SPS Seminar 2nd term 2015-2016

Foundations of Social Life 2015: Explanatory Social Mechanisms

Organised by Diego Gambetta

Tuesdays, 11:00-13:00, Seminar Room 3, Badia Fiesolana
(Please note that the class on 1/3 will be held in Sala del Capitolo.)

Please register online

(Contact: Monika.Rzemieniecka@eui.eu)

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 and suitable for both political scientists and sociologists.

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Key Texts

Jon Elster – *Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* [NB there is a Revised Edition published in 2015]

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

NB in each class researchers are expected to read the pertinent chapters of the two above 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
- Active attendance of at least 8/10 classes
- Giving at least one presentation

Optional: term essay on a course topic that is relevant to your dissertation.

Week 1 – 12 January – An example: “What makes people tip” – plan presentations

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

This will illustrate
(i) a range of mechanisms, several of which will resurface later in the course, and (ii) how one can reason when trying to find a mechanism-based explanation.

After that, we will organise the researchers’ presentations for the following weeks.

Week 2 – 19 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 social interaction mechanisms—such as strategic actions, social norms, selection, tipping models.

Bibliography

Jon Elster, key text, part I

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

http://goodliffe.byu.edu/301/protect/stinchcombe.pdf

J. Elster, Alchemies of the Mind, 2000, ch.1
Week 3 – 26 January – Rational Action

Much of what agents achieve and the means they use to do so are intended and at times 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 will best satisfy their preference 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, stable and widespread. But we should be aware of its limits.

Bibliography
Jon Elster, key text, part III and for limits part II


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)


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


[Limits]

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


**Week 4 – 2 February – Self-interest and altruism**

People’s actions, even rationally driven actions, vary depending on basic dispositions – such as risk aversion, time discounting and self-interest vs altruism. These dispositions are heterogeneous at the individual and at the group level, and are at once an object of research (*explanandum*) and factors that can explain behaviours (*explanans*). In this class we shall focus on the most socially consequential of these dispositions, namely the degree of self-interest and altruism.

**Bibliography**

Jon Elster, key text, II.5 and II.6 and Jon Elster, 1989, Nuts and bolts, ch. VI


Gary Becker 1976, The economic approach to human behaviour (Introduction and chapter 5)

Milton Friedman, [1996], The methodology of positive economics, in M. Martin & L. C. McIntyre Readings in the philosophy of social science, MIT press, pp 647-660


**Biological Explanations of Altruism**


**Week 5 – 9 February – 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**


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


Paul Veyne, 1990, *Bread and circuses*, Allen Lane [chapter 4, on the deification of the Emperor]
[Application to economic development]

**Week 6 – 23 February – 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 7 – 1 March – 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

Week 8 – 8 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 9 – 15 March – 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**


Elster, J. *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), Ch. 10.


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

Week 10 – 22 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:


