

Mayhem in sociology: proverbs in economics

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As an extended version of the original *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (1989), Jon Elster's *Explaining Social Behavior* proposes causal mechanisms that help the reader interpret social behavior, calling for an epistemic treatment of social sciences, founded on the capacity of the individual to reason about his or her actions.

Reviewed: Jon Elster, *Explaining Social Behavior. More nuts and bolts for the social sciences*. Cambridge University Press, 2007, 496 p., 29€.

In *Explaining Social Behavior*, Jon Elster compiles an exposition of the arguments articulated during his decades-long study of social phenomena and the methodology of social sciences in general. Rather than a monolithic case, the book provides a collection of seemingly disparate arguments to propose causal mechanisms that help the reader interpret social behavior, calling for an epistemic treatment of social sciences in general. By epistemic, Elster defines the approach to an interpretation of behavior that is founded on the capacity of the individual to reason about his or her actions, as well as their consequences in social life.

Method in social sciences: no general laws, unpredictable behaviors, but causal mechanisms

The book begins by offering the author's view on how social phenomena should be approached. According to Elster, a fact about behavior has first to be established by proper measurement. First, there is no point, according to the author, in trying to explain gut feelings or metaphysical arguments about behavior, but there is for actions recorded by an unalloyed instrument, be it a survey, a questionnaire, or a story in a journal. Second, an attempt to explain social behavior has to be founded in what is called methodological individualism, i.e. the premise that in order to understand the workings of a given group of people, we first have to understand the behavior of the individuals that constitute them. The fact that the individual is affected or even coerced by its immediate or distant environment is not a reason to change the methodological framework, it is claimed. Instead, it is precisely this interaction of individual agents and their behavior in organized societies that provides the most fertile ground for reasoning about individual behavior.

Further refinements of rational choice theory can actually shed light on the understanding of many theories in social sciences. This way of reasoning can be pushed further to the understanding of Freud's theory of personality, for instance. Freud brings forward three entities that are linked together in a specific manner. The results of the interplay between the id, the ego, and the super-ego generate observable behavior. However, the most important question according to the book is "how are we going to approach the explanation of actual behavior"? In terms of Freud's theory, one might say that the question translates to "which interplay of the unconscious with the ego that generates such and such behavior?" In answering this question, we would have opened the "black box" of Freud's theory and stated in a simple and easily digestible manner the way in which the three entities are linked. Therefore, explanation consists in uncovering causal chains or mechanisms.

There is a clear message in Elster's book, namely that by proposing laws in social sciences one should essentially be dealing with the identification of causal mechanisms. Nevertheless, according to Elster, the pursuit of general laws in social sciences is futile. No general causal mechanism can claim the status of being ironclad, precisely because there will always be observations that refute any such universal mechanism. The author offers a multitude of examples, interspersed with an original analysis of proverbs as records of causal mechanisms, collected from the works of Alexis de Toqueville, Marx, as well as Jean de la Bruyère, Montaigne, and even Proust.

Elster prefers to define the nature of explanation in negative terms, writing mostly what it is not rather than to define what it is. Explanation consists of stating objective mechanisms, ideally mechanisms that we can verify by quantitative methods. Mechanisms, as defined by Elster, are "frequently occurring and easily recognizable causal patterns that are triggered under generally unknown conditions or with indeterminate consequences." Hence, mechanisms offer to us the way to approach social phenomena and understand behavior, even if we cannot fully understand the particular instances that trigger their appearance. For example, the child of an alcoholic can either turn out to be an alcoholic herself, or abstain from such a behavior. In the first case, the child adheres to the behavior of her family background, a mechanism of conformism. In the other case, the child observes the hazards of this behavior and abstains from reproducing it. We often cannot predict that one behavior or the other can turn out to be real. But the fact that we can identify a causal chain, and see if this causal chain is what indeed has happened in the case of the alcoholic child of an alcoholic, we are in a much better position as a social scientist than without this identification.

Elster's social explanation and economics models

The way that the book is structured is precisely the way that modern academic research in economics is written nowadays. In a figurative manner, it can be claimed that the book of Jon Elster is a collection of economic models, where the equilibrium behavior of individuals is studied either in isolation or in an organized society. The book first

describes the objectives of individuals, then the means that they have at their disposal to attain these objectives, and then the predictions on individual behavior, and the consequences of these actions. Individuals, according to Elster, have a multiplicity of objectives, determined for example by their emotions or their inner motivations. Self-interest is the innate motivation of individuals that exhibit a minimal degree of altruism. The distance between objectives and the present, and the individual's ability to foretell the results of his or her present actions towards aims that reside in the distant future is also a way to model behavior over time. These are precisely the objectives used in economics, conceptualized in what economists call a utility function.

In this way, the book endorses the body of knowledge developed by economics in several passages, especially the area that has come to be known as behavioral economics. For example, part of the literature of behavioral economics deals with the nature of subjective probability (see Savage), or the availability of information. By dealing with these issues, it is essentially the nature of this utility function that is extended to include, for example, concerns about the availability of information and its influence of decision.

As the author immediately makes clear, though, the methodological apparatus of instrumental rationality is not defended: it appears that the author tries to protect the mechanics of causality from an argument so strong as the instrumental rationality premise.

A first reading of Elster can detect some critical dispositions towards established practice in economics, most of them indicative of the author's view on the methodology of social sciences in their entirety. In Elster's terms, constructing a social theory is simply putting together a set of causal mechanisms contingent on the conditions the individual is confronted with in any particular situation. To clarify this argument, suppose that we observe that two individuals with different objectives react in a different observable manner when confronted with the same set of choices available to them. In the same manner, two individuals with identical objectives will react in a different observable manner when

confronted with different choices available to them. How can then, in Elster's terms, a law like the "law of demand" claim universality?

Economics as providing proverbs

There is a clear answer to this question. In economics, the pursuit of generality is anything but futile. In fact, it often appears at a first glance that economics is totally "science fiction", in Elster's own words. But even if economics cannot predict individual behavior with the notorious accuracy of physical sciences, it may still have a pedagogical or other use within the realm of social sciences, precisely in the way it is clearly endorsed in the book's pages. In economics, we don't model actual behavior, and there are many people that claim that we actually shouldn't. It is the purpose of economics to write allegories, or, in Elster's terms, to write proverbs.

In a clear and entertaining manner, this is a book for readers who want to explain contemporary society in a way that appeals to our understanding of rationality. Complex phenomena lend themselves to simple answers. Oftentimes, these answers are as simple as a saying written in a book or a proverb. It is up to the reader to delve into the numerous references to economic research at the end of every chapter, and to further pursue the observation of the mechanisms of rational choice theory in her everyday life.

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