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COUNTLESS BOOKS promise in their titles a lot more than they actually deliver. Not so, *Theories of Civil Violence*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Professor James B. Rule, a sociologist at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, subjects not only a variety of theories of civil violence but also the field of social science itself to critical, if sympathetic scrutiny. The result is a primer on theories and theorizing about "when, where, and how civil violence occurs" (12), with the added bonus of an intriguing and stimulating discussion of what makes for good, and what makes for popular, social science theories.

Unfortunately, the qualities of a good theory are not necessarily those of a popular theory. Even more distressingly, Professor Rule concludes from his analysis of the history of theories of civil violence, that social scientists are all too prone to accept or reject theories not on the basis of their proven ability to resist falsification, but on what he calls their rhetorical appeal. Thus, he finds it hard to vouch for any real progress in the field other than the merely technical—the accumulation of data and their analysis by computer.

The history of the study of civil violence, it seems, is littered with the half-digested carcasses of theories nobody stayed with long enough to refute by the sheer accumulation of evidence. Theories go in or out of style according to the political or intellectual passions of the moment. It is the need of the *consumers* of theories, the social scientists themselves, not the ability of a theory to withstand confrontation with potentially falsifying evidence, which determines its currency.

By Rule's account, social science lies somewhere between natural science and literature or art. Like natural science, social science has what he calls "the theoretical yearning" (237). This is the search for explanatory forces that account for the presence or absence of a phenomenon in a set of important or interesting cases. Empirical testing of scientific explanations requires clear specification of "contrast sets," *i.e.* "precisely which conditions are presumed to remain constant, and which to vary" (299).

Attention to contrast sets alerts us to the possibility that what appears to be the same phenomenon may actually be explainable by different theories specifying different contrast sets. For example, "Why did a revolution occur in *Nicaragua* (and not in Guatemala or El Salvador) in 1979?" is not the same question as, "Why did a revolution occur in Nicaragua in 1979 (and not in an earlier year)? As Rule puts it, "Thus a variety of explanations of what may appear to be the same thing may in fact be explanations of rather different things. If all explanations are indeed explanations of differences, specification of *the precise difference* (or contrast) to be explained is an essential part of explanatory work" (232).

Focusing on contrast sets enables Rule to find some merit in most theories he reviews, for each addresses itself to somewhat different questions and manifestations of civil violence. With some coaxing, most theories on collective violence, from Hobbes, through Marx, Pareto, Park, Parsons, Tilly and Gurr (and others not mentioned here) yield falsifiable statements, hypotheses which, at

least in principle, can be confronted with potentially disconfirming evidence. The one kind of theory Rule has little use for is the grand general theory, the comprehensive paradigm presuming to account for every kind of civil violence. Civil violence is simply too heterogenous a category of phenomena, it seems, to be encompassed by a single, universal theory.

Rule concludes that most theories of civil violence cannot be categorically rejected. Yet his summation of the hypotheses, some highly qualified, that he thinks have been well established empirically occupies only five of the three hundred pages of his book. It is not that the subject matter of social science cannot be studied empirically but that social scientists have been unwilling to accumulate a sufficient body of data to truly sustain or defeat a theory.

While social science shares a theoretical yearning with natural science, social scientists have what might be termed an expressive yearning in common with novelists, story-tellers, and other artists. In its most elemental form any social science theory is "a kind of *cartoon* of the phenomenon" (279). These cartoon-like images convey emotional, social, or political messages with which social scientists want, or do not want to identify. It is this rhetorical aspect of theories that makes them "politically correct" at any given time. Thus Rule says, "Any working scholar knows that, at any given moment for any population of thinkers, some ways of looking at things are 'in,' while others are 'out.' Moreover, profession of certain key ideas will serve often to define boundaries of groups highly conscious of their identities" (285). Citing a certain book, such as Coser's *The Functions of Social Conflict* became in the 1960s, a sort of badge of progressive thinking, even if, as usually happened, the author did nothing else but cite it.

According to Rule, it is the rhetorical import of theories of civil violence espoused by Marx and Pareto, not their respective conceptual or empirical strengths, which is most responsible for this or that social scientist lending his allegiance to one or the other theory. Rhetorical considerations also account for paradigm shifts, such as the one from collective behavior theory to relative deprivation and group contention theories. Thus Park's theory was not thoroughly tested and found wanting. Social scientists simply lost interest in his way of looking at civil violence and were captivated by the alternative images offered by Gurr and Tilly. Park passed out of style in an age of black ghetto violence and student demonstrations. This shifting of attention from one theory to another in response to changes in the intellectual, cultural, or political environment is, Rule concludes, the single greatest obstacle to progress in the study of civil violence.

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