oral sepsis***

In the early 1900s, the theory of oral sepsis gained great support among British dentists. “Oral sepsis” or “focal sepsis” was the idea that many diseases gain entry to the body through bad teeth. In retrospect, the theory was wrong and was never supported by very much good evidence. Two authors who studied the reception to the theory, Gilles Dussault and Aubrey Sheiham, say that “the acceptance of a medical theory by practitioners and by the public is as much determined by social and economic factors as by its scientific validity or its therapeutic potential.”

William Hunter, the British doctor who developed the theory, used it to attack conservative dentistry that was done mainly in the United States. Hence more research was done on it in the US and more opposition to it was expressed there. Although it ended up being wrong, oral sepsis theory helped draw attention to oral hygiene and gum disease and improved restorative techniques. Dussault and Sheiham conclude “In the end, the

example of oral sepsis shows that even an unfounded theory can produce beneficial results.”<sup>9</sup>

This is not unusual in science. The most important theories are the ones that stimulate productive research, and many theories that do this are later shown to be false. Oral sepsis theory also illustrates that theories can be adopted or adapted to serve the needs of those who use them.

### ***SLAPPs***

In West Virginia in the 1970s, farmer Rick Webb made a complaint to the US Environmental Protection Agency about pollution of a river by a coal company. The company responded by suing Webb for defamation, asking for \$200,000. In 1983, a number of residents in a small town in Colorado signed a formal petition for a referendum to stop conversion of some farmland for residential development. Four of those who signed the petition were sued by the developer for “an undetermined amount.”

Two academics at the University of Denver, Penelope Canan and George Pring, became aware of an epidemic of legal actions of this sort. The basic pattern was for a company to use the courts to intimidate citizens who were simply exercising their constitutional right to petition the government. The actions for defamation, conspiracy, judicial process abuse and other legal claims had little chance of success and hardly ever succeeded when they did go to court, but that didn’t matter. They often were quite successful in scaring citizens, many of whom backed off from their activities.

Canan and Pring carried out extensive studies of this development. They dubbed these suits Strategic Lawsuits

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9. Gilles Dussault and Aubrey Sheiham, “Medical theories and professional development: the theory of focal sepsis and dentistry in early twentieth century Britain,” *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol. 16, 1982, pp. 1405-1412, quotes from pp. 1405, 1410.

Against Public Participation or SLAPPs.<sup>10</sup> The basic concept was that the law was being used to quell free speech. The idea of SLAPPs caught on very quickly. There were many articles in law journals, some of them proposing slightly different definitions than Canan and Pring's. More importantly, the idea of SLAPPs was immensely helpful to the citizens who were being sued. It helped them understand what was happening and to formulate a better informed response. Canan and Pring used their knowledge and contacts to mobilise opposition to SLAPPs around the US, including laws against them passed in a number of states.

It is possible to quibble with the definition of a SLAPP, to debate whether particular types of cases fit the model and to question the usual strategies used against them, such as the countersuit or SLAPP-back. Potential complexities abound. Nevertheless, the basic idea of a SLAPP is simple and captures enough of people's experience to be extremely useful. The acronym SLAPP is brilliant and seems to have helped a lot.

### ***Strategy against nuclear power***

In Australia, the peak years of debate over nuclear power were 1975-1984. Much of the debate focused on uranium mining, since Australia has large deposits of uranium and plans for nuclear power plants had never progressed very far.

In 1983, four of us in Friends of the Earth Canberra decided to write an article about strategy against nuclear power.<sup>11</sup> We planned our article as an analysis of the deep-rooted driving forces behind the nuclear fuel cycle followed by an assessment of various strategies in the light of our analysis. We had lots of debates about "driving forces" and eventually ended up

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10. George W. Pring and Penelope Canan, *SLAPPs: Getting Sued for Speaking Out* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996). See chapter 6 for another context.

11. The article appeared as a booklet in January 1984. An abridged version was published as Friends of the Earth (Canberra), "Strategy against nuclear power," *Social Alternatives*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1986, pp. 9-16.



concentrating on four: the state, capitalism, patriarchy and the division of labour. The strategies we examined were lobbying, participating in environmental inquiries, working through the trade union movement, working through the parliamentary system and grassroots mobilisation. We concluded that grassroots mobilisation—including such things as leaflets, talks, petitions, marches, promoting nuclear-free zones, and civil disobedience—offered the best prospects for challenging the social structures behind nuclear power.

We sent a draft of our article to quite a few people in the antinuclear movement, asking them for comments. This was revealing. Quite a number of them said they agreed with our conclusions but disagreed with certain parts of our analysis—but each person had a different disagreement with the analysis.

When we wrote the paper, we imagined that the analysis and the conclusions were logically linked together. But the responses suggested something else, namely that the same strategy could be justified by a range of different analyses. It almost seemed that the analysis didn't matter all that much: the key thing was the strategy.

We wrote our paper in the usual fashion, putting the analysis first and then using the analysis as a means of assessing strategy. Yet if readers disagreed with the analysis, the risk was that they wouldn't persevere to the section on strategy.

This experience got me thinking about the connection between theory and practice. Our discussion of theories of the state, capitalism, patriarchy and so forth was presented in simple terms, without much elaboration, and in close connection with a practical analysis of the development of nuclear power. If our down-to-earth discussion of theory was contentious for activists, what about the jargon-filled treatments in scholarly books and journals? I knew the answer to that question. They are almost totally irrelevant for activists. Most sophisticated theory is too complex, too qualified and too remote from applications to be of much practical use. The only exceptions are when there is a simple version.

***Theories of technology***

Many people used to think that technology is always a good thing. The development of nuclear weapons undermined that view. On the other hand, a few people think technology is generally bad, but this view is hard to justify when thinking of hoes or hearing aids.

The most common view is that technology is neutral and so can be used for good or bad. This is called the use-abuse model. The idea is that technology can be *used* (for good purposes) or *abused* (for bad purposes). Another common idea about technology is that it has a momentum of its own: once a technology such as the car or the telephone gets started, it can't be stopped. This is called technological determinism.

Social analysts who focus on technology rejected all these ideas long ago. In university classes where I work, we spend lots of time explaining why technology is not neutral and why technological determinism is wrong. Currently, a favourite view among scholars in the field is constructivism. In this model, technologies are the outcome of diverse social processes, including world views, prior technologies, organisational structures, social class, etc. There is no inevitability. Neutrality is an irrelevant concept. Instead, individual technologies have to be studied in the context of the circumstances in which they are conceived, developed, opposed, altered, instituted and superseded.

There are some highly sophisticated analyses of technology available. But there is a big problem. The more sophisticated theories don't provide a simple way of thinking about technology. Admittedly, some scholars can become accustomed to thinking in terms of actor-networks in which people, platypuses and paint brushes are all equivalent "actors" in an undifferentiated struggle to get their way. But this seems suited mainly for scholarly analyses, not for practical dealings with technology.

I'm almost inclined to advocate simplistic ways of thinking about technology. Rather than neutral technology, I prefer the

idea of biased technology. Some technologies, such as cluster bombs, are biased towards bad uses; others, such as straw hats and solar hot water collectors, are biased towards benign uses.

In addition, it may not matter all that much what general theories of technology people espouse, since what counts is their response. In spite of the prevalent belief in technological determinism, there have been major campaigns against technologies such as nuclear weapons, supersonic transport aircraft and pesticides. If people really believed that technologies couldn't be stopped, why would they bother campaigning against or for them? If they really believed that technologies are neutral, why would they care whether electricity is produced by wind, coal, hydro or nuclear power? For most activists, scholarly theories of technology are unknown and irrelevant, for better or worse I'm not sure. I do think that theories of technology are more relevant when they were grounded in readily understandable and practical ideas.

## **Conclusion**

These examples suggest a number of points.

- Sometimes a wrong idea can be more useful than a correct idea. A wrong idea sometimes can be a good way of pursuing the truth.
- Sometimes getting the theory right doesn't really matter for practice. Rather than being the basis for practice, a theory may just be used to justify practice.
- Some simple ideas are useful for producing a good society, but many of them are irrelevant or harmful.

Many intellectuals do not take kindly to these points. Whenever I've suggested that it doesn't really matter all that much whether theory is right, I've encountered all sorts of objections. "Surely it's better to base practice on a theory that is logically consistent, coherent and complete. It only makes sense that an improved analysis will lead to improved practice."

I'm not convinced. Just because a theory is self-consistent, for example, doesn't necessarily mean it is more useful for

activists than a self-contradictory one. That's because knowledge is always incomplete. Forcing a theory to be consistent may eliminate insights and dynamism. From the point of view of some future improved theory, "consistency" may just mean forcing the theory into a straitjacket based on an ill-considered assumption.

This doesn't mean that inconsistency is better. It means that getting the theory right is not the first priority, but simply one thing to do among others. Of equal or greater importance is promoting ideas that are relevant to practice and that can be simply understood.

There are plenty of simple ideas around, and lots of them are used to prop up sexism, racism, poverty and the like. In order to challenge simple ideas used for oppressive purposes, it's valuable to promote simple ideas that encourage human ideals. But this is not an easy task.

It is one thing to come up with a simple idea that is an improvement over what's available. But promoting it is a different story. There are stacks of people in advertising, for example, who devote their careers to developing catchy slogans or striking images that will sell. They are experts on attaching products to cultural stereotypes. Toys, for example, are increasingly differentiated by gender, with Barbie for girls and He-Man for boys and a host of others. Gender stereotypes are widely understood and thus can be used as an effective marketing strategy.<sup>12</sup>

This sort of corporate use of simple ideas is essentially manipulative. It is not aimed at helping people understand their lives, but rather getting them to buy a product. Most mainstream political uses of simple ideas, such as politicians' campaign pitches about crime or debt, are similarly manipulative.

Finding, developing and promoting simple ideas that empower people is quite a challenge. The ideas of SLAPPs and

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12. Wendy Varney, *The Social Shaping of Children's Manufactured Toys* (forthcoming).

sexual harassment are instructive. These ideas speak to people's experiences, enabling them to understand problems confronting them and encouraging them to take action.

Promoting simple ideas can be a struggle. Dominant groups often attempt to discredit ideas. The idea of "anarchy" in principle means society without government but is widely used as a synonym for chaos. This is largely due to attacks by capitalists, politicians and communists. Anarchists consequently have an uphill battle in explaining their vision and methods. There are no widely understood terms referring to an egalitarian society without rulers.

The idea of "democracy" has had a similar but less drastic fate. For most people it has come to mean voting and elected representatives, which can be called electoral democracy or representative democracy. A form of democracy in which citizens have direct control over decisions has to have a different name, such as direct democracy or participatory democracy. There is an ongoing struggle over the meaning of "democracy." As social scientists say, its meaning is "essentially contested."

Because different groups have an interest in promoting certain ideas and certain meanings of ideas, it is not easy to promote socially beneficial simple ideas. There is an enormous intellectual challenge involved, but it is one that cannot take place solely among intellectuals. All sorts of people have to be involved in developing simple and useful ideas.