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978-0-521-77744-5 - Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences

Jon Elster

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EXPLAINING SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

MORE NUTS AND BOLTS FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

This book is an expanded and revised edition of the author's critically acclaimed volume *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*. In twenty-six succinct chapters, Jon Elster provides an account of the nature of explanation in the social sciences; an analysis of the mental states – beliefs, desires, and emotions – that are precursors to action; a systematic comparison of rational-choice models of behavior with alternative accounts; a discussion of what the social sciences may learn from neuroscience and evolutionary biology; and a review of mechanisms of social interaction ranging from strategic behavior to collective decision making. He offers an overview of key explanatory mechanisms in the social sciences, relying on hundreds of examples and drawing on a large variety of sources – psychology, behavioral economics, biology, political science, historical writings, philosophy, and fiction. In accessible and jargon-free language, Elster aims at accuracy and clarity while eschewing formal models. In a provocative conclusion, he defends the centrality of qualitative social science in a two-front war against soft (literary) and hard (mathematical) forms of obscurantism.

Jon Elster is Professor (Chaire de Rationalité et Sciences Sociales) at the Collège de France. A Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy, he is a recipient of fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation and the Russell Sage Foundation, among many others. Dr. Elster has taught at the University of Chicago and Columbia University and has held visiting professorships at many universities in the United States and Europe. He is the author or editor of thirty-four books, most recently *Closing the Books: Transitional Justice in Historical Perspective* and *Retribution and Restitution in the Transition to Democracy*.

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for the Social Sciences*

JON ELSTER
COLLÈGE DE FRANCE



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521771795

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First published 2007

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Elster, Jon, 1940–

Explaining social behavior : more nuts and bolts for the social sciences

/ Jon Elster

p. cm.

Expanded and rev. ed. of: Nuts and bolts for the social sciences, 1989.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-77179-5 (hardback)

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-77744-5 (pbk.)

1. Social sciences – Methodology. 2. Social interaction. I. Elster, Jon, 1940 – Nuts and bolts for the social sciences. II. Title.

H61.E434 2007

302 – dc22 2006022194

ISBN 978-0-521-77179-5 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-77744-5 paperback

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For Jonathan and Joanna

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PREFACE

This book began as a revision of a book I published in 1989, *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*. It ended up as a quite different and more ambitious kind of book. It covers a much greater variety of topics, in considerably more detail, and in a different spirit. Although nine chapters have the same headings as chapters in the earlier book, only Chapter 9 and Chapter 24 remain substantially the same.

Although comprehensive in scope, the book is not a treatise. It is both less and more than that. It is an elementary, informal, and personal presentation of ideas that have, I believe, considerable potential for illuminating social behavior. I use plenty of examples, many of them anecdotal or literary, others drawn from more systematic studies. The very occasional use of algebra does not go beyond high school level. At the same time, the book has a methodological and philosophical slant not usual in introductory-level presentations. There is an effort to place the social sciences within the sciences more generally – the natural sciences as well as the humanities. There is also an effort to make the reader keep constantly in mind how general principles of scientific explanation constrain the construction of theories with explanatory pretensions.

The style of the bibliographical notes to each chapter reflects the rise of the Internet, in particular of Wikipedia, Google.com, and Scholar.Google.com. Since readers can find most relevant references in a matter of minutes, I have omitted sources for many of the statements and findings in the text. Instead I try to point readers to important source-books, to some modern classics, to books and articles that are the sources of claims that might be harder to track down on the Internet, and to authors from whom I have taken so much that not mentioning them would justify a pun on my name (*Elster* in German means magpie).

Although the main text contains few references to contemporary scholars, I refer extensively to Aristotle, Seneca, Montaigne, La Rochefoucauld, Samuel Johnson, H.C. Andersen, Stendhal, Tocqueville, Proust, and other classical writers who remain literally inexhaustible

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sources of causal hypotheses. We would be cutting ourselves off from many insights if we ignored the mechanisms suggested by philosophy, fiction, plays, and poetry. If we neglect twenty-five centuries of reflection about mind, action, and interaction in favor of the last one hundred years or the last ten, we do so at our peril and our loss. I cite these authors not so much to appeal to their authority as to make the case that it is worth one's while to read widely rather than narrowly. In direct opposition to what I perceive as the relentless professionalization of (especially American) social science, which discourages students from learning foreign languages and reading old books, the present volume is an extended plea for a more comprehensive approach to the study of society.



In preparing the manuscript I received assistance and comments from many people. I should first thank my students at Columbia University for their incisive questioning and comments in the course where I first presented the material that turned into this book. Suggestions from Pablo Kalmanovitz were particularly useful. In Collioure, Aanund Hylland and Ole-Jørgen Skog spent three days with me discussing a draft of the whole book. In Oslo, Hylland, Karl O. Moene, and John Roemer continued the discussion over a day and a half. Their comments not only saved me from many (many!) errors but also suggested how I could supplement and consolidate the exposition. I am grateful to Roemer in particular for urging me to write a conclusion. I received written comments on the whole manuscript from Diego Gambetta, Raj Saah, and an anonymous reviewer. Gambetta's comments were particularly detailed and helpful. I had useful conversations with Walter Mischel about the ideas – largely originating with him – presented in Chapter 10. I also received valuable written comments from George Ainslie on the ideas – many of them raised by him – presented in Part I of the book. Bernard Manin commented constructively on Chapter 25. Robyn Dawes offered incisive comments on Chapter 7 and Chapter 12. Finally, over the several last years I have presented drafts of chapters for this book to the

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members of the “Monday group” that has met weekly in New York City each fall and more occasionally in the spring since 1995: John Ferejohn, Raquel Fernandez, Russell Hardin, Stephen Holmes, Steven Lukes, Bernard Manin, Pasquale Pasquino, Adam Przeworski, and John Roemer. I thank them all for their friendly and constructive objections.

I dedicate the book to Jonathan and Joanna Cole – they will know why.



I cite Montaigne’s *Essays* from the translation by M. Screech (London: Penguin, 1971); Proust from the new translation edited by C. Prendergast (London: Penguin, 2003); Pascal’s *Pensées* from the translation by A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1995); La Rochefoucauld’s *Maxims* from the translation by L. Tancock (London: Penguin, 1981); La Bruyère’s *Characters* from the translation by H. van Laun (New York: Scribner, 1885); Stendhal’s *On Love* from the translation by G. Sale, S. Sale, and J. Stewart (London: Penguin, 1975); and Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* from the new translation by A. Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004). Other translations from French are mine.

