The aim of the course is to acquaint researchers with some of the most important social mechanisms, of the intentional, causal, and functional variety, which social scientists employ to explain social phenomena, and which can help researchers to generate testable predictions, often in competition with one another. The course focuses on theoretical models and not on empirical studies or data collection and analysis, but the bibliography includes examples of mechanism-based explanations. The course is open to all and suitable for both political scientists and sociologists.

1. ‘What makes people tip” and course organisation
2. Explanation by social mechanisms
3. Rational action
4. Strategic interaction
5. Unintended consequences
6. Functionalist explanations
7. Social norms
8. Cognitive dissonance reduction
9. Imitation
10. Tipping models

Key Texts

Jon Elster – *Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*

Peter Hedström & Peter Bearman (eds.) *Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*

Requirements & credits

**NB in each class researchers are expected to read the pertinent chapters or sections of the two key texts, even if these are not always repeated in the bibliography.**

Each class will be introduced by DG, and followed by previously agreed presentations (20-30 mins), based on the readings—each by one or more students depending on the number of participants—on aspects of each mechanism.

Credits will be obtained by

(i) Giving at least one presentation in a clear and concise manner
(ii) Writing an essay (max 4000 words) discussing how one or more mechanisms could be relevant for researcher’s dissertation question(s).
**Week 1 – 8 January – Introduction and course organisation**

I will present an unpublished paper on the explanations of a seemingly simple social phenomenon, the giving of tips.

This will give me the opportunity to illustrate a range of mechanisms, several of which will resurface later in the course.

After that, we will organise the researchers’ presentations for the following weeks.
Week 2 – 15 January – The explanation of social phenomena

Correlation vs explanation. Contrast between grand theories and testable middle-range theories. Mechanisms and laws. Ultimate and proximate mechanisms. Explanation as reduction either to individual traits and properties—such as rationality or emotions or to interaction mechanisms which follow from individual properties—such as social norms, selection, tipping models.

Bibliography

M. Weber, Economy and Society, 1920, part I, ch. 1, pp. 3-26

R. Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure, 2nd ed., 1968, ch. 2


J. Elster, Alchemies of the Mind, 2000, ch. 1

P. Hedström and R. Swedberg (eds.), Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory, 1998 (esp chapters 1 by editors, 3 by T. Schelling, 5 by D. Gambetta)

D. Gambetta Were they pushed or did they jump? Individual decision mechanisms in education, 1987, ch. 1

Elliott Sober and David Sloane Wilson. Unto others. The evolution and psychology of unselfish behaviour. 1998, ch. 6
Week 3 – 22 January – Rational Action

Much of what agents achieve and the means they use to do so are intended and often rationally chosen. Even in cases in which unintended consequences affect action, an account of what agents mean to achieve is a required part of a successful explanation (Weber called this requirement of explanation “adequacy at the level of meaning”). According to the theory of rational choice, given their desires and opportunities for actions, agents choose the course of action, which they believe will satisfy their preference best at the lowest cost (maximisation). This benchmark mechanism can be applied to explain a variety of social phenomena with success, especially when preferences, on which the theory has nothing to say, are simple and widespread. But we should be aware of its limits.

Bibliography
Jon Elster, key text, parts II and III


Gary Becker 1976, The economic approach to human behaviour (Introd. and Part 5, and any one application that takes your fancy, crime, marriage, time allocation)


[Pick among the empirical examples 2 you are more interested in.]

[education] D.Gambetta Were they pushed or did they jump? Individual decision mechanisms in education, 1987, ch. 4


[state formation] D. North, A neoclassical theory of the state, ch. 9 in Elster 1986, Rational choice

[limits of rational choice]

A.Tversky and D.Kanheman, 1986, The framing of decision and the psychology of choice, ch.5 in in Jon Elster, Rational choice


Week 4 – 29 January - Strategic interaction & collective action

What people get out of social life very often depends not only on what they decide but on what other people decide. And often in making a decision we take into account what we expect other people will decide (and what they expect that we expect etc…!). Doing the rational thing becomes a lot harder, and pursuing one’s self-interest can backfire, as illustrated famously by the Prisoner’s dilemma. This is the domain studied by game theory.

Elster key text, part V, chapters 19 and 20, 24, 26

A. Dixit and S. Sheath, *Games of Strategy*, Norton, chapters 1,2,5,8,11

Robert Axelrod, *The evolution of cooperation*, chapters 1,2,3,4,8,9

Samul Popkin, *The rational peasant* [worth reading whole if you are interested, else skip]

[collective action and limits to rationality driven by self-interest]

Olson M. (1965), *The logic of collective action*. Chapters I and II


http://mailer.fsu.edu/~whmoore/garnet-whmoore/research/prq95.pdf
Week 5 – 5 February – Social Norms

People often do not pursue their self-interest even when they would like to, but follow social norms in various domains of social life. Sometimes these norms promote the collective good, and some scholars think that this is why they emerge, but sometimes they do not and why they emerge, persist and have a grip on people’s behaviour is a puzzling, amply debated and controversial issue.

Cristina Bicchieri, *The grammar of society*, chapter 1

James Coleman, *Foundations of social theory*, chapters 10, 11


[norms of consumption] Pierre Bourdieu, 1986. *Distinction* [scattered, but search under ‘taste’ in the index]

[norms of money use]
Michael Walzer, 1983, *Spheres of justice*, chapter 4


Week 6 – 12 February – Unintended Consequences

Much of social life consist of individuals and institutions selecting, intentionally or otherwise, either other individuals with desirable traits with whom to deal with (e.g. in marriage, recruitment, promotion, migration, economic partnership and exchange etc.) or selecting themselves into social practices which they find congenial (working practices, child-rearing practices, dwelling practices etc.). While intentionally aiming to achieve positive outcomes for themselves, individuals and institutions often face unintended consequences, which derive from the fact that the properties by which they select other individuals and practices, have unexpected and sometimes negative consequences. These in turn are often due to the fact that once the aggregation of individual actions occurs the overall outcome does not turn out as planned. The discovery and modelling of effects of this kind are one of sociology’s best contributions. These models help to explain both social change as well as the permanence of sub-optimal states of affairs.

Bibliography


Tocqueville, A. de The Old Regime and the French Revolution (London: Everyman’s Library) Ch. 9, pp. 65-77.

Week 7 – 26 February – Functional explanations

Functional explanations are a particular family of selection models which has played an important role in the social sciences. These models explain the permanence of practices and institutions by the adaptive function they perform. The extent to which these models can be applied to human affairs is controversial since a condition of a functionalist explanation is that the feedback process which maintains the practice must occur unbeknownst to the agents participating in it. If the feedback process is recognised by agents and intentionally governed by them, then functionalist explanations simply turn into a variant of intentional explanations. Despite much fallacious use of functionalist reasoning, there are a few important examples, however, in which, even applying the strict criteria, a functionalist explanation does work.

Bibliography


In Martin M. and L.C. McIntyre, 1996, *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science*, MIT Press see:

Carl Hempel, The Logic of Functional analysis (chapter 22)

G.A.Cohen, Functional explanation: In Marxism, (chapter 24)

Jon Elster, Functional explanation: In social science (chapter 25)
Week 8 – 5 March – Cognitive dissonance reduction

How can we explain strange social phenomena, such as forms of (seemingly) willing and extreme submission – in Ancient Rome, in the caste system or in Mafia-ridden societies – or catastrophic changes in political or religious preferences which can lead to revolt? The theory of cognitive dissonance reduction provides a key mechanism. The presence of an oppressive power as well as the existence of diffused and intense social pressure on what is either safe or right to desire and to believe can cause agents to rearrange their beliefs or preferences. The partial collapse of the pressure can lead to sudden changes, in that true preferences and beliefs re-emerge generating dramatic social change.

Bibliography
Leon Festinger, 1957, A theory of cognitive dissonance, Stanford UP

Jon Elster 1983. Sour grapes. CUP. Chapter IV.

[General appraisal of the theory and of its applicability to social change]

[A critical appraisal]


Paul Veyne, 1990, Bread and circuses, Allen Lane [chapter 4, on the deification of the Emperor]

[Application to economic development]
Week 9 – 12 March – Imitation

“Monkey see monkey do”? On the contrary, recent research shows that imitation – on which Gabriel Tarde wrote a famous treatise in 1895 but which has so far been little studied - requires a complex mind such as that of humans. Intentional imitation can be a solution to some of the limits of rational choice; it is crucial for the understanding of the diffusion of technologies and practices; it works as a major vehicle of learning and cultural transmission. Some forms of imitation are relevant for sub-intentional phenomena, such as conformism, or contagious suicides.

Bibliography


Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson 19985. Culture and the evolutionary process. University of Chicago Press. Chapter 1 and 2; pp. 32-60; 132-136; 166-171; 223-240; 241-247; chapter 9


Week 10 – 19 March – Tipping (or threshold) models

What can explain the sudden change of stable collective behaviours? Why do small 'shocks' cause large shifts in behaviour? E.g. why do people sometime rebel, breach norms and stop painful practices? Also, why do fads spread like wildfire, or racially mixed neighbourhoods unravel into segregated ones? In which ways is behaviour interdependent? How does interdependence depend on social structure and networks?

Bibliography:


Laitin D. ((September, 1994), "The Tower of Babel as a Coordination Game: Political Linguistics in Ghana, American Political Science Review, pp. 622-34. [JSTOR]


