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FUNCTIONALISM, FIELD THEORIES, AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

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One of the virtues of Mohamed Cherkaoui's *Good Intentions* (2007) is that it separates the problem of unintended consequences from functionalism, and shows its power as an autonomous concept. In what follows I will take up one key idea in the book, the limitations of instrumental rationality. This is closely connected to the notion of unintended consequences: acts with unintended consequences are often acts where, because of our limited knowledge, the consequences are not known in advance nor expected because of our limited knowledge. Cherkaoui identifies different forms of the unintended social consequences of action. The effect of this is to show that functionalist arguments are unnecessary: that a better account of unintended consequences, completely causal in character, suffices to account for a wide range of phenomenon formerly thought to require, or be congenial to, functionalist explanation. This represents an important advance. Nor is its relevance restricted to the past, before functionalism became the love that dared not speak its name. It applies to the later, submerged forms of functionalism that attempted to evade the criticisms of functionalism.

Despite the very different trappings, Bourdieu never went beyond functionalism, as Elster has recently pointed out (2010). The functionalist pattern is one of reasoning in which the *consequences* of an action or pattern of actions explain the maintenance of the actions or pattern of actions. Often this requires theoretical invention, such as reasoning backwards from the existence of some social fact to a hypothesized sustaining force, which is then theorized as a kind of goal-seeking or end-producing agent-like force. This pattern of reasoning applies, evasions notwithstanding, to a wide range of social theories, including so-called field theories and Merton's "structuralism." But evasion is characteristic in these accounts. The evasions in the case of functionalism are failures to fully explain how it is that the consequences explain the cause. The evasions typically take the form of truncations or omissions, in which some crucial explanatory element is left obscure, left out, or left incomplete. As we will see, this is an important feature of "field theories." The evasions serve a purpose, however: they allow the theorist to avoid appealing to problematic theoretical inventions of hidden forces.

LEFT FUNCTIONALISM AND THE MYSTERIES OF TELEOLOGY

Traditional functionalism validated apparently irrational practices or institutions by showing that they had unrecognized beneficial effects, usually for "society" or for people other than those who were engaged in the activities of the institution itself. Left functionalism took society to be oppressive, and thus interpreted practices and institutions as secret oppressors. It was not claimed that the practices were intentionally or overtly oppressive, but that they were oppressive in their consequences, or in their hidden essence. Claiming they were oppressive in their consequences is not a claim that that fact explains the pattern. The claim that they were oppressive in their hidden essence, however, does: it implies something like a true purpose and force. This kind of reasoning characteristically took a theoretical turn, in which the oppressive agency was theorized as being itself a concealed cause that could be named and described, such as *habitus*. In this respect Left functionalism

resembles conspiracy theory. One can invent explanations of something one condemns, and then attribute it to this malign force. Nothing is happenstance. Any large effect must have a large cause. The cause is intrinsically hidden. For functionalism in its Bourdieusian form, these secret forces operate within and through ordinary agents–intentionally acting people. Yet the forces are not blind, because they adjust to continue to produce the result that is being explained. But the intentional agents whose actions are the proximate producers of the result are blind to these forces. Teachers, for example, think they are doing something else– enforcing standards, educating, and so on–when they are instead unwittingly enacting the inscription on the bodies of their charges of a *habitus* which ensures the continuation of class distinction.

Habitus is a characteristic theoretical object in this tradition. There is a banal and uncontroversial form of the concept, that appears in Weber, and means merely the collection of habits of an individual. It has no collective causes, though it might have effects on others and on collective outcomes. Habits are acquired in the normal manner: through experience and such things as actions or forms of reasoning becoming second nature, habitualized. For Bourdieu, however, *habitus* is something more. Not only is it the source of individual dispositions, these dispositions serve social or collective ends, and, crucially, are part of a process that reproduces oppressive effects. A *habitus* is a kind of collective agent that expresses itself in individual dispositions produced by the socially generated individual *habitus.*

One can see here the beginnings of the issue. The fact that there are things that people (in this case teachers) do that have unintended consequences is part of this story. But to get the teleological directionality, the continuing adjustment to produce the same unintended results, which is essential to functionalist explanation, there must be more. The functionalism is concealed in the term reproduction. What is being "reproduced" are the effects, and they are reproduced through the means of the theoretical object, the *habitus*, which is connected to the effects not merely causally, but in a way that sustains the effects. In short, for reproduction in the relevant sense, i.e., not merely copying but changing to continue to produce the relevant effects, there must be feedback. But the feedback cannot be through the medium of the adjustment of action to

conform with individual intentions, in the manner of individual teleology, the teleology of purposive action. The intentions and dispositions themselves are expressed individually but controlled through some sort of collective process.

The difficulty with these explanations and their variants is in making sense of this collective process. Old fashioned functionalists "solved" this problem in a variety of ways. One is to hypothesize steering mechanisms of some sort in a dynamic system, and to infer the existence of these mechanisms from the fact that "society" manages to make adjustments, for example, to its environment or internal tensions. Needless to add, these were all highly abstract rather than concrete phenomenon. But there is a special difficulty with Left functionalism: the mechanisms are not only hidden, they must be systematically concealed from consciousness in order to work. Oppression and its analogues cannot flourish if they are recognized as such. But oppression works through intentional actions. What is required for people to perform the oppressive acts is a specific kind of false consciousness: misrecognition, which is the reason the causes are hidden.

MISRECOGNIZED *VS.* UNINTENDED

Despite their surface similarity, the concept of misrecognition and the concept of unintended consequences are very different in their implications. A side-effect of a drug given for a specific purpose is an unintended consequence. The ethical doctrine of double-effect is concerned with the distinction between intended and unintended consequences. In these cases there is a clear separation between the subjective fact of intent and the objective facts about consequences. In the case of misrecognition, some notion of essence or essential connection is a part of the concept. And this is where some sort of supra-intentional teleology is built in to the usage.

Weber's thesis in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is the classic example of unintended consequences. The Protestants in question were aiming for salvation. In doing so they became disciplined and consequently rich. Getting rich was never intended. But the causal connection was eventually recognized by the people involved. There

is nothing in the way of supra-intentional teleology in this account. There is no essence. There is no secret force inducing the religious beliefs as a means of producing the end of wealth. And although the consequences were eventually recognized, there is no feedback loop in which this recognition serves to sustain belief. On the contrary, there is a concern that wealth undermines belief. To be sure, there might be other effects that work in the other way: a person esteemed initially for being rich might be imitated and in the course of imitation someone might come to believe as a side-effect of imitation. All of the feedback, however, is on the conscious or "recognition" level. There is no secret path. People are conscious of what they are doing, even if they are oblivious to the side-effects. It is not essential to the causal story that these effects be hidden.

In the case of misrecognition, it is essential that the effects be hidden, or at least incidental to the main point of the activity, and thus hidden from the attention of the agent. The thought is that the people performing the relevant acts would not do so if their real significance was manifest. If teachers understood that by enforcing rules of grammar they were actually (and essentially) reinforcing class distinctions, they would rebel. So something needs to do the hiding of these effects. And this something is ideology. But merely confusing people about effects–making them unintended, so to speak–is not enough. For ideology to do its work, it must hide: overcome the reality of the effects that normally would be apparent. Mere unintendedness is not enough. A kind of active participation in the process of self-delusion is necessary. And the process needs to be sustained, and even to adjust to new circumstances in order to continue hiding effects. Error is not enough either. Error can be overcome, either advertently or inadvertently. Error is a kind of natural accident: intelligible, but recognizable (under the right circumstances, such as the availability of new data) by the agent as wrong. It may be systematic, for example as a result of cognitive biases. Or it may be propagated intentionally, by believers or by people who know it is error. But error is not self-sustaining.

Bourdieu's account of *doxa* and *habitus* trades on the notion of systematic error. The world of experience given to us as a result of our shared *habitus* biases us toward seeing what is in fact the product of

history as "natural" and this systematic error is at the foundation of our beliefs, which we are systematically in error about because we do not consider the conditions of the possibility of belief. We confuse second nature with first nature, and as a result of the phenomenological immediacy of experiences conditioned by second nature, we ignore the conditioning itself. In Lacan, the source of the term "misrecognition," we get a straightforwardly teleological explanation complete with feedback mechanisms: misrecognition is a systematic means by which the ego protects itself from shattering in the face of the arbitrariness of the world. The work of protection is unconscious, the mechanisms of feedback and revision are thus hidden from the agent, and necessarily so: conscious self-deception would no longer be effective self-deception.

Bourdieu needs a collective analogue to this teleology and something to substitute for these unconscious feedback mechanisms, and indeed he asserts exactly this in his analysis of Mauss on gift exchange. "It is clear", Bourdieu insists, "that individual self deception [which characterizes each party's position in the logic of exchange, such as the gift exchange described earlier] is only possible because it is supported by a collective self-deception ... This collective self-deception, furthermore, "is only possible because the *repression* from which it arises ... is inscribed, as an *illusio*, at the foundation" of exchange. The entire economy of exchange is based "on a collective labour devoted to maintaining misrecognition with a view to perpetuating a collective faith in the value of the universal, which is simply a form of individual and collective bad faith (in the Sartrian sense of lying to oneself)" ([1997] 2000: 192). This collective labour is entirely metaphorical, of course: if there were real "labour" it would be conscious and intentional, and this would defeat the purpose of the misrecognition argument because it would not be hidden. But what the phrasing also conceals is the lack of any teleological force operating at this subintentional level that is analogous to the Lacanian ego protecting itself. The idea that there is an *illusio* at the foundation of the form of exchange is about essences: the essence of the form of exchange is other than the manifest features of the form. The essence is captured by Bourdieu's description.

THE PROBLEM OF AMBIGUITY

Because functionalism fell so far out of favour, and the perspectives that replaced it appeared on the surface to be so different, it would be useful to clarify some of the issues with these explanations, issues that carry over to Left functionalism and "field theory." The issues are apparent with Merton himself, and openly discussed in the Merton literature. Jon Elster pointed out one of them in these terms:

> Merton never states in so many words whether the task of functional analysis is to *explain* social phenomena or, more modestly, to identify and describe phenomena that might otherwise be overlooked. Clearly, manifest functions—intended and recognized consequences of action—have explanatory power. The question ... is whether latent functions—the unintended and unrecognized effects of action—can explain the actions of which they are the consequences. (1990: 130)

This is indeed the question, for Bourdieu and others as well as Merton. The issues appear at the heart of Merton's most famous arguments, such as his analysis of machine politics. As Elster points out, Merton

> ... refers to 'consequences [of a structure] which may provide basic social support for the structure.' With respect to the political machine he claims that 'the functional deficiencies of the official structure generate an alternative (unofficial) structure to fulfil existing needs somewhat more effectively.' The first statement suggests that consequences are important in maintaining (and thus explaining) institutions, the second that they are instrumental in creating (and thus explaining) them. (1990: 131)

Elster frames this as a problem of Merton's intentions: were they merely to describe consequences, or to use the consequences to explain the institution?

The larger issue is whether functional locutions and especially claims about "maintaining" can be employed without a commitment

to a view of society, or some other unit, having ends. The issue is not settled by quotations like the following, but they do allow for some clarification. Writing about the professional association of nurses, Merton comments that

> But one of the association's principal functions for the society of which it is a part is far from evident; it has often gone wholly unnoticed. This is its function, as one of the great intermediate associations, to help prevent the atomization of society into a sand-heap of individuals, each intent on pursuing his own private interests. Such an atomized condition is a step toward totalitarianism, which consolidates power over these socially disconnected individuals into a single center. (1958: 53)

This is a hidden effect that has to be pointed out by the sociologist, an unintended consequence, and a latent function. But it is not a case of misrecognition in the sense that nurses would recoil in horror and abandon the practice if these consequences were revealed to them. Nor is it clear that the consequence has much to do with maintaining the association, and Merton never hints that it does.

This, then, is a case of functionalist language used to simply mean unintended consequence. The consequence is collective, so it is not the kind of consequence that the people performing the actions would have had in mind, or perhaps could have had in mind. But it does not explain the creation or maintenance of the association of nurses. Is the case of machine politics like this: that it is the case that it fulfils some needs more efficiently, but that this is merely a descriptive fact about machines, not a part of the explanation of them? This is an important point: it is simply the case that the kinds of institutional arrangements that figure in functionalist explanations do not go on forever. Political machines of the kind Merton described have long since vanished. Did something change in some sort of unspecified feedback mechanism? Or was it instead that the conditions that produced the machines ceased? Is the "efficiency" of the machine a descriptive fact about the machine, or part of an explanation of why it persisted or won out against rival institutional possibilities?

THE CASE OF "FIELD THEORIES"[1]

Merton's model of political machines and Bourdieu's model of teachers contain omissions or problematic entities. In the case of Merton, it appears that he wishes to claim that the efficiency of the machine in delivering benefits contributes to its maintenance. But to complete this claim he would need to supply the relevant link: a feedback or selection mechanism, for example. This is nowhere to be found. All we get is a claim about benefits. In the case of Bourdieu, we get an appeal to a problematic theoretical object and process together with an implicit claim about essences related to misrecognition. The problem of omissions arises in particularly acute form in so-called "field theories." These are claimed to avoid the problems of functionalism. They do so, however, by giving up on the causal explanations and mechanisms that functionalism relies on. But is it really possible to have something explanatory rather than descriptive and avoid cause and mechanism? In what follows I will consider John Levi Martin's revealing exposition and defence of these claims.

The basic idea of field theory is that one can "explain" in a non-causal or at least non-mechanistic way by describing the features of a "field." The puzzle, however, is how a field explains. Martin suggests an analogy to the idea of magnetic fields. In this kind of explanation, it is not the properties of the objects in the field, but the properties of the field itself that do the explanatory work. Similarly, it is claimed, for field theories. The forces that do the explaining are in some sense in the field or part of the description of the field. But there is a familiar ambiguity here. Are we merely describing a world of existing forces, so that field theories are models which apply when they apply? If so, what are the conditions for their application, the conditions that make them fully explanatory? Are the forces in question enough to complete the explanation, or is something else needed? And are these "forces" problematic theoretical items, which are attributed unusual properties, but exist only to fill holes in the explanation?

Martin notes a "danger of ... tautology" (2003: 8): "since fields are only known by their effects ... it is tempting to proliferate invisible forces that 'explain' whatever it is that we otherwise cannot explain" (2003: 8).

This is of course familiar territory: Bourdieu and Foucault, not to mention Parsons, were fond of naming such forces or inventing theoretical objects with unusual powers to explain the phenomenon they attempted to explain. But these forces and theoretical objects, even if they were unfamiliar, explained in more or less familiar ways: they worked with mechanical analogies, or traded on the idea of presupposition.[2]

Field theories are more problematic. Martin uses Gestalt theory as a model close enough to social science to shed light on how field theory in social science might be understood. He argues correctly that Gestalt theory does not provide mechanisms. Indeed, this is one of the major criticisms of it. Nor are field theories either generalizations or generalizable. We do not know why they apply, or why they fail to apply. They differ from functionalism in that they avoid the characteristic nested structure of teleological explanation, in which ends become means to ends in higher or larger functional units. They are resolutely "local" or "concrete."

> the fact that the field at some place and time can be determined to be of a certain nature in no way implies that it must be this way—indeed, field theory, by never making explanation reach outside the field, must forswear any legitimating arguments that there is a reason why the field must be as it is. For this reason, field analysis is quite different from systems analysis, which, though it may stress the self-organization of the system, requires that the system be understood in contradistinction to an environment. But in field theory, explanation stops at the constitution of the field. (Martin 2003: 12).

The language explaining the notion of what it means for the model to apply is archaic: "determined to be of a certain nature." This is the language of essences. But the point is plain. Field theories are "applies when it applies" models. They forswear answering the question "why does it apply?"

But field theories, by renouncing any interest in causal mechanisms (however misleading this renunciation turns out to be[3]), find themselves on the horns of a different dilemma: either they are descriptive rather

than explanatory, or they are explanatory but explanatory in a teleological way–precisely as functionalism is. The issue can be seen clearly in the example of Gestalt psychology, which Martin repeatedly turns to as a model. Martin tries to navigate this dilemma as follows. He argues that these theories differ from normal functionalist sociology because the fields are local, the analysis is concrete, and the explanations do not depend on some sort of general societal end state. Is this possible? Not for functional explanation. To explain a given fact functionally, one must say what functional contribution it makes. The ends, the ends that do the explaining, may be local. But local ends must themselves be explained. The explanation might be mechanical or causal: a machine can be designed to equilibrate, as a thermostat does. If one has a complete description of the feedback mechanisms and so forth, one has a causal description of the device, and the preferred state is no longer the explanation but rather a feature of the causal processes themselves–a mechanical fact about the machine setting. But this kind of account converts a teleological explanation into a causal one.

Teleological explanations, explanations invoking ends, produce a hierarchy or sequence of ends, in which a local end is a means to another end. If we are to explain why animals have particular capacities by saying that it conduces to their survival, we invoke a preferred state, survival. But we then need to ask why survival is a preferred state. And we get some explanation like this: survival enables the genes to be transmitted. Genes being transmitted becomes the preferred state. The explanation is teleological. In the social case, there is always the question of whose ends are doing the explaining: whether they are individual ends (the interests of the voters who support the machine) or societal ends (such as integrating these voters into a larger political order to produce stability, or some such explanation).

Field theories are neither causal nor teleological explanations in this sense. The question then becomes whether they are explanations at all. In the case of magnetic fields, the answer would be that the field description is incomplete: one needs to account for the forces themselves. A similar problem arises for Gestalt theory. Critics have complained that Gestalt theory is purely descriptive, inasmuch as it describes a perceptual state of Good Gestalt, but does not provide mechanisms that

explain how this state happens. In its pure form, Gestalt theory rejects the problem. It rejects the assumption that perceptions are produced out of smaller units: experience simply comes in this form. However, one can think of a Gestalt as a preferred end state: "perceptually organized" as the end-state. And this would imply that the mind has self-organizing tendencies and therefore mechanisms that do the organizing.

We get, then, two interpretations. One is explanatory and teleological. The "laws" of Gestalt psychology, which specify the basic idea of the law of *Pragnanz*, including proximity, similarity, closure, symmetry, Good Gestalt, and so forth, are descriptions of the preferred end state to which the mind tends when organizing the perceptual field out of something unorganized, such as what William James called the "great buzzing, blooming confusion" of raw percepts. Identifying the preferred end state and explaining in terms of a supposed tendency to produce it is not enough and is merely circular in the way functionalism without feedback mechanisms normally is. To turn it into a fully teleological account would require explaining the tendency, not merely citing it. So as a teleological account it is an incomplete theory, and one that is perhaps impossible to complete on its own terms. The alternative is to claim that the theory is purely descriptive, inasmuch as it does not explain why this end-state is preferred. What is omitted, in this case, is not a part of the explanation, but explanation itself.

As an incomplete teleological explanation, Gestalt theory is like local functionalism, in its traditional and Left versions, and many other social science models as well. The benefit of claiming only to be "local" and concrete is that the account is freed of the obligation to either connect to a hierarchy of ends or to be explicable in terms of non-local causes or to explain why it applies in this situation. "Incomplete" or "local," however, imply "merely descriptive" rather than explanatory. And here the issue with Gestalt theory is revealing. Gestalt theorists, like Martin, fall into the ambiguity we first encounter in Merton: they want to be explanatory, but avoid the normal means (or elements necessary to the normal means) of explanation, and provide results which are descriptive–in the case of Merton the claim of efficiency, for example–but which are supposed to be taken as explanations. The Gestaltists would reject the "teleological" account of terms like "organization" I

have supplied on their behalf, and would reject the idea that perceptual experience is built up from smaller perceptual units. They wish to have it both ways. Martin provides a sociological variant of this kind of argument. It involves two steps. The first is to reject any distinction between the phenomenologically experienced world and the objective world (presumably of causal relations):

> ... the principles of field theory, and hence almost all field theorists, reject the assumption that there is in principle a divorce of phenomenology from objective description ... Indeed, it was a conviction that the phenomenologically perceived world should be treated as valid that led to the emergence of Gestalt psychology and the first field investigations. In Köhler's words, the world we inhabit is 'so absolutely objective ... that for a more objective world no place [is] left.' (Martin 2003: 38)

For the Gestaltists, this was why there was no point in talking about organizing experience out of smaller perceptual units: the perceived world was the one they were describing, and there was nothing "objective" behind it which the mind organized.

For Martin, "percepts are fundamentally organized because they come from a world or environment with its own principles of organization" (2003: 39). The mind does not organize: the world is pre-organized for it. This inverts the standard story about the mind full of presuppositions organizing the world that one finds in Neo-Kantianism and its heirs, such as Durkheim and Clifford Geertz. These accounts involve agency: it is the minds that are doing the organizing. Martin argues agency itself can be accounted for by field theory:

> ... we directly retrieve from the environment an imperative for action: get away. There is no need to categorize and reflect; the visceral impulse to move away is anterior to the cognitive understanding. Consciousness, to take a term from Whitehead and Mead, is a 'prehensive' faculty in that the concepts it creates are grasped from the nature of the surrounding world; we are best off considering these action imperatives qualities of the

> (phenomenological) objects themselves. Similarly, our understanding of the social field is both direct and couched in the socially constructed categories that are relevant for our conduct. Consequently, field theory implies an understanding of social perception that flies in the face of the dominant pseudo-Durkheimian orthodoxy (exemplified by Mary Douglas) that sense data come in relatively disorganized form and are sorted according to a culture that, in James's words, throws 'categories over them like a net.' (Martin 2003: 39)

It is puzzling that the categories can be both "socially constructed" but not "constructed" out of something less organized: that would seem to be the very meaning of "construction." But this is the same ambiguity between "organized" and "given" that Gestaltists trade on.[4]

A field, on Martin's account, is a set of locations, pre-organized into a perceptual world consisting of affordances. "Affordance" is a term from Gibsonian psychology meaning this: some things come to us with, so to speak, handles on them, so that we would normally use them in a certain way, namely grabbing by the handles. This translates nicely into descriptions of the social world, and to descriptions of the differences between locations. To be located in a certain place in the social "field" is to have access to a distinctive set of handled things: a social role, for example the role of a physician, makes some things accessible and easy for you, and others not so easy. The social location of a ghetto drug dealer provides an entirely different set of affordances: crime is easy; going to medical school is very hard. Creating a role from scratch, or interacting without a role, is difficult.

This is a genuinely valuable use of description in aid of explanation. But the explanatory part is still murky. Martin concedes as much when he says that

> ... field theory makes the exciting, nontrivial, and generative claim that action can be explained by close attention to field position as every position in the field induces a set of motivations that are subjectively experienced as 'what should be done.' Field theory disappoints us in remaining vague as to precisely

> how this occurs and we hope that it can be eventually surpassed in this regard. Yet it promises the chance of combining rigorous analytic insight with attention to the concrete. (2003: 42)

"Affordance" is an environment term: handles are inert. So something more is needed to "explain" action: "Induces" is just a vague causal term. How a motivation is induced from an external source is a mystery. Martin suggests that there is a solution to this within field theory:

> ... field theorists assume that the field is defined by certain common primary motivations—subjective representations of 'what is good to strive for' such as Bourdieu's 'libido' or Emery and Trist's 'values'—and organizes other ones. (2003: 37)

But these primary motivations don't seem like the sort of things that are induced. Elsewhere he suggests that regularities such as the institutional regularity of marriage can be understood as involving "an internalization of field position" (2003: 41). Values can be understood as being subjectively experienced as injunctions, but this is "a cognitive simplification of what is otherwise a complex task of navigating a field" (2003: 37).

These kinds of claims serve to break down any distinction between the internal mental life of the individual as, for example, rational agent, and "action ... understood as a field effect":

> Not only is it mistaken to assume that people choose their allies and tactics, in many cases there is no reason to assume that they choose their goals. This is not because, as critics of Bourdieu have sometimes assumed, field theory implies that people are cognitively limited in their vision of what they want. It is because the only way to reach conditions that we cognize and wish for is to make use of those conditions that we have not wished for. (2003: 44)

Cognition itself gets this treatment. Field theory gives us an

> ... understanding of cognition as a seamless web of extero- and interospecific information about an intersubjectively valid field allows field theory not only to explain the correspondence of social thought to social location (previous answers in terms of interests being psychologically implausible) but to open the way for a more general understanding of the relation between subjective understandings and trajectory through a social environment. (2003: 40)

The strategy, in short, is to attribute as much as possible to facts about the field, i.e., descriptive facts, and to treat them as explanations.

This is a doomed project, if the goal is to transform field descriptions into complete explanations. Affordances and field positions are still inert: as Martin says, they are "conditions." Assumptions about generalized motivations help to complete the explanation, but they are not enough. The problem is explaining how things move from the inert facts of the field to the acting individual. Pseudo-explanatory language, such as "internalize field position" does not help. Terms like this are only placeholders for actual processes. The processes of internalization are real cognitive processes in active brains: habitualization, perceptual processing, conscious and tacit cognizing, and so forth. Of course, much can be explained by the learning that comes from navigating a field from a particular position. But "learning" and other processes beyond generalized motivations are necessary to complete the explanation. Affordances, in any case, cannot explain on their own. A handle is a handle only to the agent with a hand. The properties of the agent are part of the two way relationship that makes an affordance an affordance in the first place.

Much of Martin's discussion involves the analogy of agonistic field relations to games. Game analogies are classic "apply when they apply" cases. But Martin seems to think that the limitations of these analogies can be overcome by adding the notion that one may talk about the rules of the game and change or violate them. He commends Goffman with the comment that

> only Goffman had an orientation to norms that came anywhere near to capturing the obvious truths that conformity or

> nonconformity are strategic options with different advantages. (2003: 32)

This gives the game away: "strategic options" are the kinds of things that rational decision-makers and creative thinkers are concerned with. The addition of the idea that one is talking about the game and changing it through doing so makes it clear what the "game" is. The game is a product and causal consequence of individual action and belief, and continues to depend on these causes.

THE LIMITATIONS OF INSTRUMENTAL RATIONALITY

We can take an important lesson from field theory: location makes a difference in what people experience, what they will find convenient to believe and do, and what will work for them, and this will shape their goals and beliefs, for example in ways familiar from such works as Elster's *Sour Grapes* (1985). But it is important to keep in mind that "field theories" that describe particular fields are models of an underlying reality. The real field as opposed to the model consists of affordances, including the affordances given by the properties of other people, such as the fact that they have role ideas. The model is a description and simplification of this field.

A few comments about this notion of field are in order. Rational choice theory, formal social epistemology, and analytic sociology work with simplifying assumptions of a different kind than the assumptions made when a model of a field is constructed. They may assume omniscience or perfect knowledge. When they do they stand at the opposite poll from the description here. This account takes its cue from feminist epistemology, and the idea that knowledge is always situated, and that all situations limit and enable knowing in different ways, with different results in what people believe or how they weight these beliefs. A field, from an epistemic point of view, is a field of epistemic opportunity and limitation. We are limited to what we can learn by navigating it. These limitations form a large part of the limitations of instrumental rationality: we are not only not omniscient about the future, but

limited by our experiences and the way these experiences shape future experiences.

How does this picture fit with the explanatory claims of functionalism and field theories? If we add to our explanatory tool kit some considerations about the limitations of instrumental rationality, of the sort discussed by Cherkaoui (2007: 56-57), we can provide an alternative. Obviously there are many other considerations that can also be applied, but in what follows I will concentrate on this one. My concern will be to show that it is possible to answer explanatory questions using the notion of field as I have outlined it, without appealing to occult forces or processes, like "internalization of field position" or mysterious collective objects like *habitus,* and to show that the same kinds of considerations about the limits of instrumental reason allow us to account for the kinds of things functionalism attempts to account for.

A classic example is given by Malinowski (1944). In the Trobriand Islands there were two kinds of fishing. Lagoon fishing was predictable and safe, and done by poisoning; open sea fishing depended on the presence of schools of fish, and was risky, full of danger and uncertainty. In the case of sea fishing, but not lagoon fishing, there was "extensive magical ritual." This was ritual with a specific aim, which the natives could all articulate. The beliefs in the effects of these rituals were false, of course. The real effect of these rituals, according to Malinowski, was that they reduced anxiety, anxiety well justified by the risks of sea fishing, risks absent in the case of lagoon fishing, where there were no rituals. Misrecognition is central to these rituals: the Trobrianders think they are to protect them from specific dangers. The effect is to reduce anxiety. If they knew the rituals had no effect on the dangers, they would no longer function to reduce anxiety.

Elster's question immediately comes to mind: in what sense can the function of reducing anxiety be said to cause the persistence of the use of the ritual without recognition of this effect? One can imagine a variety of answers to this. One would be that they do recognize the effect, and this is one of their motives for performing the ritual in addition to the main motive of preserving against danger. Another would be that they unconsciously appreciate the effect even though they could not articulate the causal connection between the ritual and the effect, and

are thus conditioned to perform the ritual. This would be Malinowski's view: anxiety was for him a hidden cause that played a role in magical ritual generally, and not a native's concept. Both of these are feedback accounts. Evidence is non-existent in either case: Malinowski acknowledges that he is dealing in abstractions, not observational data.

A simpler explanation can be given in terms of the issues of uncertainty that Malinowski himself stresses, in terms of the limitations of instrumental rationality. The rituals are clearly instrumental in their intention. They are also rational. The rituals reflect a Pascalian wager that is very cheap. It costs little to act on the belief that the ritual does some good; it potentially costs a great deal to wrongly disbelieve in the efficacy of the ritual. On a purely individual basis, it would be good, under these conditions of uncertainty, to perform the ritual. When others are involved, it becomes better: one avoids the inconvenience of explaining why one is violating the ritual, potentially endangering others, and of explaining why one is rejecting what everyone else appears to believe. Radcliffe-Brown made similar points about this explanation in the course of supplying an explanation of similar rituals preserving a woman from the dangers of childbirth:

> In a given community it is appropriate that an expectant father should feel concern or at least make an appearance of doing so. Some suitable symbolic expression of his concern is found in terms of the general ritual or symbolic idiom of the society, and it is generally felt that a man in that situation ought to carry out the symbolic or ritual actions or abstentions. (1939: 41)

This appeals to field position, that of the expectant father, and the affordances available to him, namely the ritual idiom of the society, and the expectations of others, which provide a motive, taken together with his own desires for a convenient solution, a convenient thing to believe or do that would avoid the consequences attendant on failing to meet expectations.

Nothing functionalist figures in these explanations: there is no occult force, or hypothesized feedback loop involving an abstract emotional state. In context, these are powerful reasons to believe. And the

context is one of cognitive limitations and specific affordances: the readily available beliefs of others and the consistency of these beliefs with available ritual practices. Is there anything left over? A fully elaborated account might include the tacit processes that produce habits and the cognitive preconditions for understanding. But none of these involve occult processes. There is nothing left over that requires unusual theoretical objects and the unconscious feedback processes that might fit with the kinds of functionalist explanations that normally figure in social institutions will be minor causes compared to those discussed here. Obviously there is a level of explanation that could involve deep psychic forces, in which there is feedback in which something like anxiety is relieved and unconsciously reinforced. But it is implausible to think that this feedback loop would overwhelm all these other considerations and be the dominant cause.

A FINAL METHODOLOGICAL COMMENT

Social science models are abstractions and simplifications. But it is well not to forget the underlying reality which models are simplifying. If one considers the reality I have outlined above, in which knowledge and tacit or habitualized knowledge varies in complex ways between individuals with experiences conditioned by different social locations and environments, this much is clear: there is no prospect of a "rigorous," meaning mathematically tractable, model that corresponds more than very roughly to this reality, or even to aspects of this reality. But simplifications for a purpose, such as prediction, can work and be revealing. Balance of power theory in international relations, for example, has many exceptions, but it is robust and predictive over a wide range of cases of great power conflict (Mearsheimer 2001: 29-54). It is nevertheless limited. As Hans Morgenthau puts it, "political reality is replete with contingencies and systematic irrationalities" (1978: 8). And few models are as successful as this one.

Claims to have captured the essence of some complex social phenomenon need to be taken *cum grano salis*. Producing the appearance of doing so normally involves sleight of hand. Malinowski focused his readers on a specific contrast: between lagoon and sea fishing, in terms

of which one specific difference, danger, stood out. The anxiety theory of ritual which was built on this case was, however, a grotesque simplification. It elevated a small feedback loop to a major cause, and then to an essence. This is unfortunately not an isolated case. There is a symbiotic relation between claims about essences and exotic theoretical objects. If one thinks one has the essence of something: ritual, or schooling, it is all the more tempting to invent a hidden force or secret purpose that explains this essence. And if one thinks there are secret forces of oppression or system maintenance it is all the more tempting to think one has captured an essence. But the long history of these claims makes this much clear: the illumination of social science models is only partial, and often very temporary. And the exotic theoretical objects that are invoked in these models rarely outlive the moment for which the model was constructed.

NOTES

1. For the generic problems with the kinds of explanatory devices used by Bourdieu and others, which I call collective objects, see Turner (1994).
2. Martin says a great deal about how field theories are "intrinsically at odds" with "mechanistic explanation" (2003: 10), and claims that "social fields differ from board games, however, in that the struggle is both over and within the rules, and thus the 'game' is not some sort of overarching formal framework that in some obscure way forces persons to do this or that." Nevertheless, he uses familiar causal language: "fields are only known by their effects." When he describes the *habitus* as "a cultural unconscious, a matrix of dispositions that serves to affectively organize perceptions" (Bourdieu 1969: 182 cited in Martin 2003: 23), he uses classically "causal" language: "dispositions" are causes, and they do something to people: to "organize" their perceptions must "in some obscure way" involve "force." Why these causal usages would not require "mechanisms" to be substantiated, or why Martin thinks he can divorce the language of effect from that of cause, is obscure.
3. Martin says the following: "... field theories, like mechanistic theories (and unlike functionalist theories), reach toward the concrete and propose only local action, but like functionalist theories (and unlike mechanistic theories), they insist that any case must be understood in terms of the global pattern" (2003: 12). What can "local action" mean other than "action" involving some sort of mechanism, causal or teleological? And what is a global pattern other than the model (which can potentially be applied elsewhere, but may not apply) itself? As we will see, Martin thinks he can answer this question in terms of the notion of affordances, which he takes to be descriptive givens of the situation which

"produce" various outcomes non-causally or at least in terms other than those of causal mechanisms of the usual kind.

4. This is precisely the issue seized on by David Hamlyn in his classic critique of the explanatory claims of Gestalists (1958). Hamlyn's point is that there can be no explanation without a contrast class. In this case the contrast would be to the pre-organized world. But if we deny there is a pre-organized world, there is no difference to explain.

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