The course aims to acquaint researchers with some of the most important social mechanisms, which social and political scientists employ to explain social phenomena. It concerns the micro-foundations of explanations, which revolve around individual behaviours, and around basic forms of interaction among individuals. Different social mechanisms often carry different observable implications, and can be tested against empirical evidence. The course however is focused on theory and not on empirical studies, though the bibliography includes examples of mechanism-based explanations. The course is open to all, and suitable for both political scientists and sociologists.

Key Texts
Jon Elster – Explaining Social Behavior [ESB]
P. Hedström & P. Bearman (eds.) Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology [OHAS]

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 repeated in the week’s bibliography. Each class will be introduced by DG, and followed by previously agreed individual presentations (20-30 mins), based on the readings—on aspects and applications of each mechanism. Credits will be obtained by

(i) Giving at least one clear, concise and well-organised presentation.

(ii) Submitting an essay discussing one or more mechanisms and how they could be relevant for your dissertation question(s) ((max 3000 words, delivery by 18 April). Essays will be marked and credits granted to those who earn a pass.

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*NB These classes are on Fridays
1 – “What makes people tip”, overview and course organisation

I present an unpublished paper of mine on the range of possible explanations of a seemingly simple social phenomenon, the giving of tips.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.
2 – Explanations by social mechanisms

We contrast correlation vs explanation, and grand theories vs testable “middle-range theories”. We discuss explanation as reduction either to individual properties—such as dispositions, rationality or emotions—or to basic interaction mechanisms—such as social norms, selection, or tipping models. We also discuss the differences between intentional and causal mechanisms.

Bibliography

ESB: Part I

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

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

Preferences are a key determinant of the small and grand things individuals try to achieve. They are an individual’s conscious ranking of outcomes, and have been categorised in various ways, such as tastes, (e.g. preferring taller partners), values (e.g. abhorring violence), or as shared tendencies (e.g. all else equal preferring more rather than less of a resource). Individuals have also deep-seated social dispositions—a particularly important place is held by self-interest and altruism (or other pro-social motivations), which affect many of our decisions when interacting with others, and ultimately generate communities with different features. The sources of our preferences and dispositions are a puzzle in their own right, and some argue they are ultimately the product of evolution.

ESB: Part II, chapters 4, 5, 6.

OHAS: chapter 5, Jeremy Freese, Preferences
http://jeremyfreese.com/docs/Freese%20-%20Preferences%2020080224.pdf

SC Kolm and JM Ythier (eds) Handbook of the economics of giving, altruism and reciprocity (2006):
- Chapter 1 by Kolm
- Chapter 7 by Garbuoa et al.
- Chapter 8 by Fehr and Schmidt

http://www.iew.unizh.ch/grp/fehr/wp-fehr.html


Elliott Sober and David Sloane Wilson. Unto others. The evolution and psychology of unselfish behaviour. 1998, ch. 6, 7
4 – Rational action

Much of what agents achieve and the means they use to do so are intended and often rationally chosen. 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

ESB: part III, chapters 9, 10, 11, 12,13


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


5 - Strategic interaction

What people get out of social life 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 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.

ESB: part V, chapters 19 and 20

OHAS: chapter 26


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
6 – 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. The debate is both ‘why do people comply with norms (or spend resources making others comply)’, and ‘where do norms come from. 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


Jon Elster, 1989, Nuts and bolts, chapter 12

[norms of fairness]
	Jon Elster, 1993, Local justice, CUP

[norms of cooperation]

[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

[norms on child rearing]
	Judith Harris. 1998 The nurture assumption, Chapter 5

[norms on honour and feud]
	Jon Elster 1999. Alchemies of the mind. CUP. Chapter 3

[maladative norms]
7 – Collective action

When the positive outcomes of taking costly actions are enjoyed by everyone (they are indivisible)—such as a pay rise, a cleaner environment, or a better reputation for your institution—but the costs of those outcomes are borne by individuals’ sacrifices—striking, not polluting, working hard—then the puzzle is: how can such good be ever produced given that the incentive is to free ride on other people’s efforts? How can collective action ever occur?

**ESB:** part V, chapters 24, 26

**OHAS:** chapter 17

Olson M. 1965, *The logic of collective action*. Chapters 1 and 2


Samul Popkin, *The rational peasant*, esp. chapters 1 and 6


[http://mailer.fsu.edu/~whmoore/garnet-whmoore/research/prq95.pdf](http://mailer.fsu.edu/~whmoore/garnet-whmoore/research/prq95.pdf)
8 – 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 or to believe, can cause agents to rearrange their beliefs or their preferences. The sudden collapse of the pressure can lead to sudden changes, in that true preferences and beliefs re-emerge generating dramatic social change.

Bibliography

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]
9 – 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 self-selecting 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

ESB: chapter 17 and 18

OHAS: chapter 13


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

10 – Tipping (or threshold) models

What can explain the sudden change of apparently 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:

OHAS: chapter 20


