

The AGORA

Newsletter of the Rationality and Society Section of the American Sociological Association and the Research Committee on Rational Choice of the International Sociological Association

Winter 2011

From the Chair's Desk



Dear Rationality and Society Members:

Our small but enthusiastic section has had an excellent year due in large part to the chairpersonship of Pam Oliver. Many thanks for the great work! Looking ahead, Christine Horne and her nominating committee have put forward an fine slate of candidates. They are:

For chair: Denise Anthony, Rafael Wittek
For council: Steven Benard, Nobuyuki Takahashi

We will have two section sessions at the ASAs this year. They are:

New Developments in Rational Choice Theory and Research. Chair: David Willer USC (east) (2 hours)

In Search of Homo Sociologicus: From Individual Decisions to Collective Outcomes. Chair: Davide Barrera University of Utrecht

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2010-2011

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**106th ASA Annual Meeting
August 20-23, 2011
Caesars Palace Las Vegas
Las Vegas, Nevada**

EXPERIMENTING WITH HISTORY

David Willer

Recently I reread two papers on theory, history and explanation, Kiser and Hechter (1991) and Mahoney (2004). Erudite and well reasoned they may be, but, by the conclusion of my reading, I found myself wondering whether historical explanation was possible. According to Kiser and Hechter, historical research offers no opportunity to manipulate and, without that opportunity, inference is problematic. They see causality as necessary to historical explanation, but causes are not observable. Since “the social sciences are not exact” (5), it is difficult to see how sociologists can explain anything in history. The paper by Mahoney gives no encouragement. His goal was to clarify the use of general theory. Yet, I looked in vain for an explanation of even one historical event. The prospects for historical explanation seem dim indeed. But are they?

Perhaps not. What I seek to show is that at least one sociological theory can offer historical explanations. In fact, using that theory I will offer three explanation sketches here. The theory is Elementary Theory and the explanations are sketches only because I have left out technical details. I should add that Elementary Theory works, not by the method of authority, by generalization, by finding regularities, or by proposing causes like so many in sociology. Instead it works by linking observable events to corresponding abstract events of models built by the theory. In fact, explanation in all the sciences consists of building theoretic models, the events of which correspond to the observable events to be explained.

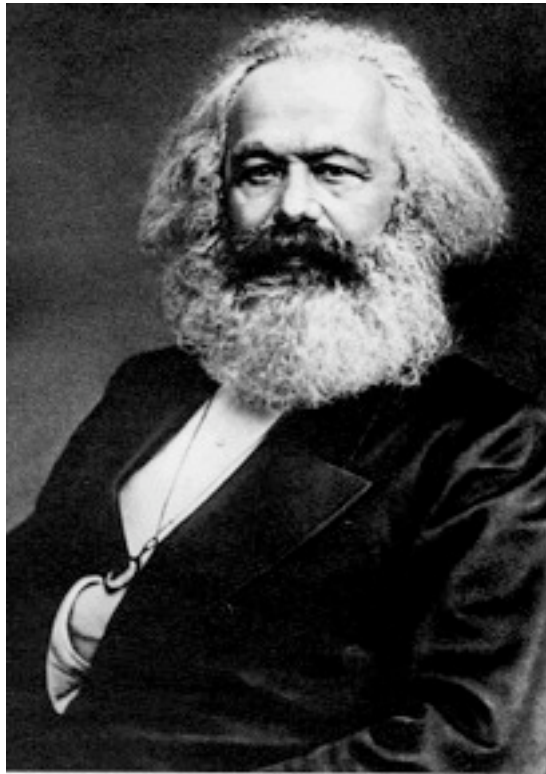
Beyond linking concrete and abstract events in explanation, applications of Elementary Theory also link different kinds of research. Models built using

the theory are designs for experiments (Willer and Walker 2007). When run, the experiments test the models and, in particular, evaluate whether the ways those models link abstract events does or does not correspond to empirical events. Experimentally tested models can explain in the following way. The linked events of an abstract model are historical explanations when they correspond to particular events of history. In that sense experimenting with history is quite possible and highly advisable.

Here is an example model. Having dropped all formalisms, I rely on your imagination to picture the following network and its events. Draw one circle labeled M and five circles labeled S. Draw more than five if you like. Connect M and each S with two signed edges that are events directed by M to S and the reverse. Each negatively signed edge is a negative sanction that can be sent by M to S. Each positively signed edge is a positive sanction that can be sent by an S to M. These are coercive relations wherein the threat of sending the negative is intended to extract positives and frequently does. A more complete model would assign numerical values to the sanctions and derive the consequent value systems for the actors. Assuming rational actors, any of a number of solution concepts can infer the number of positive sanctions extracted by threat of M’s negatives. Call this a weak coercive structure.

Now imagine a second model much like the first, but now M always sends at least one negative sanction to one of the Ss. Call this model a strong coercive structure. A rational M seeks to optimize positives received and the S to receive the negative sanction is the one sending the least to M. Knowing that contingency, rational Ss will seek to avoid sending the least thus generating a competition through which the number of positives sent goes to the maximum possible for the system.

The two models above can be applied to master – slave structures under two contrasting conditions understood by both Marx and Weber. Marx explained that slavery in Jamaica had higher profits than slavery in the American South because slaves were cheaper in Jamaica. Weber used the same contrasting conditions to explain the decline in productivity of slavery in Rome when it stopped expanding. Both Marx and Weber recognized that when slaves are cheap they can be routinely beaten and killed to optimize production.



Marx and Weber asserted that the mistreatment of slaves was related to the profitability of slavery, but does their assertion explain these historical events? Perhaps not because neither had proof that the cheapness of slaves and ongoing negative sanctioning produced high rates of coercive exploitation. Nevertheless, the strong and weak coercive structures that correspond to their two contrasting conditions have been investigated in the laboratory. Experiments show that the difference in coercive exploitation is substantial and in the direction claimed by Marx and Weber. The numbers of positive sanctions extracted in the strong coercive structure were far greater than the number in the weak structure. This is a reliable result, predicted by theory and found again and again under controlled conditions. Therefore, it completes their historical explanations.

Consider one further example. In *Life on the Mississippi* Mark Twain wrote that, while born and raised in Missouri, then a slave state, he hated slavery. Yet he said that he had never seen a slave mistreated in

his home state. Elsewhere in *Life* he described the heart-wrenching sight of slaves held in irons on the St. Louis wharf awaiting shipment to the plantations of Mississippi and Louisiana. It was well known that, in those plantations, life was hard and short. In fact slaves were being ‘shipped down the river’ with all of the horrors that phrase implies. Was the mild treatment of slaves in Missouri related to shipping some down the river?

The two could be very well be related. Recent experiments

Karl Marx

on direct and indirect coercion clearly show that coercers who act

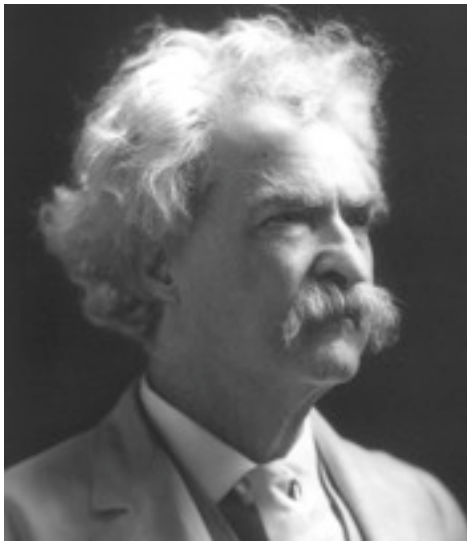
in strong coercive structures gain no more positive sanctions than do actors without coercive power who can affect whether subordinates are or are not negatively sanctioned by another. Significantly, more resentment is directed by coerced against coercers than against actors who do not coerce, but benefit from positive sanctions sent by others. Do the models for these experiments cover and thus explain the workings of the ‘peculiar institution’ in Missouri? Whether they do requires historical investigation, an investigation focusing on what slaves in Missouri knew about the consequences of being shipped down the river.

That these examples are disturbing – and much in history is disturbing – should not obscure the point I am seeking to make. In sociology historical explanation and the experiment can stand in the same relation as do astronomy and experimental physics.



Astronomers are no more able to manipulate their subject than are sociologists who study history. Nevertheless, the understanding of astronomical phenomena through theory that links their work to experimental physics provides tested models for explanation of the

events of the Universe. Just as in the physical sciences, in sociology concrete events are explained when they are covered by theoretical models that have been experimentally tested. Isn't it time that sociologists, by employing theory, build models, test them and explain the events of history?



RATIONALITY AND SOCIETY 2011 SECTION AWARDS

Section Award for Best article, 2009-10.

Nominations, including self-nominations, are encouraged for theoretical or empirical works in the rational choice tradition broadly construed, including alternative decision theoretic frameworks and applications of theory to empirical problems. Eligible articles must have been published in 2009 - 2010. Nominations should be submitted by email to [Yoshimichi Sato \(ysato@sal.tohoku.ac.jp\)](mailto:ysato@sal.tohoku.ac.jp) by **March 1, 2011**. Nominations should include two electronic files: (1) A cover page with the article title, article abstract, author's name(s), institutional affiliation and institutional address, and full contact information including preferred email address, telephone number(s) and mailing address. (2) The nominated article beginning with title and abstract but with author's name and other identifying information removed. The heading of messages with the two attached files should be "2011 Best Article Award."

Section award for best paper by a graduate student in 2010.

Nominations, including self-nominations, are encouraged for theoretical or empirical works in the rational choice tradition broadly construed, including alternative decision theoretic frameworks and applications of theory to empirical problems. Eligible authors are students currently enrolled in a graduate program who will not have received the PhD at the time of the ASA meeting, August 13-16th, 2011. Multi-authored papers are eligible if none of the authors has a PhD. Nominations should be submitted by email to [Jane Sell \(j-sell@tamu.edu\)](mailto:j-sell@tamu.edu) by **March 1, 2011**. Nominations should include two electronic files: (1) A cover page with the paper title, paper abstract, author's name(s), institutional affiliation and institutional address, the name of the author's faculty advisor, and full contact information including preferred email address, telephone number(s) and mailing address. (2) The nominated paper, double-spaced, beginning with title and abstract but with author's name and other identifying information removed.

Rational Choice Section, International Sociological Association, 2011

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From the President's Desk

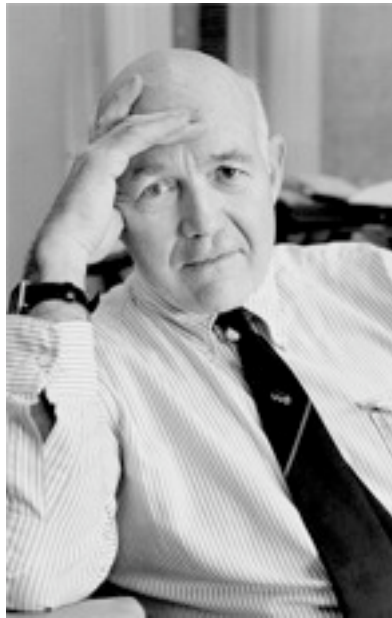


Dear Colleagues:

Some years ago I came across the section membership statistics of the ASA published on the ASA homepage, and the result naturally came to my mind when I was asked some months ago to run for the presidency of RC45, the research committee on Rational Choice of the International Sociological Association. You may or may not know it, but the trend over the last decade is not an overwhelming sign of success for conceptions of sociology organized around the idea of the rational, goal-oriented individual. I do not know the respective figures for the ISA committees, but I am quite sure that the general result will be rather similar: In an environment where the number of people doing sociology of some kind is growing, the number of us, scholars who seek explanations through modelling interaction of rational actors, is stagnating if not slightly shrinking.

So when Yoshimichi Sato asked me whether I would be willing to serve as ISA RC45 president, I had to ask myself what to think of this trend. Usually, being an official of a shrinking club is no fun: Instead of making plans for enlargement and the use of increasing funds, you manage a diminishing cake and see your best friends leave for more promising locations. And there are clearly some signs of the tide which go against rational choice sociology: In a world which is showing ever more new facets each day, many students of sociology are happy to use

their studies just to explore these facets, bringing more than a surface order into their observations. In a world which becomes more visual and haptic every day, abstract concepts are not hip. And even if it comes to things where abstract explanations are dearly demanded, as for the recent financial crisis, for terrorism, or for the increasing instability of national and global institutions, many scholars place more hope on other paradigms than that of understanding individual purposeful action.



That situation is quite different from that 45 and even 25 years ago. In the times of Becker and Coleman, to presume rationality behind things which had always been seen as guided through stable norms had a fresh impetus, and it provided a useful rationale for new insights in social issues which were regarded as problems within sociology and within society. Rational choice sociology departed from economics just after Debreu had described mathematically how a free economy can work, and Solow, how societies might be able to find higher levels of wealth and modernity. Coining the prisoners' dilemma, describing divorce as Becker did, Schelling's segregation model or Coleman's support for busing were all impulses which were noted far outside the profession. Although at that time their impact was largely confined to the United States, they and other pioneers of these days inspire scholars all over the world to this day.

This success cannot be cut off from the situation of the decades they worked in, neither from the social situation nor from the giants on whose shoulders they stood. Socially, the modernization of societies had untied many people from the bounds of social norms: Although later-on rational choice mechanisms provided insights into processes of all times, in that particular situation the goal-oriented

subject for which orientation on pre-defined norms was not the optimal option became an important force of change. And the pioneers of that time were able to make use of the developments in theory of production and demand which themselves had built on the growing abstraction of mathematical theory in the early 20th century.

In the current situation, we find these two aspects, social situation and usable foundations, in a rather comparable form. Contrasting to previous ages, even the 25 years ago already mentioned, current societies

provide their citizens with an overload of information and the necessity to process this information. This situation is both a challenge and a chance for rational choice sociology. It is a challenge, since Coleman's boat started from assumptions about interpretations, motivations and restrictions which remain ad hoc to the respective analysis. The influence of perceptions has been taken into account systematically with regard to interpretation, but a similar inclusion of the relation between motivations and restrictions and the cognitive situation of individuals into the framework remains to be done.

But it is a chance, too. Socially relevant cognitive processes are individual processes in a social setting, so only the inclusion of actor-oriented social analysis can reveal all of their aspects. We have to do this inclusion, but we are better equipped than scholars who lack the knowledge either of individual action or of social settings. For this attempt, we also have the chance to climb on shoulders providing some height to look out. The recent results from cognitive psychology, behavioral game theory, and institutional economics have been achieved with interfaces to rational choice sociology. We are asked to aim for, and some of us are still working on an integration into a framework

applicable to those social issues which are currently of interest to the broader society.



Doing so will change rational choice sociology. We will have to integrate new approaches and methods into our analytical toolbox. And, given

the scarcity of time, we will sadly note the diminishing importance of other tools we once loved. But we will provide our readers, our students and ourselves with new insights and new solutions to social problems. And, of course, an integrative tackling of current social issues will affect the outside impact of rational choice sociology. It will not make us a majority fraction, since our demands in terms of abstraction and mental discipline are still above average and there are sociologists existing who are satisfied with less. But chances are intact for the years to come, that in terms of intellectual satisfaction and of impact and reputation, being a rational choice sociologist (and a rational choice research committee president) will still be fun as it once has been.

News from ISA RC45

The international counterpart of the ASA Rationality and Society Section, the International Sociological Association's research committee on Rational Choice (RC45) has held a business meeting during the ISA world congress at Gothenburg (Sweden), on Wednesday 14 July 2010. The board during RC45's fifth term of existence, consisting of Yoshimichi Sato as outgoing president, Kazuto Misumi as secretary and treasurer, and Antonio M. Chiesi, Dianne Payne, Hanno Scholtz, Rafael Wittek, and Lynne Zucker as board members had done a good job, presenting RC45 at an co-sponsored International Conference on Rational Choice and Social Institutions in Zurich, Switzerland (September 6-8, 2007), at

(News from ISA RC45 (continued))

four own sessions at the First Forum of Sociology in Barcelona, Spain (September 5-8, 2008), and at the nine sessions, this business meeting, and an integrative session with RC04 and RC28 at the World Congress of Sociology in Gothenburg, Sweden (July 11-17, 2010).

For the sixth RC45 board, the following colleagues have been proposed and elected: Hanno Scholtz (Berne/Leipzig) as president), Thess Schoenholzer (Berne) as secretary and treasurer, Rafael Wittek (Groningen), Guillermina Jasso (New York), Antonio M. Jaime-Castillo (Granada), Elizabeth Roberto (Yale), Antonio M. Chiesi (Milano) and Yoshimichi Sato (Tohoku) as board members. Jun Kobayashi volunteered as newsletter editor.

In between, the new board has decided to organize a sequence of meetings.

- 2011, 11.-13.5. Netherlands, linked with the ICS anniversary
Local organizer: Rafael Wittek
- 2011, Aug/Sep. Fourth International Conference on Rational Choice and Social Institutions, Japan. Local Organizer: Kunihiro Kimura (Tohoku)
- 2012, July ISA Forum (location still to be decided)
Organizer: Hanno Scholtz
- 2013 USA, linked with ASA meeting
Local organizers: Elizabeth Roberto and Willie Jasso
- 2013 Torino, Local organizer: Antonio M. Chiesi
- 2014 ISA World Congress, Yokohama

The new board has adopted the necessity to foster generally the use of rational choice methodology and more specifically membership growth (especially beyond the current geographical clusters of membership in the German-speaking part of Europe and in Japan), the co-operation with other RCs and the improvement of communication as current priorities.

CALL FOR PAPERS
RATIONAL CHOICE SOCIAL RESEARCH:
FROM STANDARD RATIONALITY TO
SOCIAL RATIONALITY?

Symposium of the ISA Research Committee 45
“Rational Choice”

Acceptance will be based on the submission of an extended abstract (1000-1500 words) or a paper by February 15, which allows us to notify participants about their participation already on February 21.

Date: May 15, 2011

Place: Groningen, The Netherlands

**Organizers: Jacob Dijkstra (j.dijkstra@rug.nl),
Rafael Wittek (r.p.m.wittek@rug.nl)**

Sponsors: Department of Sociology, University of Groningen

(<http://www.rug.nl/soc/index>) and ICS

(<http://www.ics-graduateschool.nl/>)

The highly stylized rationality assumptions of neo-classical economics have always been a point of controversy. Neo-classical economists do not consider these assumptions as problematic – they treat deviations from standard rationality as ‘cognitive anomalies’ at the level of individual actors, irrelevant for aggregate outcomes. In fact, the last decades have witnessed a strong increase in the use of such approaches, inspired by mainstream economics or more recently, the physical sciences and chaos-complexity theory. The advantages of such a “thin” or “strong” conceptualization of rationality are evident: the resulting models build on a parsimonious set of assumptions and remain highly tractable. This standard rational choice approach is challenged by proponents of an alternative approach, who emphasize the need to expand our concept of rationality. Building on evidence collected by cognitive neuroscientists, behavioral economics, evolutionary psychology, sociology and related fields, proponents of this approach suggest that

rather than treating deviations from a strong rationality model as idiosyncratic cognitive anomalies of individuals, they should be conceived as systematic reflections and hence predictable characteristics of human nature. The resulting “social rationality” approach emphasizes the ‘resourcefulness’ of humans, and arrives at surprising hypotheses and insights. These are sometimes at odds with the predictions of standard rational choice models, and sometimes can be incorporated into it. Social rationality extensions of the actor model, e.g. through ‘fast and frugal’ heuristics, the incorporation of goal framing, loss aversion and reciprocity effects, or the assumption that actors derive utility from punishment were successfully applied to explain cooperative vs. selfish behavior, e.g. the decision to free-ride, or to allocate sanctions for non-cooperation, and open new fields of application for the rationality-oriented framework. While correcting and refining the stylized actor assumptions of the standard model, orthodox rational choice scholars criticize these extensions as idiosyncratic, unnecessary extensions of the theoretical core of the approach. They argue that the problems resulting from adding complexity by far outweigh the potential benefits.

During this one-day symposium, we will take stock of the most recent theoretical developments and empirical findings relating to this debate. We welcome both theoretical and empirical, both fundamental and applied contributions.
