

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

Dietrich Rueschemeyer: Usable Theory

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2009, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

Follow links for Class Use and other Permissions. For more information send email to: permissions@press.princeton.edu

Chapter I

ANALYTIC TOOLS FOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL RESEARCH

This book is an essay in empirical social theory. It will present tools for theory construction in the course of empirical research. I will describe established theoretical ideas and suggest new ones—pieces of theory that seem useful for formulating research questions, for identifying key factors important for the issues at hand, for devising explanations of puzzling and remarkable outcomes, and for exploring possible future developments.

Fully developed theories—by this I mean integrated sets of empirical hypotheses that hold under specified conditions—are fairly rare in social and political analysis; rarer than many find it comfortable to recognize. Full-fledged theories do exist in social and political analysis. The body of propositions about interaction, emergent norms, and social control generated by small group research is a well-known example. However, on most issues and problems there simply do not exist theories of this kind that can be “taken off the shelf” and applied “as is” to a given problem. At the same time, different elements of theory in a broader sense—ranging from initial conceptualizations to freestanding causal hypotheses—remain indispensable for making sense of social life. Almost inevitably, then, meaningful social and political research will involve theory construction. It is for this theory work within the process of empirical research that I wish to offer analytic tools as well as encouragement.

Foremost among these analytic tools are focused *theory frames* that guide hypothesis formation but do not themselves contain or logically entail a body of testable hypotheses. They identify the *kinds* of causal conditions and process patterns that seem relevant for a given range of issues, they offer concepts that correspond to these identifications, and they give reasons for the choices made. Though occasionally also including empirical theoretical claims, they are primarily helpful in developing testable hypotheses. We ask about theory frames how fruitful they are in suggesting empirical propositions rather than judging them as empirically true or not. Yet the utility criterion represents an indirect link to empirical reality. For instance, the study of social movements has been greatly advanced since the 1970s when structural, cultural, and rational action ideas that had been separately developed in research on movements were inte-

grated with each other, linking a focus on political opportunities with emphases on resource mobilization and organizational capacity, as well as on social constructions of meaning through “cognitive framing” (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1988; Tarrow 1994; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 1997; Goodwin and Jasper 2004).

Theory frames are often underestimated; this is due partly to the fact that they fall short of the ideal of a full-fledged theory. Yet, to venture a strong claim, it is such theory frames rather than fully developed empirical theories that represent the strongest advances in the social sciences over the last 150 years. Among the many instances that come to mind are the claims of Durkheim (1893/1964) and Simmel (1908/1955) on the nexus between modern social structures and a person’s individuality, the sequence of Marxian analyses of class formation, game theoretical explorations of interaction under simple motivational assumptions, Olson’s *Logic of Collective Action* (1965) and the discussion that followed it, or Steven Lukes’s consequential reflections on a series of community power studies in his *Power: A Radical View* (1974).

Theory frames give the context within which the more detailed theoretical work is to be done—developing fresh hypotheses, adjusting concept formation and hypothesis development to each other, complementing and elaborating hypotheses that hold promise but fail to sufficiently specify their domain or the conditions activating the hypothesized mechanisms, and the like. Throughout, I will concentrate on ideas that are portable across different substantive areas rather than on insights that are confined to specific domains such as family and kinship, work in offices and factories, or the dynamics of electoral choice in politics.

What this volume offers, then, differs from most treatments of theory in the social sciences. Some of these present mostly normative theory. Though normative theory is shot through with assumptions about how social and political life actually works, its main thrust is to state what should be, not what is. In political science, normative conceptions and their history constitute the bulk of what is commonly understood as political theory—the rich heritage of views ranging from Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas, from Hobbes and Locke to Bentham and John Stuart Mill, and today from Robert Nozick to John Rawls, Martha Nussbaum, and Amartya Sen.

In sociology, the teaching of theory typically presents surveys centered on Marx, Durkheim, and Weber in the nineteenth century and the work of such thinkers as Mead, Parsons, Habermas, Foucault, Bourdieu, and Coleman in the twentieth. Bracketing their normative orientations, it focuses on the broad theoretical orientations and grand designs of analysis the different theorists advocate—on structural functionalism, power and conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, poststructuralism, or rational ac-

tion theory—rather than on empirical propositions. Such comprehensive “metatheories” may give broad context and direction to more focused theory frames and specific hypothesis formation, but they often have another, more hidden side as well. They frequently also serve as elements of comprehensive worldviews, linking theory to broad ideological and philosophical orientations. This, more than their utility as tools for theory formation, explains the intensity with which views about system integration and social conflict, the role of culture in sociological explanations, or the explanatory power of rational choice models are advanced, attacked, and defended.

These broad conceptions of theory have their place—as inventories of past social thought and as background to more specific social and political analysis. Many empirically oriented scholars treat them as not directly relevant excursions into the humanities, good for a liberal education but not very important for their own research. Arthur Stinchcombe has made this point in a memorable way about historical sociology: “When it comes down to analysis of specific cases, I would argue that when they do a good job of historical interpretation, Marx and Weber and Parsons and Trotsky and Smelser all operate the same way” (1978, 2). The construction of hypotheses, research design, and the logic of analysis in empirical research may indeed be quite similar across different traditions of metatheory.

It is for the empirical theory required in social and political research that this book will present building blocks. I will offer theory instead of surveys of theory, presenting analytic tools I consider useful rather than commenting comparatively on a range of past and current ideas and conceptions. Focusing on tools for the theory work in empirical analysis, I will deliberately leave aside the dialogue and the contention among grand theoretical conceptions.

The title *Usable Theory* may be read as both invidious and ambitious. It is not meant to be either. I have no intention to denigrate metatheoretical discussions or to dismiss normative theory, which has seen in recent decades a welcome revival. Nor do I claim that what I can present amounts to integrated empirical theories of immediate applicability. This is most of the time simply not possible.¹ My goal is a distinctly modest one: to

¹ This volume also does not aim to be a compendium of whatever is considered settled theoretical knowledge in the social sciences. This complex and difficult task has been tackled by others. Randall Collins’s *Theoretical Sociology* (1988) made a comprehensive attempt. For earlier, more pedestrian versions that focus on presumed or established empirical generalizations, see Gilbert Kushner et al., *What Accounts for Sociocultural Change? A Propositional Inventory* (1962), and Bernard Berelson and Gary A. Steiner, *Human Behavior: An Inventory of Scientific Findings* (1964). There are of course also many reviews of particular subfields that contain important summaries of theories and findings. Regular publications of this kind are found in the *Annual Review of Sociology* series. *Current Sociology*, pub-

present some established theoretical ideas and to complement them with further suggestions that I deem useful in the interplay of research design, theory formation, and data analysis, analytic tools helpful in the do-it-yourself enterprises most social researchers have to engage in when it comes to formulating significant problems, explaining findings, and venturing estimates of future outcomes. Many of these ideas are less than comprehensive and even fragmentary. Furthermore, they are often only suggestive. Yet I firmly believe that even fragmentary ideas that stay close to the problems of empirical investigation will set theoretical imagination free and stimulate theory building in the process of research.

THE ROLE OF THEORY

Theory in its various forms is of vital importance for social and political research. While everyone is aware of its complex role, it may be useful to rehearse here a few major points. First, theoretical ideas shape the questions we ask. Thus power theory frames direct examination to power resources and conflict relations in the study of material inequality. Furthermore, the very concepts we use in the formulation of research problems are shaped by our ideas about the factors and conditions that make a difference in outcomes of interest. Jean-Jacques Rousseau noted ages ago, “Before observing, one must establish rules for one’s observations.”²

Second, theory is critical for the task of anticipating answers, once the problems are sharply formulated. The development of hypotheses to be tested—often a set of competing hypotheses—quite clearly gains from a knowledge of how comparable hypotheses fared in the work on similar problems. In the absence of specific hypotheses on related problems, there may be useful precedent in the way similar research identified the main relevant factors and conditions. More comprehensive theoretical conceptions put an inquiry into a broader perspective. In this way they can help to avoid simplistic closure in the analysis of specific questions about, say, families, work organization, or community governance, preventing a one-sided focus on domination or shared values, on harmony or conflict, on destructiveness or functionality.

The third point corresponds to the second; it is in fact the other side of the same coin: theory serves as the repository of previous research results. And it is the more useful in this function, the more systematic it is. It is

lished by the International Sociological Association, has long offered specialized literature reviews. Earlier theoretical summaries of special fields of inquiry that deserve particular mention are Donald Black’s *The Behavior of Law* (1976) and Gerhard Lenski’s *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (1966).

² *Emile, ou de l’éducation*, bk. 5, in a section titled “Des Voyages.” Cited after Starobinski (2002, n. 7).

difficult to know all the studies that are relevant to a given new project. Even roughly systematically ordered theory helps to give access to the theoretical gist of previous work. Without it, research produces a sea of fragmented results. This was well known to the ancient Greeks, who distinguished between well-ordered knowledge (*episteme*) and mere information about many facts (*polymathia*).

DESCRIPTION AND THEORY

To be sure, studies that content themselves with description often arouse great interest. And they are significant products of social and political analysis. But even these studies need theory. Sheer description does not ever exist.

Much of survey research fascinates because it informs about patterns in the wider society that transcend our immediate experience. How many people of different descriptions voted Republican? Who opposed the decision to go to war in Iraq? Yet the categories used for informative breakdowns of survey results imply at least a rudimentary theory of the behavior in question, of political choice for example. Theory points to social groupings with similar interests, shared experience, values, and outlooks that seem crucial for political choice.

One might claim that on many issues we can predict the future quite well by extrapolating from descriptions of the present or the past. We can estimate the need for schoolrooms and teachers in a community reasonably well after looking at the current cohort of one-year-olds. Such extrapolations form the basis of much social planning. But predictions that extrapolate from time series data in the past benefit from adjustments based on theoretical ideas, however simple and commonsensical. Pure extrapolation is rarely sufficient, especially over long periods of time. Pitirim Sorokin (1956) put uncontrolled extrapolation on his list of “fads and foibles in sociology.”

Similarly, once the biology of transmission of AIDS was understood, one could derive conclusions about the likely paths of HIV infection if the established patterns of sexual behavior were known. This knowledge was generated by a research project that superseded the nonrepresentative information of the Kinsey reports (Laumann et al. 1994). Yet, though largely descriptive in character, that study required a conceptual sophistication uncommon in run-of-the-mill survey research.

All descriptive work, then, involves some theory. The most narrative of historical accounts entail decisions about what is important and why, and their storytelling is interwoven with causal interpretations that require the use of theoretical ideas, no matter how much these remain implicit. The same is true of social case studies that appeal by their vivid

detail and interesting subject matter, and that might resemble novels more than other social research. Theory figures in formulating the questions asked, in conceptualizing the important phenomena, in making connections between different aspects of the things examined, in suggesting—however crudely and perhaps tentatively—cause-effect relations, and so on. These theoretical ingredients may not go much beyond informed common sense, but they are present. In the best work of this kind such elements of theory rise well above ordinary understandings. How else to explain the sense of insight created by books like Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943) or Hannerz's *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community* (1969)?

VARIETIES OF ANALYTIC TOOLS AND TROUBLED THEORETICAL AMBITIONS

What is it exactly, then, that we mean by theory? It is time to take a closer look and to distinguish the variety of analytic tools covered by that label. As we disentangle and define different meanings and components of theory, we will learn more about where things stand, what is possible, what seems beyond reach, and what is to be done.

In the conventional ideal, which holds to a narrow concept of theory, a theory consists of interrelated propositions that say something general about relations and processes in social reality. A theoretical proposition is "general" in the sense that it transcends description of particular facts; it claims to hold universally, but only under specified conditions.

Some assert that such propositions are altogether beyond the reach of social and political analysis. Human behavior, this argument runs, is too variegated. Embedded in ever-changing institutional and cultural configurations, it is shaped by too many factors. And the effects of these factors vary over time, not least because individuals, groups, and organizations learn from experience. Throw in the sense that the future is open as well as common assumptions about human freedom, and the conclusion seems clear: social and political analysis cannot aspire to theoretical understanding in this demanding sense of theory. That skepticism, however, seems to go too far. A more moderate view upholds the ideal of building theoretical knowledge but finds the results often thin, perhaps embarrassingly thin.³ Giving close attention to a few examples may be instructive.

³ Eckstein (1975, 99) addressed these issues a generation ago in the context of political case studies and spoke about an "*embarras de pauvreté*." The theoretical nihilism that underlies the more extreme versions of postmodern relativism is perhaps a reaction to disappointing results in the search for scientific theory.

A broad theoretical proposition, taken from the sociology of law, differentiates between societies: “The more stratification a society has, the more law it has.” This claim has been backed up with a great variety of research results. Furthermore, stratification has been shown to be related to several specific aspects of the law in systematic ways (Black 1976, 13 and chap. 2).

Another hypothesis in the area of law concerns the effectiveness of legal sanctions. Legal sanctions, it suggests, are most effective in shaping rational instrumental behavior, characteristic of commercial market transactions and relations in formal organizations, while “expressive” behavior—valued in itself, grounded in emotion, often deeply rooted in personality, and supported by close groups—is least responsive to legal sanctions (Dror 1959). This hypothesis has strong and interesting implications. It helps explain why Soviet legal policy failed for decades to transform family relations in central Asia, where traditional gender relations proved resistant to massive interventions by Communist modernizers (Massell 1974). The same proposition also throws light on the successes and failures of racial integration in Southern schools. Popular racial views and attitudes were virtually immune to legal sanctions; but the head of Alabama’s National Guard obeyed instructions by President Kennedy as national commander in chief and confronted a defiant Governor Wallace, removing him from the schoolhouse door and admitting the first black student. Acting as a military officer, he responded to the formal lines of command and control. Similarly, school administrators later complied with the federal government’s directives and incentives aimed at school integration. They, too, acted within the context of legal authority and more or less independent of their private attitudes. Yet after public schools were integrated, white parents and politicians often created—in line with their persistent racial positions—racially separate private schools. Here, then, are two theoretical propositions of considerable reach.

A full-fledged theory consists of several logically interrelated theoretical propositions. Black offers a number of more specific propositions about stratification and the law. Thus within a society “law varies directly with rank”; law is more often directed downward than upward in the structure of inequality; and downward law varies directly, upward law inversely with vertical distance (1976, chap. 2). As his master proposition of “the more stratification, the more law,” these hypotheses state regular associations and are suggestive of causation, but they do not explicitly offer causal explanations. Yet higher-order propositions explaining lower-order ones is the principal form of logical integration of a theory. The following assertions of Adam Smith (1776/1937, 670) could serve as an at least partial explanation for Black’s master theorem:

Wherever there is great property there is great inequality. . . . The affluence of the rich excites the indignation of the poor. . . . The acquisition of valuable and extensive property, therefore, necessarily requires the establishment of civil government. Where there is no property, . . . civil government is not so necessary.

There may be other factors explaining the link between stratification and law that would have to complement the interest of the rich in the protection of property; but in principle it seems possible to construct a causal theory explaining the complex of associations asserted by Donald Black.

An example of a well-integrated theory with wide applicability is the series of interrelated propositions about interaction, sentiments, norms, ranking, deviance, and social control that form the core of Homans's treatise *The Human Group* (1950). Homans's hypotheses were formalized in a remarkable review essay by Herbert Simon, later a Nobel Prize-winner, who showed that some of Homans's propositions lacked independent standing and were logically entailed by others, while new hypotheses could be derived from those stated (Simon 1952). I will return to that book in a separate chapter.

These examples may suffice to show that meaningful theoretical propositions as well as logically interrelated sets of such hypotheses are not completely out of reach. At the same time the examples also illustrate persistent difficulties and problems.

To begin with, the concepts used to construct hypotheses often are not clearly defined. What, for instance, is meant exactly by "more law" and "more stratification"? Both stratification and law plainly consist of more than one dimension. Both take many disparate forms. How to add up pieces of legislation, implementing ordinances, judicial decisions, and enforcement actions by police or administrative agencies? Black offers suggestive illustrations but no clear-cut metric by which an ordering of more or less law can be accomplished. Similarly, the distinction between instrumental and expressive behavior is intuitively meaningful but it is also fuzzy and complex; it, too, almost certainly involves more than a single dimension.

If it often seems that we are faced with a trade-off between meaning and precision—sometimes described as the trap of knowing more and more about less and less—this may be due to the fact that what is studied is actually shaped by several different, yet subtly intertwined factors. Initial broad hypotheses may be more open to intuitive understanding than to controlled research. Thus the instrumental-expressive distinction may work in the examples given because it points to behavior grounded in well-functioning complex institutions—family and kinship roles in contrast to bureaucratic relations and governmental authority—rather

than because it identifies two abstractable characteristics of behavior that have consequences independent of the institutional contexts in which they are embedded. If that conjecture proves right, the proposition needs extensive reformulation and elaboration. This points to the important connection between conceptual work and hypothesis development that I will discuss below.

Many hypotheses we encounter in the literature fall short in a variety of ways. They frequently do not adequately specify the conditions under which they hold. This may concern the general scope of their applicability; for example, there may be social and cultural formations in which distinctions between instrumental and expressive have a different meaning and weight than they do in others. Or a proposition may misspecify the causally relevant conditions, pointing perhaps mistakenly to the instrumental character of individual behavior rather than its embeddedness in well-functioning institutions such as a bureaucratic organization. Or a hypothesis may identify just a few specific conditions relevant for the outcome in question while leaving open that others may be equally pertinent. In the extreme, this can lead to pairs of propositions that—much like many proverbs—assert opposite outcomes. Elster (1989a, 9) offers the example of two common lines of thought: “If others cooperate, I too should do my share, but if they don’t I have no obligation to do so.” This may seem as plausible a psychological causal mechanism as its opposite: “If most others cooperate, there is no need for me to do so. If few cooperate, my obligation to do so will be the stronger.”

A common shortcoming of a different kind underlies much of the skepticism about theoretical analysis of social and political life. Even a properly specified hypothesis may lack the detail that would make it more interesting. For instance, does the claim of “the more stratification, the more law” hold just roughly across societies of broadly different kinds, or does it also apply to differences between countries of similar wealth and complexity? If it were confined to the former, it would have a far more “academic” flavor than if it also claimed to explain differences between, say, Sweden and the United States. Similarly, if we learn from small group research that group-specific norms emerge universally with sustained interaction and that the frequency of interaction is related to agreement on norms, we may be far less interested in that formal claim than in the *content* of such emerging norms, say the specific norms held in a threatening neighborhood gang; and that is a subject on which the tradition of small group research is more or less silent. The theoretical conclusions social and political research has to offer frequently fall short in answering questions a broader audience considers important and perhaps urgent.

The difficulties of hypothesis formation just indicated are linked to a yet more important problem. A given hypothesis may correctly identify the effect of one factor on an outcome of interest and specify the conditions under which that relation holds. But the outcome—the density of legal regulation or the effectiveness of legal sanctions—may also be subject to other influences, possibly counteracting the causal effects analyzed initially. Legal sanctions may be more or less effective depending on the determination of enforcement agencies and the resources available to them, on how laws relate to moral and religious beliefs, on the ease with which behavior can be observed, and on many other factors. Unless a theory is reasonably complete in covering the often bewilderingly complex cause-effect relations, explanations have to rely on the clause of “other things being equal” without being able to point out which these other relevant things are. Predicting outcomes on the basis of such an incomplete theory is even more problematic. If social life is shaped by complex interdependencies, adequate theories have to reflect these interdependent structural patterns and cause-effect relations; all of them, in principle.⁴

More than half a century ago, at the meetings of the American Sociological Society in 1947, Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton engaged in a debate on the best strategy for theoretical advance in the social sciences. It was a momentous deliberation on the future of social science. Parsons argued for a comprehensive theoretical framework, one that would combine his own integration of certain fundamental ideas about social action in the work of Alfred Marshall, Vilfredo Pareto, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber with an early program of systems analysis. He pointed precisely to the argument just stated, that an adequate theory must reflect the complex interdependencies characteristic of social life, and claimed that a “structural functionalism” offered an opportunity to develop an approximation to such a theory, because it made it possible to treat relatively stable patterns as (reasonably unproblematic) “structures” and to focus on the effects of processes within a social system, the “functions” of structural functionalism, contributing to or detracting from its maintenance and development. Merton held that such an all-inclusive approach was premature. Instead, he argued for “theories of the middle range.” Dealing with delimited, partial explanations of such pervasive phenom-

⁴ The preceding paragraph states the problem in the language of correlational analysis and of corresponding nonquantitative modes of work where changes in the value of several “independent” variables are related to the outcome in question. The problem remains in principle the same if we look at other approaches to causal assessment, such as the search for necessary and sufficient conditions by way of categorical comparisons of outcomes and potential causes. See Mahoney (2003) for a comparative evaluation of different modes of causal assessment.

ena as norm compliance and deviance or the conditions of efficient administrative organization, these less comprehensive sets of theoretical propositions had a better chance to create testable and tested theoretical knowledge, and could bridge the gap between all-embracing theories and empirical description (Parsons 1945, 1948, and 1950; Merton 1945, 1948, and 1968a).

Both Parsons and Merton proceeded along the lines they proposed. And both had a profound impact on the social sciences in the second half of the last century. Theoretically oriented but empirically grounded work inspired by structural functionalist ideas became dominant in the 1940s and 1950s. Parsons himself developed an ever more comprehensive conceptual framework that pointed at an extremely abstract level to functional problems and their solutions. In the wider discussion, it came to be seen as one of several alternative theoretical frameworks, with conflict theory and social ecology theory as its major competitors. Merton acknowledged the importance of such comprehensive frameworks but insisted that only theories of the middle range could forge the critical links between comprehensive theory frames and empirical research.

Merton clearly defined the nature of comprehensive theory frames, which he called “general sociological orientations” and which later came to be known as “metatheories.” They represent, he said, “broad postulates which indicate *types* of variables which are somehow to be taken into account rather than specifying determinate relationships between particular variables. Indispensable though these orientations are, they provide only the broadest framework for empirical inquiry” (1968b, 142).

It is fair to say that Merton’s program, focusing on empirical theory though acknowledging the role of broader theoretical orientations, won the allegiance of the vast majority of theoretically oriented researchers in the field. In fact, the influence of his overall strategy is still visible in the current thrusts to concentrate on developing “causal mechanism” hypotheses.⁵ And the present project follows lines broadly similar to Merton’s proposals of how to advance empirically oriented social theory.

Yet if we examine closely one famous example of middle range theory, reference group theory, we make an interesting discovery. Reference group theory held that people’s judgments about reality, both their assessments of what is the case and judgments about right and wrong, are shaped by what they see as the experiences and the views of others—that is, by their “referring” to one or another group that seems relevant to them. Both in its version that deals with cognitive estimates, explaining,

⁵ For the recent revival of interest in causal mechanisms, see Elster (1989a), Stinchcombe (1991), and Hedström and Swedberg (1998).

for instance, the views of promotion chances in different branches of the military, and in its application to normative orientations, pointing, for instance, to the role of “anticipatory socialization” in the course of career advancement, reference theory instills a good sense of explanation; but—it is not able to predict. The reason, on reflection, is clear. It makes a strong case that expectations and views derived from the experiences of others matter decisively, but it does not tell us *under which conditions* in any particular case *who looks to whom* with an impact on *which standards of judgment*. Still, it is hard to deny that reference group theory constitutes a real advance in understanding. Arguing that cognitive assessments tend to be informed by references to the experience of relevant others, it prevents the naive substitution of the observer’s estimate of the “objective” situation for the understandings of the people observed; and it offers initial suggestions of where one might look when studying the origins of people’s views of reality and their normative commitments.⁶

Ironically, then, the most prominent of the theories of the middle range, on which Merton placed his bets for the future of social analysis, seems to share the core characteristic of “general sociological orientations.” It, too, “indicate[s] *types* of variables which are somehow to be taken into account rather than specifying determinate relationships between particular variables.” However, it would be a mistake to see it as just another version of metatheory and set it and other theories of the middle range aside as similarly far removed from empirical analysis. It provides much more than “only the broadest framework for empirical inquiry.”

THEORY FRAMES

Reference group theory must be understood as a highly focused *theory frame*. If one wants to understand how people’s views of their world or their normative orientations come about, reference group theory offers important specific leads for developing more detailed and delimited hypotheses about who looks to which groups in setting standards for judgments.

Focused theory frames, though commonly used with considerable success, are often not recognized as important analytic tools. Virtually invisible in most discussions of theory as well as method,⁷ they are in fact critical instruments of theory development. As noted earlier, much of the

⁶ Merton’s statements of reference group theory are found in Merton and Rossi (1968) and Merton (1968b).

⁷ A recent exception is their recognition by an otherwise formally oriented theorist, Guilmerina Jasso (2004).

progress of social and political analysis found expression in theory frames rather than in clusters of tested hypotheses specific enough to yield effective explanations and to make specific predictions.

Theory frames may be formally similar to comprehensive metatheories in that they largely stop short of empirically testable hypotheses; but they formulate more precise problems and point to far more specific factors and processes of relevance. Theory frames often build on past research and the puzzles created by varied results. The analysis aims frequently at substantively defined subject matter, such as revolutions, democratization, the development of welfare states, or levels of juvenile criminality and changes in fertility. But even when the inquiry cuts across different areas of substantive interests—as in the case of reference group theory, the dynamics and effectiveness of norms, or the social determinants of knowledge—theory frames have a sharper focus than do comprehensive metatheories. They are more closely attuned to social reality as it presents itself in research. Again, a few examples deserve closer attention.

Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966) represents a good example of a theory frame that remained largely implicit.⁸ In a complex and sometimes meandering account of several countries he arrived at three models of political routes to modernity. Throughout, he consistently deployed a conceptual grid concentrating on economic change, the state, and social classes (with a distinctive focus on rural classes). He persistently looked for long-term consequences of past conflicts and developments; and in all his case analyses he inquired about the relative strength of the major collective actors as well as their relations of alliance and conflict. This theory frame was mingled with more specific theoretical propositions that proved of repeated utility, for instance about the conditions leading to revolutionary collective action among peasants.

Theda Skocpol opens her *States and Social Revolutions* with an explicitly developed theory frame; she calls it a set of theoretical principles. Having given social revolutions a careful definition—"rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures, accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below"—she concludes her review of earlier attempts to explain revolutions:

Three principles of analysis shared by existing theories of revolution have been critically discussed. And alternative theoretical principles have been proposed in their stead. In fact, all of the shared tendencies for which existing theories have been taken to task are closely interrelated: A purposive image of the causes of social revolution comple-

⁸ Theda Skocpol made the intellectual structure of this seminal work explicit in a searching critical assessment (Skocpol 1973).

ments an intranational perspective on modernization. And each is most readily consistent with a socioeconomically reductionist understanding of the state.

Her own theory frame stresses three opposite principles:

We shall analyze causes and processes of social revolutions from a nonvoluntaristic, structural perspective, attending to international and world-historical, as well as intranational, structures and processes. And an important theoretical concomitant will be to move states—understood as potentially autonomous organizations located at the interface of class structures and international situations—to the very center of attention. (1979, 32–33)

These principles informed her analysis as she compared the trajectories, as well as the prehistories and the aftermaths, of the French, the Russian, and the Chinese revolutions and contrasted them with three negative cases—England, Prussia/Germany, and Japan—where revolutions did not occur, even though conditions in these countries were similar in some important ways to those in the cases of social revolution. In explanation she developed two master hypotheses—that a breakdown of state control and peasant uprising are each necessary conditions for social revolutions, and that together the two developments are sufficient to bring about a social revolution. These master propositions were then supplemented by further hypotheses that similarly followed the guidelines of the initial theory frame.⁹

Successful theory frames often have implications for research in different substantive areas. When John Stephens, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and I began to work on our *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (1992), not only were we inspired by Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* to develop an explicit theory frame, but we borrowed for our frame, which took off from Moore's work, some important theoretical principles from Skocpol's analysis. Other elements came from research on welfare state development, where a power resources frame had been extremely fruitful in advancing the understanding of social welfare policies (Stephens 1979b; Korpi 1983). Considering that democracy is inherently a matter of power, we turned three clusters of power relations into the core of our theory frame—the balance of power within society, the power relations between state and society, and the impact of international power relations.

⁹ This eminently successful work has provoked much discussion. Among the best analytic and methodological commentaries are Mahoney (1999), Mahoney and Goertz (2004), and Goertz and Mahoney (2005).

This frame was further developed on the basis of past research dealing with democracy, taking account of work on states and the formation of public policy as well. Yet even though it included a number of specific hypotheses, it remained a theory frame. For explaining the emergence of democracy—or for that matter its lack, incompleteness, or breakdown—in different European, Latin American, and Caribbean countries, it was necessary to develop more specific explanatory hypotheses. This was, then, not a case of applying a single explanatory theory, understood in the strict and narrow sense, to a set of countries. Rather, we ended up explaining forty-odd cases within a consistent theory frame that focused on the relation between capitalist development and democracy.

These examples illustrate several important features of theory frames that I want to highlight. First, *theory frames build on past research*. They absorb earlier research results,¹⁰ and they often rest on a critique of earlier frames, replacing them by analysis sketches that are more empirically adequate as well as—often—more comprehensive. They thus can be, and often are, a major form of knowledge cumulation. At the same time, the best formulate questions and anticipate answers that significantly reach beyond the work on which they build.

Second, *theory frames often come in clusters, sometimes following a common overarching frame*. They borrow from other frames that deal with similar problems, gain strength from overarching similarities, and jointly may shape broader research programs. This has been recognized in the literature by labels characterizing such patterns of commonality. Examples in the field of comparative politics include “the new institutionalism” (March and Olsen 1984), “the new comparative political economy” (Evans and Stephens 1988), “historical institutionalism” (Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth 1992), or most broadly “power theories” (Mahoney 2004). One can imagine a nesting of frames that leads from comprehensive orientations to ever more specific and efficient frames for the analysis of particular problems.

Third, *theory frames ensure that context is taken into account in hypothesis formation*. They help to prevent major causal factors from being omitted, guard against premature generalization of the hypotheses developed, and make it easier to identify the scope conditions of these hypotheses.

Fourth, *theory frames shed a new light on the old problem of induction*. The intuitively plausible view that theoretical insights emerge from the

¹⁰ This is of great importance in areas of research where—as for instance in comparative historical analysis—the number of cases that can be studied in any one project tends to be severely limited. Using a theory frame grounded in previous research indirectly enlarges the number of cases taken into account.

study of empirical facts is clearly problematic. Sheer induction is inherently inconclusive, since empirical study is always guided by questions, and, furthermore, any set of empirical observations can support many different theoretical conclusions. A theory frame formulates precise research problems and directs the empirical analysis to a series of relevant factors and conditions. Though further hypotheses do not follow logically from theory frames, they link up to the problems and relevant factors identified in the frame used. Broadening a concept earlier developed by Znaniecki (1934), this interplay of theory frame, empirical research, and specific hypothesis formation may be called “analytic induction” (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985, 348–50; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992, 36–38).

Fifth, *theory frames are open to revision*. Theory frames are not protective fortifications shielding the analysis from critiques that proceed from different premises. This is important to stress precisely because frames do define problem formulations and guide the construction of specific hypotheses. Revisions may be based on the research and theory building engendered by a given frame, or they may respond to persuasive “outside” objections. That empirical findings suggest revisions of a frame shows that theory frames respond to social reality although they are not themselves directly testable.¹¹ Discussions of Skocpol’s theory of social revolutions have questioned her strong version of structuralism, insisted on a greater role of culture, and emphasized more strongly the limited domain to which her theory frame applies—states with international ambitions in a phase of transition out of agrarian socioeconomic structures. Similarly, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992, 281–91) concludes with revisions of the initial theory frame that resulted from its own case analyses: “The middle classes turned out to be more central to the political developments in South America than they were in the advanced capitalist societies; working-class strength and ideology showed more complex effects on democracy than originally conceptualized; and the concept of labor repressive agriculture required modification. Yet the theoretically most far-reaching finding concerned political parties. Their role . . . emerged as a crucial determinant of democratic consolidation” (281–82).

Finally, in light of what this volume seeks to offer, it bears repeating that *theory frames are openings for do-it-yourself theorizing*. This must

¹¹ Since theory frames, unlike textbook theories, do not entail but only suggest testable hypotheses, they are not subject to textbooklike confirmation and falsification via the empirical examination of derived propositions. However, their utility is put into question when using them leads to less successful hypotheses than does drawing on alternative frames. Similarly, plausible explanations building on factors and processes not included in a theory

not be obscured by the confidence that derives from working in a research tradition defined by a nesting of theory frames that have proved fruitful. Theory frames suggest where to look, pointing to the *kinds* of hypotheses that have a chance to be valid rather than entailing more specific hypotheses by simple deduction. They need to be “filled in” with the hypotheses that allow us to arrive at a causal understanding of the phenomena we wish to explain, and that may be successful even in predictions. It is by the success of this empirical theory work that frames prove themselves.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Our earlier discussion of the difficulties and common shortcomings in the construction of theoretical propositions suggests that many hypotheses we encounter in the literature are underspecified as to the conditions under which a certain outcome obtains. They are, as Arthur Stinchcombe has put it with some irony, “bits of sometimes true theory.”¹²

But incomplete propositions with some apparent validity are important springboards for hypothesis elaboration, for developing more completely specified hypotheses about causal and structural relations. If we return to Elster’s example of two contradictory reactions to the participation of others in a matter of common interest (the cooperation of others could plausibly diminish one’s sense of obligation to participate, but it also could conceivably increase it), we might explore whether the two reactions can be set apart by the strength of preexisting commitments to the common concern and by preoccupations with other material or immaterial interests that also make demands on one’s time and resources. If the two contradictory reactions are both intuitively plausible, it is intuitively plausible as well that hypotheses which take strength of commitment and the weight of competing concerns into account would not end up in a stalemate that is mocked by the German proverb “If the rooster crows on the dung heap, the weather will change or it will stay the same.”¹³

Using intuitive plausibility as a first “smell test” for theoretical ideas points to an important resource for theory construction. We navigate everyday life with a good deal of theoretical knowledge. We live by predictive theories. This is apparent if we reflect on any significant episode of our own decision making or on occasions when we critically assessed

frame may reveal it as misleading, incomplete, or one-sided. A frame may of course also fail because it is too vague and unspecific to encourage successful hypothesis development.

¹² Stinchcombe (1998, 267).

¹³ Wenn der Hahn kräht auf dem Mist,
ändert sich das Wetter oder es bleibt, wie’s ist.

the narrative accounts of important political developments. Much of the theory we use in everyday life remains implicit. We could not easily formulate it as a set of theoretical propositions, but it is still available to us as we make decisions and act. A good analogy for this phenomenon—indeed a well-known instance of it—is the fact that we “know” the grammar of our language well enough to speak and write correctly, but we don’t know it so thoroughly and explicitly that we could write out the grammatical rules. Yet on reflection we can recover a good deal of the implicit theory by which we live. This resource is not available to everybody in equal measure. We say of a person who stands out among others that she has exceptionally “good judgment.” Among the most important wells of good judgment seem to be varied experience and an understanding that makes the most of that experience. The counterparts to these sources in formal social and political analysis are, of course, knowledge of multiple empirical investigations and theoretical reflection. If social scientists occasionally refer to the outcome as analytical or sociological “sense,” this indicates that even among professionals engaged in social and political analysis some of the theoretical “knowledge” remains implicit, submerged in the knowledge of many things, but perhaps more easily recoverable through reflection.

A good starting point for hypothesis formation is explanations of processes that we understand very well in commonsense terms. Such explanations nearly inevitably imply theoretical propositions. These can be extracted and refined on reflection. How far can they be generalized beyond the immediate context of which they gave a convincing account? Which limiting conditions suggest themselves when such generalization seems inappropriate? Are there cognate hypotheses that seem to fit situations and processes at odds with the initial causal account? Further hypotheses are likely to emerge if we ask *why* a certain causal nexus seems to hold.

Identifying the specific conditions under which a given causal or structural relationship holds amounts to defining the domain of a given set of hypotheses. Often, however, it will be more feasible and sufficient to indicate such a domain in a summary fashion, without detailing all specific limiting conditions. An example would be Theda Skocpol’s (1979) statement that her account of social revolutions is confined to agrarian bureaucratic states.

Quite obviously, ideas found in the literature that are appealing and yet not fully worked out are another springboard for hypothesis development. Weber’s treatment of bureaucracy (1922/1978) offers an interesting example.

Most sociologists and political scientists are familiar with Max Weber’s concept of an ideal type. In the first place, it is presented as a complex concept—say, of charismatic authority or of bureaucracy—in which certain features and tendencies observed in reality are combined in stylized

and exaggerated form into a pure model. In this conception, it serves as a structuring and ordering device for realistic observations of social realities that can be described as different “deviations” from the pure type.

Weber’s use also implies, however, another conception, in which an ideal type contains elements of embryonic theory or theory frame (cf. Kalberg 1994). Thus Weber claims that close approximations to the pure type of bureaucracy are the most effective means of large-scale administration; and it is possible to interpret the insertion of different features into his construct of bureaucracy as implicit hypotheses about efficiency (for instance, hiring and promotion by merit), while others point to the explanation of coordination and cohesion in the organization (for instance, hierarchy of offices; action according to rules; full-time employment; tenure in, but not ownership of, office). Clearly these hypotheses that are implied in the construction of the pure type of bureaucracy need further elaboration and specification, especially if a researcher tries to use them for the explanation of the workings of really existing organizations that differ in various degrees from the pure construct.

Here it may be useful to reflect briefly on the interrelations between concept formation and hypothesis development.¹⁴ In the first place, it is critically important to be clear about the kinds of concepts we use. Thus Weber’s conception of an ideal type might be called a relational concept, used for ordering empirical observations by the degree to which they approximate or deviate from the pure model. Relational concepts are often not sufficiently distinguished from classificatory concepts, which allow us to sort descriptions of social reality into different categories. Even more important is the distinction between concepts that seek to define the essence of a phenomenon—the law, for example, or the family—and concepts that simply aim to identify certain phenomena distinctively. An essentialist view of the law may well quarrel with definitions that neglect voluntary compliance and focus on an organization ready to implement norms by coercion, while this focus may prove very powerful when one wants to investigate the effects and interrelations of legal and nonlegal norms. Essentialist concepts have their place in social philosophy. In empirical research they may serve to keep the conceptual core of a theory frame balanced, attentive to all relevant causal conditions; but they can also unduly limit the flexible adaptation of concepts to the repeated reformulation of hypotheses, and they often result in interminable squabbles about the “right” definition.

A peculiar form of inept concept formation—sometimes but not only or necessarily associated with essentialist concepts—defines causal factors in such a way that they logically entail all or part of the anticipated outcomes. This results in claims that are true by definition, that is, tautolo-

¹⁴ For an important extended discussion see Goertz (2006).

gies, which often remain unrecognized as such. Examples are definitions of civil society that include among its characteristics tendencies favorable for democracy. Even if the tautological character of this often celebrated idea is recognized, as it often is not, the procedure is inept because it wastes the opportunity of stating and examining important empirical hypotheses about links between a more austere concept of civil society and democratic governance.

Flexibly changeable concepts are crucial for theory frames when the issue is to adjust conceptualization to the questions asked and to the expected findings. Thus Weber discarded Marx's conception of class as based in the ownership of the means of production or the lack of it; he substituted a market-based conception of economic class and supplemented it with conceptualizations of status and domination. Another example, also drawn from Weber's work, is his claim that a threefold distinction of systems of domination based on traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic legitimation and the corresponding organizational forms of rule would lead to more profound and adequate insights into the dynamic of rule than does the time-honored distinction of rule by the one, the few, and the many.

We find the same processes of reconceptualization when we examine the construction of specific hypotheses. What is at stake here is more than the familiar need for constructing precise "operational" measures that correspond closely to the theoretically intended meaning. Defining concepts that pin down those aspects of the phenomena under investigation which appear to stand in a regular relation to each other is an important and difficult phase of theory construction, one that involves going back and forth between the formulation of concepts and hypotheses and the gathering of empirical information. An ingenious seminar assignment of the late William J. Goode illustrates the point. Goode asked his students to read closely a theoretically relevant piece of research, identify the central concepts, look for subtle—often just implied—variations in the definition of these concepts throughout the text, and explore how these variations were associated with changing interpretations and hypotheses. The second, creative part of the assignment invited the students to come up with their own reconceptualizations and hypotheses made possible by this conceptual work.

CAUSAL MECHANISMS

Causal mechanisms hypotheses are an important variety of empirical hypotheses. As theoretical propositions of a special kind, they have recently received much-deserved attention. Grounded in realist philosophy

of science, the renewed focus on causal mechanisms seeks to go beyond correlational indications of causation. Furthermore, its proponents claim that searching for causal mechanisms is an important way of linking empirical research and theoretical analysis. A causal mechanism is a condition, relation, or process that brings about certain events and states. Strongly conceived, it is a sufficient condition of specified outcomes.¹⁵ Causal mechanisms are often—and in some conceptions they are inherently—unobserved; but they can reasonably be inferred from observations. Power in its different incarnations (Lukes 1967) represents an important set of examples of causal mechanisms.

The Humean theory of causation focuses exclusively on regularities among observable variables. However, as is well known, correlational analysis does not unambiguously identify causation. Some of the reasons are obvious. A correlation between A and B (for example, the correlation, allegedly found in nineteenth-century surveys of rural villages, between the number of storks on the roofs of houses and the number of children within them) may be “spurious” because a third condition C (for instance, the agricultural mode of production) is involved in bringing about both A and B. Less obviously, some causal relations may not reveal themselves through available frequency associations, be it because several alternative causal mechanisms are at play that can substitute for one another or counterbalance each other, or because the indicators available for quantitative analysis do not tap the mechanisms at work, however indirectly. Finally, correlations may establish stable relations that plausibly, though vaguely, point to underlying causal patterns, but they do not reveal through which processes the statistical relationship comes about; the actual causal mechanisms remain in what has been called a “black box.” For certain broad policy purposes, it may be sufficient to establish that women’s education is associated with declines in fertility and to leave out of consideration the causal paths in which education of women brings about differences in fertility behavior. Yet when it comes to understanding variations and exceptions in the fertility outcomes, knowing more about the specific

¹⁵ The metaphor of “mechanism”—using, say, the clockwork behind the movements of the hour and minute hands as a simile for the hidden systems of the body—is old indeed. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* it was “in early use chiefly with reference to natural objects”; but the dictionary also cites a formulation of Harriett Martineau in 1833: “The mechanism of society thus resembles the mechanism of man’s art.”

For current research on social mechanisms, see, in addition to the works cited earlier in n. 5, for instance the recent work of Tilly (1995, 1997, 1998, and McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). On the philosophical grounding of causal mechanism analysis, see Archer et al. (1998), Wendt (1999), and Gorski (2004 and 2007). Mahoney (2001b) was useful for the comments that follow. Also enlightening is the brief discussion in the entry “Causal Mechanisms” in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods* (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, and Liao 2003).

causal paths becomes important. The effects of different kinds of education on prevailing fertility norms, the role of sheer knowledge about conception and contraception, the status and power effects of education on gender relations, and the complicated interactions among education, income, and fertility preferences are only some of the factors that may make a decisive difference.

The claim of the realist theory of causation that the identification of causal mechanisms is fundamental to causal understanding is persuasive. Frequency associations can only give indications about the underlying mechanisms. Yet for our purposes in this book little is gained by taking a strong position on the philosophical understanding of causation. Statistical association remains a major tool of research and constitutes one important link between evidence and theoretical understanding. At the same time, assertions about causal mechanisms have to be supported by empirical evidence regarding the presence of a mechanism that is not directly observed, regarding its causal nature, and regarding its relevance for the phenomena to be explained.

An instructive set of overarching causal claims and empirical findings developed around the explanation of the rise and spread of modern democracy. In a now classic paper, Seymour Martin Lipset (1959/1963) established a strong correlation between indicators of economic development and assessments of democratic constitutionalism. This was contradicted by skeptical judgments about any direct causal connection between the two phenomena of broad social change, which such analysts as Max Weber (1906), Karl de Schweinitz (1964), Barrington Moore (1966), and Guillermo O'Donnell (1973) derived from their exploration of particular cases. But the correlation was repeatedly confirmed by cross-national studies that employed a variety of sample compositions and measurement techniques. The views on the underlying causal processes varied. Lipset did not take up the tenet of Marxian theory that the interests of bourgeois capital owners were the main driving force behind democratization. He pointed to advances in education, communication, and equality that accompany economic development, and he saw the middle classes as the main prodemocratic force. Phillips Cutright (1963), who refined Lipset's statistical analysis, emphasized the features of modernization theory included in Lipset's account and offered an explanation in terms of system theory: a democratic regime form reflects the greater complexity of modern society, and only democracy can cope with this greater complexity in the long run. Our own work in *Capitalist Development and Democracy* took off from the contradictory results of two modes of empirical research (Rueschemeyer 1991). We considered the cross-national correlations as an established empirical generalization any causal account would have to explain. At the same time we were impressed with the

greater theoretical sophistication of the historical case comparisons. That inspired the construction of the theoretical frame briefly sketched above. After the examination of forty-odd cases we saw the central causal mechanism linking capitalist development and democracy in the changes of the balance of power within society that were induced by capitalist development—a decline in the power of large landlords and an increase in the power and autonomy of classes previously excluded from participation, especially but not only the working class. The newly dominant bourgeois capital owners did not systematically advance democracy with full participation, while the middle classes and small farmers supported democracy unequivocally only if they were free from hegemonic influences of anti-democratic forces. These changes in society were modified and varied in their political effects by the power relations between state and society and by the impact of the international power balance on a given country. The point of this lengthy excursion is not to claim that these problems have now a settled solution but rather to illustrate the useful interplay among empirical findings, claims about underlying causal mechanisms, and renewed empirical investigation.

Focusing on causal mechanisms does more than deepen the knowledge that can be gleaned from correlational analysis. It holds the promise of invigorating the interaction between theory and research, both within and across different modes of research. If quantitative research can demonstrate that the interpretation of one or a few cases may mistakenly identify causal patterns, looking for social processes that generate statistical regularities challenges the prevailing mode of quantitative research in which variable characteristics of units, rather than social action and social processes taking place under different structural conditions, are the elements of causal assessments. Seeking out and testing underlying processes that, driven by identifiable actors and processes, can explain the correlations between variables will not only invigorate the theory component of quantitative research, its design and interpretation, but will also establish closer links with theoretical ideas that inform other modes of research.¹⁶

On closer inspection, we find several different conceptions of what causal mechanism hypotheses will accomplish as well as of what constitutes the exact nature of causal mechanisms. Many theorists try to go back to the level of individual action in their causal arguments, combining the causal mechanism program with the position of methodological indi-

¹⁶ If the illustration given above comes from the particular area of research with which I am familiar, it is easy to point to examples from different corners of the variegated landscape of social and political research. For example, the late Aage B. Sørensen (1998), a major quantitative social scientist, developed similar ideas forcefully in the field of social mobility and labor market studies. See also Mahoney (2001b).

vidualism. The strong version of this combination, which accepts *only* explanations that rest on theorems about individual behavior, faces obvious obstacles in the real world of social analysis. Hedström and Swedberg (1998, 12) quote the philosopher David Lewis:

Any event that we might wish to explain stands at the end of a long and complicated history. We might imagine a world where causal histories are short and simple; but in the world as we know it, the only question is whether they are infinite or merely enormous. (1986, 214)

In the present state of our knowledge, it would obviously be wasteful to insist that social institutions, structural conditions, and the relations between collective actors can play a role in causal accounts only if they are in turn explained by the multiplicity of individual actions that constituted them.

There are major differences among the various conceptions of “causal mechanism.” Mahoney (2001b, 579–80) lists twenty-four different definitions (and adds another of his own). Much of this must not detain us here, but it is useful to highlight a few points. Some programs of mechanism research remain closely related to correlation analysis, seeking to throw light into the “black box.” Others aim to offer a foundation for causal theory independent of the covariation of variables. In addition to differences arising from divergent positions on methodological individualism, it is clear that causal mechanisms specific enough to fully explain events of interest differ significantly from such overarching causal claims as we just encountered in the studies and arguments about development and democracy. Jon Elster (1998) advances a conception that combines the ambition of explaining particular events with a fairly strong version of methodological individualism. In addition, he is skeptical of the explanatory use of probabilistic hypotheses. As a result, his plea for mechanisms offers only limited hopes for analytic advance. Concentrating on psychological and social psychological mechanisms, he stresses that typically both the conditions that activate a given mechanism and the outcomes generated are indeterminate, as illustrated in the example of cooperative and uncooperative responses to the participation of others. This skepticism is not shared by all or even most analysts pursuing causal mechanism. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) are far more optimistic. They see in the search for causal mechanism a fundamental shift in comparative historical work away from a focus on complex events such as revolutions and toward identifying “mechanisms and processes [that] play significant parts in quite disparate episodes, but produce varying overall outcomes depending on their sequence, combination, and context.”

Causal mechanism hypotheses, then, have a special character, explaining why things happen by showing how outcomes are produced. In developing hypotheses against the background of theory frames, they take their place alongside other hypotheses identifying noncausal linkages between structural elements—say, between marriage, descent relations, and family ties—as well as causal hypotheses taking off from statistical covariation. Causal mechanism hypotheses are likely to play a special role because they may link up more easily with the exploratory work on causal relations and their conceptualization that is at the core of theory frames.

We have encountered different kinds of analytic tools ranging from comprehensive orienting frameworks à la Parsons to focused theoretical frames for studying more specific, often particular substantive problems, to causal mechanisms and other hypotheses, whether or not these are fully specified as to their conditions. We also found occasional sets of interrelated hypotheses that may be called theory in the narrow sense. The relative sparsity of fully developed theoretical propositions and their concentrations into theories leads us back to the repetitive refrain in this sketch of some problems of social theory construction: a researcher has to provide in the course of virtually any project theoretical frames and propositions on her own, even though previous research and the theoretical tradition offer tools for this work.

WHAT LIES AHEAD?

In the following chapters, I intend to offer analytic tools for theory construction in a very broad sense. I do not rule out the established ideal of theory construction, to build complex theories with full-fledged theoretical propositions as their components; but I will concentrate attention on the more modest intermediate goals along the road, on formulating questions, conceptualizing relevant factors and conditions, developing hypotheses as well as complementing and elaborating existing ones, creating and revising focused theory frames, and putting research results into a broader framework. Almost all social and political studies require theory building in the process of research that can work with these tools. What I offer will not be lists of “how-to” recipes. I will rather focus on analytic questions and arguments that can improve the theoretical imagination.

The next chapter sets out a conception of social action as a broad framework and baseline. It is followed by four discussions of knowledge, norms, preferences, and emotions as analytic components of social action. These chapters complement and develop the rational calculus core of rational action theory and provide wide-ranging material for hypothesis development. A revisiting of Homans’s *The Human Group* and the small

group research it epitomized not only presents a fully developed theory but also integrates the preceding cluster of four chapters and shows the broad relevance of small group processes. A chapter of midpoint reflections concludes the first section of the book and opens the view to more comprehensive social and cultural structures.

These more comprehensive patterns figure prominently already in this first section's consideration of the analytic components of elementary action and interaction, but they receive sustained attention in the second half of the book. This begins with an examination of the aggregation of individual actions into larger phenomena. That is followed by discussions of collective action, power and cooperation, institutions, and collective identities. This series of chapters ends with a discussion of large social structures as consequential locations for individuals, groups, and organizations and a consideration of the role of culture and ideas. A brief conclusion takes stock and rounds out the volume.