

Foundation of Social Life: Explanatory Social Mechanisms

Organised by *Diego Gambetta*

7 classes on Wednesdays 17:00-19:00; 3 classes on Fridays, 11:00-13:00

Register [online](#)

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The aim of the course is to acquaint researchers with some of the most important social mechanisms used by social scientists to explain social phenomena, and which can generate testable implications, ideally in competition with one another. The course focuses on theoretical reasoning and models, and on how they have been applied to empirical examples (the bibliography includes many examples of mechanism-based explanations). *The course is open to all, and suitable for political scientists and sociologists.*

Week	Date	Title	Presenters	Room
1.	10.1	<i>“What makes people tip, plan of presentations</i>	Diego	Seminar room 4
2.	19.1	<i>Explanation by social mechanisms [Friday]</i>		Seminar room 4
3.	24.1	<i>Rational action</i>		Seminar room 4
4.	31.1	<i>Dispositions and preferences</i>		Villa Sanfelice
5.	7.2	<i>Cognitive dissonance reduction</i>		Seminar room 4
6.	16.2	<i>Strategic interaction [Friday]</i>		Seminar room 4
	21.2	NO CLASS		
7.	28.2	<i>Collective action</i>	Max Schaub	Seminar room 4
8.	7.3	<i>Social norms</i>	Krzysz Krakowski	Villa Sanfelice
9.	16.3	<i>Selection models [Friday]</i>		Seminar room 3
10	21.3	<i>Tipping models</i>	Krzysz Krakowski	Seminar room 4

General Texts

Jon Elster – *Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* [NB chapters listed below refer to Revised Edition, 2015]

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

Requirements

NB in each class researchers are expected to read the pertinent chapters of the two above key texts, even if these are not 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. We will have guest speakers too.

Credits will be obtained by

- Active attendance of at least 8/10 classes
- At least one class presentation

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

Week 1 – 10 January – An example: “What makes people tip” and plan of course 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 resurface later in the course, and
- (ii) how to reasons when trying to fit a mechanism-based explanation to empirical phenomena.

D. Gambetta 2015. “What makes people tip”. In C. López-Guerra and Julia Maskivker (eds.) *Rationality, Democracy, and Justice The Legacy of Jon Elster*. Cambridge University Press, pp.97-114

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

Week 2 – 19 January [Friday] –Explanation by social mechanism

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—such as rationality or emotions— or to social interaction mechanisms—such as strategic actions, social norms, selection, tipping models.

Bibliography

J. Elster, key text, chapters 1 and 2

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

A. Stinchcombe, “On the Conditions of Fruitfulness of Theorizing about Mechanisms in Social Science,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1991, pp. 367-388

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

P. Hedström and R. Swedberg (eds.), *Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory*, 1998 (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

Habyarimana, J., Humpherys, M., Posner, D. N., and Weinstein, J. M., (2007). “Why Does Ethnic Diversity Undermine Public Goods Provision?” *American Political Science Review* 101(4): 709-725. [illustration of mechanism-testing]

Week 3 – 24 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 rational choice theory, 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 many limits...

Bibliography

J. Elster, key text, part III, esp. chapters 13 and 14

J. Elster 1986, *Rational choice*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Introduction

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)

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

[gender differences] Cowen, T. (1996). Why women succeed, and fail, in the arts. *Journal of Cultural Economics*, 20(2), 93-113.

[invention] D. North and R. B. Thomas 1973, *The rise to the western world*. CUP, esp. chs.1, 2, 11

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

[Limits]

Amartya Sen, 1977, *Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioural Foundations of Economic Theory*. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6, ss. 317-344.

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

David McRaney 2012. *You are not so smart*. Oneworld Publications (**an exhilarating review of the ways we go wrong, read at will and be ready to describe to the class a couple of mechanisms of your choice**)

Week 4 – 31 January – Self-interest vs altruism

People's actions, even rationally driven actions, vary depending on people's basic dispositions – such as risk aversion, time discounting and self-interest vs altruism. In this class we shall focus on the most socially consequential of these dispositions, namely the degree of self-interest and altruism. These dispositions are heterogeneous at the individual and at the group level, and are at once a factor in the explanation of behaviours (*explanans*), and an object of research (*explanandum*) – how do we explain altruism for instance, and that unlike ants humans are heterogeneous in this regard?

Bibliography

J. Elster, key text, part II, chs. 4 and 5; and J. 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

Fehr Ernst and Simon Gächter (1998): Reciprocity and Economics. The Economic Implications of Homo Reciprocans, *European Economic Review* 42, 845-859.

Herbert Gintis, Joseph Henrich, Robert Boyd, Samuel Bowles, Colin Camerer, Ernst Fehr, and Richard McElreath (2001) Cooperation, Reciprocity and Punishment in Fifteen Small-scale Societies, *American Economic Review*

Kollock, P. (1998). Social dilemmas: The anatomy of cooperation. *Annual review of sociology*, 24(1), 183-214. [on 'motivational' and 'strategic' explanations of cooperation]

Baldassarri D (2015) Cooperative networks: Altruism, group solidarity, and reciprocity in Ugandan farmer organizations. *American Journal of Sociology* 121(2):355–395.

Explanations of Altruism

Hamilton, W.D. 1963. The Evolution of Altruistic Behaviour. *The American Naturalist*. 97: 354-56.

Humphrey, N. 1997. Varieties of Altruism - and the Common Ground Between Them. *Social Research* 64: 199-209.

Trivers, R. 1971. The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism. *Quarterly Review of Biology*. 46: 35-57.

Sober E. and Wilson, D.S. 1998. *Unto Others. The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. 1-9; 55-99. chs. 7 and 8 (pp. 223-274).

Week 5 – 7 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

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

J. Elster 1983. *Sour grapes*. CUP. Chapter IV.

Jack W. Brehm and Arthur G. Cohen 1962 *Explorations in cognitive dissonance*. New York: John Wiley & Sons [General appraisal of the theory and of its applicability to social change]

Timur Kuran 1995, *Private truth, public lies: the social consequences of preference falsification*. Harvard UP

Timur Kuran, 1996, “Social mechanisms of dissonance reduction”, in P. Hedstrom and R. Swedberg (eds.), 1998 *Social mechanisms. An analytical approach to social theory*, Cambridge University Press

D. Gambetta, 1996, “Concatenations of mechanisms”, in P. Hedstrom and R. Swedberg (eds.), 1998 *Social mechanisms. An analytical approach to social theory*, Cambridge University Press

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

Albert Hirschman 1965, Obstacles to development: a classification and a quasi-vanishing act. *Economic development and cultural change*, July, vol. 13, pp. 385-93 [Application to economic development]

Week 6 – 16 February – Strategic interaction

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.

Bibliography

J. Elster, key text, part IV, chapters 18, 19

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

Thomas Schelling, 1961, *The strategy of conflict*, section II

Week 7 – 28 February – Collective action

Collective action does not always come about when it could bring about clear benefits for all. The pursuit of self-interest may block it and turn out to be self-defeating, and the problem of coordination can prevent even well intentioned individuals from acting collectively. These are some of the themes we shall explore in this class.

Elster, key text, chapters 22, 23, 24

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

Kenneth Arrow, 1973, *The limits of organization* [worth reading whole, short book]

Samul Popkin, 1979, *The rational peasant*

Will Moore, 1995. Rational rebels: overcoming the free-rider problem, *Political research quarterly*, 48, 417-454.

Thomas Schelling, *Micromotives and Macro Behaviour*, chapter 7

Kalyvas, S. N., & Kocher, M. A. (2007). How “Free” is Free Riding in civil wars?: Violence, insurgency, and the collective action problem. *World Politics*, 59(2), 177-216 [follow-up on Moore’s paper]

Week 8 – 7 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.

Bibliography

J. Elster, key text, ch. 21

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

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

J. Elster, 1989, *The cement of society*, chapter 3

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

[norms of cooperation] Robert Ellickson, 1991. *Order without law*, Harvard UP

[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

Viviana Zelizer 1994, *The Social Meaning of Money*. Princeton UP

[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

[maladaptive norms]

Robert B. Edgerton 1992, *Sick Societies: Challenging the Myth of Primitive Harmony*, The Free Press

Herrmann, B., Thöni, C., & Gächter, S. (2008). Antisocial punishment across societies. *Science*, 319(5868), 1362-1367.

Gambetta, D., & Origg, G. (2013). The LL game: The curious preference for low quality and its norms. *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, 12(1), 3-23.

[on norms change/persistence]

Knight, J., & Ensminger, J. (1998). Conflict over changing social norms: Bargaining, ideology, and enforcement. In: Brinton & Nee (Eds.), *The New Institutionalism in Sociology*, Stanford University Press. 105-127.

Week 9 – 16 March – Selection mechanisms and 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

Merton, R. 'The unanticipated consequences of social action', *American Sociological Review*, 1 (1936), pp. 894-904

J. Elster, key text, ch. 17.

J. Elster 1979. *Logic and Society* chapter 5.

Raymond Boudon 1982, *The Unintended Consequences of Social Action*, London, chapter 2 (in French edition is chapter II, titled Effets pervers et changement social)

Raymond Boudon and Francois Bourricaud 1989. *A critical dictionary of sociology*. Routledge, entry "Aggregation"

Thomas Schelling 1978. *Micromotives and macrobehaviour*. New York: Norton. Chapters 1 and 4 [worth reading whole as one of the best books in social sciences of 20th century]

Runciman G. *A treatise on social theory*. Volume II, Cambridge UP, 1989, pp.310ff.

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

Robert Nozick 1974. *Anarchy, state and utopia*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, pp. 18-22

Week 10 – 21 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:

Gladwell, M. (2000). *The tipping point*. Abacus [entertaining popular introduction]

Schelling T (1960). *The strategy of conflict*. Harvard UP [pp.54-58; and pp. 89-115]

Schelling, T.C. (1978) *Micromotives and Macrobehavior*, Norton, esp. pp. 83-110

Schelling, T.C. (1971) 'Dynamic Models of Segregation', *Journal of Mathematical Sociology*, 1, 143--186 [this corresponds roughly to chapter 4 of the book above]

Granovetter, M.S. (1978) 'Threshold Models of Collective Behavior', *American Journal of Sociology*, 83: 1420--1443.

* Granovetter; M.S., R Soong (1988) '[Threshold Models of Diversity: Chinese Restaurants, Residential Segregation, and the Spiral of Silence](#)' *Sociological Methodology*, Vol. 18, pp. 69-104.

Kuran, T. (1995) *Private Truths, Public Lies*, Harvard University Press, chap.15, 16.

Petersen R. (2001) *Resistance and rebellion. Lessons from Eastern Europe*. Cambridge UP [see esp. Introd and Concl, and then read selectively following index]

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

Laitin, D. (2007). National Cascades. In: Nations, States and Violence. New York: Oxford University Press. Ch. 2 (pp. 29-59).

Hedstrom, P., R. Sandell and C. Stern (2000) 'Mesolevel Networks and the Diffusion of Social Movements', *American Journal of Sociology*, 106:145--172. [JSTOR]

Mackie G (1996), "Ending Foot-Binding and Infibulation: A Convention Account," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 61, no. 6, 1996, pp. 999-1017 [JSTOR]

Myers, D.J. (2000) 'The Diffusion of Collective Violence', *American Journal of Sociology*, 106:173--208.