

# Book Review

Strand M. and Lizardo O. *Orienting to Chance. Probabilism and the Future of Social Theory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2025.

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Although I am not a theorist by training, I approach this book from the standpoint of a researcher with a background in statistics who later moved into sociology, where I conduct theoretically informed empirical work. The book's engagement with concepts such as probability and theories of action resonates with my recent interest in the role of chance events in shaping individual socioeconomic outcomes. My review is therefore offered as an outsider's perspective informed by empirical concerns and statistical reasoning, rather than from within the book's core theoretical tradition.

The book begins from the premise that the rise of data science poses a fundamental challenge to the very survival of sociology as a discipline. Over recent decades, sociology has increasingly grounded its legitimacy in the presumed methodological rigour and objectivity of the data used to support its arguments, while progressively disengaging from broader theoretical foundations. However, the emergence of big data and computational approaches now compels the discipline to reflect critically on the nature of data and the power processes shaping their production and accessibility. As a result, the contemporary, largely atheoretical foundations of sociology, based on the implicit assumption that data provide an adequate and taken-for-granted representation of reality, begin to unravel.

At the core of the book lie the notions of probabilism and the concept of *Chance* (capitalized, as it derives from the German term). At the risk of simplifying a complex theoretical discussion, probability must be conceived in a broader sense than the classical distinction between the objective, frequentist definition, understood as the ratio of favourable outcomes to all possible outcomes, and the subjective definition, which equates probability with the stake a subject is willing to place on a given outcome, as in De Finetti, or with its continual updating in light of new information, as in the Bayesian approach. In the authors' theorization, objective probability refers to recurring, durational patterns, sequences, and correlations that constitute the objective range of possibilities and opportunities structuring individuals' courses of action. They refer to this set of possibilities as *Chance*, drawing explicitly on the German notion of the term and, in particular, on Max Weber's theorization.

Individuals apprehend *Chance* testing it through their actions and simultaneously reaffirm and reproduce it, generating a continuous loop between objective opportunity structures and subjective expectations. The book is organized into four parts. Part I is historical: The authors examine different notions of probability and introduce their own concept of objective probability. In Part II, they discuss classic and contemporary theory, most prominently Weber and Bourdieu, recasting their theories through the lens of probabilism and the concept of *Chance*. Part III focuses on individual cognition, forging a connection between sociology and cognitive science, particularly through the theory of predictive processing. Finally, Part IV addresses the implications for sociological research.

According to the authors, the book may be approached selectively rather than sequentially, as its central insights emerge clearly regardless of the reading path. Readers with different backgrounds are likely to focus on different sections. Methodologically minded sociologists may be drawn to discussions of objective versus subjective probability and the often implicit epistemic assumptions behind them. Social theorists will find value in the reinterpretation of Weber's theory of action and Bourdieusian concepts such as habitus, field, and capital through the lens of probabilism. Finally, the chapter on neuroscience and predictive probabilism will appeal to socio-behavioralists and may inspire interdisciplinary work connecting sociology and neuroscience, offering micro-foundations for social action and explanations of social phenomena.

The book is also of clear interest to non-theory specialists like myself, both for its scholarly value, introducing new authors and ideas to explore, and as a reminder of the absent theoretical foundations of contemporary sociology, and how the drift toward computational sociology and data science risks rendering the discipline irrelevant. More generally, it will appeal to sociologists interested in explaining social phenomena. I use the term 'phenomenon' in the sense of Merton, as a social fact or recurring social patterns. In this respect a Mertonian phenomenon can also be understood as a persistent, probabilistic link between a 'space of initial states' and its associated outcomes, following the probabilist approach proposed in the book. I note then the absence of a discussion of Merton, particularly because his middle-range theory and his conceptualization of social phenomena as the object of sociological inquiry seem connected to the notions of 'parch' and the 'sociological bubble', which the authors also discuss as the loci where Chance is found and where the sociological imagination and explanation should focus. Relatedly, I would be curious to know how the authors would interpret Boudon's theory of action in light of probabilism. In *Les Places du Désordre*, Boudon presents a middle-range framework to explain social change, which could also be applied to understanding social order and stability by linking a structure of opportunities to micro-level actions that produce both intentional and unintentional aggregate outcomes. I believe that Boudon's concept of a 'structure of opportunities' resembles the range (Spielraum) of possibilities and Chance discussed by the authors.

Overall, I see a productive conceptual tension at the heart of the book and the authors' theoretical contribution, stemming from the polysemy of the term *chance*. In English, chance may denote probability but also randomness or unpredictability. By contrast, the capitalized Chance (following the German usage) designates opportunities and structured probabilities. The resulting dichotomy of chance versus Chance captures the tension between a probabilistic social order (Chance) and the ever-present exceptions, contingencies, and random deviations (chance). If social order is probabilistic rather than mechanically nomological, it is precisely because of the role of chance, which leads individuals along indeterminate pathways toward different possible outcomes or worlds. If my reading is correct, and in an echo of Du Bois, the book can be read as an attempt to establish a foundation for a sociology capable of measuring the interplay of Chance and chance in human conduct. In doing so, the authors revitalize a largely dormant line of theoretical inquiry and open up fertile ground for renewed reflection on uncertainty, structure, and human action.

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