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Edited by Claudio López-Guerra and Julia Maskivker

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## PART I

# JON ELSTER'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THOUGHT

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[More information](#)

## I

**The Road toward Disillusion***Explanations, Predictions, and Prescriptions  
in the Work of Jon Elster*

Roberto Gargarella and Félix Ovejero

From his first days in academia until today, there have been important changes in the writings of Jon Elster. These changes have been a constant in his work – take, for example, his early visit to France, where he went to study Hegel’s intricate thoughts with Louis Althusser and ended up writing his dissertation under the supervision of Raymond Aron. Far from his Hegelian beginning, today Elster’s writings have much more in common with Michel de Montaigne’s dictum, according to which, “there is an infant-school *ignorance* which precedes knowledge and another doctoral *ignorance* which comes after it.”<sup>1</sup> Many years of intense study seem to have convinced him that the social sciences have very little to say conclusively about the world: there is much more room for doubts than for certainties. In what follows, we will concentrate our attention on Elster’s process of theoretical evolution and change, which we could describe as part of “a long road toward disillusion.”

## ON THE ROAD

It goes without saying that Elster’s capacity for theoretical renewal – a capacity that he reaffirmed again and again throughout his academic life – is perfectly compatible with a firm persistence in some of his philosophical preoccupations and normative viewpoints. There is a clear continuity between his early commitment to socialism and his careful study of Marx – his interest in some of the main Marxian insights (self-realization, alienation, exploitation) – and his later work on local justice, democracy, and political transitions. Moreover, we consistently find an identical intellectual disposition: his normative reflections have never been separated from a concern with the practical, potential implications of his thoughts. Elster has resisted the possibility of transforming social theory into

<sup>1</sup> “Of Vain Subtleties” (Book I, chapter 54) in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, 227.

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mere abstract speculation. He has always been interested in the prospective aspects of his investigations and has maintained his concern for institutional design. Even when he expresses, in a completely honest way, his theoretical doubts about the capacities of the social sciences to provide reliable tools for intervening in reality, he still believes that knowledge matters insofar as it helps us to deal with the external world. In this respect, after all, he seems to subscribe to Marx's famous XI thesis on Feuerbach.

Although at the end of this chapter we will come back to the normative aspects of Elster's work, in most of what follows we will be describing his gradual disenchantment with the social sciences. We will consider this development – a dialectical development, for sure – which has always followed a similar dynamic: first, Elster explores certain theoretical or methodological proposals from all different angles, then he begins to examine its shortcomings, then he abandons or radically modifies those initial proposals, and finally he moves on to a newer and more promising aspect of his research. Elster's theoretical attitude manifests a particular intellectual honesty, which has led him to dramatically revise theses to which he seemed to be deeply committed. To state it more graphically, Elster seems to be in an eternal discussion with the Elster that preceded him. The continuity, in any case, has been marked by his methodological approach, related to certain analytical traditions and clear and rigorous thinking.<sup>2</sup>

Elster's critical and self-critical attitude has appeared, more notably, in three significant moments of his academic life. The first moment concerns his explorations of the scope and limits of Marxist theory. In this period, Elster first examined Marxism under the lens of the available social theory, philosophy of science, and diverse formal tools. The ambitious aspirations of Marx's "grand theory of history" were put under strict scrutiny. We find expressions of this work in numerous and diverse writings, including his *Logic and Society*, *Making Sense of Marx*, and *Explaining Technical Change*. The second period appears with his analysis of the scope and limits of the models of rationality that constituted the theoretical core of microeconomics and rational choice. His studies of the topic can be found in books such as *Ulysses and the Sirens*, *Sour Grapes*, *Solomonic Judgements*, and, in a more systematic way, in his *Traité de l'homme économique*. The third period (which, in part, systematizes the previous two) appears when he declares his distrust of the project of the great social theory (his distrust of the science of law – which finds its more idealized version in Carl Hempel's *Covering Law Model*),<sup>3</sup> and opts for the study of mechanisms, with the help of material that he takes from the most diverse sources, including

<sup>2</sup> To state this, at the same time, does not mean that he has a fascination for intellectual novelties, an attitude that can be clearly recognized in his considered approach to rational choice, cognitive sciences, or the use of formalization in social theory (in this respect, his reflections on neurosciences or biology are particularly telling). See, in particular, Elster's *Explaining Social Behavior*, 445–467.

<sup>3</sup> Hempel, *Philosophy of Natural Science*, 239.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Road toward Disillusion*

5

history and literature. We can find expressions of this third period in books such as *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions*, and *Explaining Social Behavior*.

In all those cases, Elster's critical approach has been accompanied by the opening of new possibilities for reflection (from the vindication of methodological individualism to the theory of norms and emotions) or the use of mechanisms as explanatory tools.

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The most "optimistic" period in Elster's academic life appears at the beginning of his work, when he was mainly attracted to the writings of Karl Marx and tried to provide better foundations for his socialist convictions.<sup>4</sup> This optimism, of course, did not imply naïveté, but quite the contrary. From the very beginning, Elster approached Marx with a nondogmatic and informed view, similar to the one that would distinguish his approach to other authors and topics. Elster did not want to use his research to reinvigorate standard, more classical views about Marx. By contrast, he tried to examine Marx's main theses with a fresh, unprejudiced, challenging spirit: at every step, he questioned why one had to expect the particular social evolution that Marx had predicted, what reasons supported the idea that history was going to advance in a certain way, and what motivations would drive individuals to gather or to react as expected. Elster's long manuscript on the topic became his doctoral dissertation, and only after long and substantive revisions was it published in 1985 under the title *Making Sense of Marx* – a book that provoked an enormous debate and attracted numerous criticisms.<sup>5</sup> In a majority of cases, the substantive revisions that he introduced to his initial manuscript came after discussions he had with the "September Group," the group of analytical Marxists that he helped to create.<sup>6</sup> The group gathered every year, at one point in September, to discuss Marxian topics from a nondogmatic or merely exegetic perspective (this is why one of the founders of the group defined it as the "non-bullshit-Marxism group").

Elster's many years as a member of the September Group had profound consequences on his relation to Marxism. After that period, he found it difficult to maintain many of the beliefs he had been subscribing to for so many years. As he put it in his *An Introduction to Karl Marx*, after all his work on the topic, he came to the conclusion that significant parts of the theory he had previously defended were defunct. These parts included scientific socialism ("there is no

<sup>4</sup> Even before then, he showed particular interest in understanding Friedrich Hegel's dialectic. See Elster, *Raison et raisons*.

<sup>5</sup> Some critics replied to his work by referring to it as "How to Make No Sense of Marx," and wondering what was left of Marx, after *Making Sense of Marx*. See, e.g., Mandel, "How to Make No Sense of Marx," and Walzer, "What's Left of Marx?"

<sup>6</sup> The group included academics such as Gerald A. Cohen, Joshua Cohen, Adam Przeworski, John Roemer, and Philippe van Parijs, among many others.

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way in which a political theory can dispense with values and rely instead on the laws of history operating with iron necessity" [189]), dialectic materialism ("No Marxist philosopher has offered any useful insights on the problems of philosophical materialism, such as the mind-body problem, the sense-data problem, and the like" [190]), teleology and functionalism ("teleology explains everything by backward connections, from the ends to be realized to the means that realize it, whereas science proceeds by forward connections from cause to effect" [190]), Marxian economic theory (and particularly, "the theory of labor," which is "intellectually bankrupt" [192]), and the theory of productive forces and relations of production (a point that Elster admits is more controversial, and one that would affect perhaps the most important part of historical materialism [192]).

The (critical) "optimism" that distinguished the beginning of Elster's work can be found in his general approach to grand, ambitious social theories. Elster expressed this optimism in two classical domains, typical of the Marxist tradition. The first, which was also the more ambitious, was related to a renewed evaluation of dialectical history and, to a lesser degree, of structuralism. These two approaches were undoubtedly very different in their details, but at the same time they had something very important in common, namely the aspiration to obtain a macro-social theory with which to understand social changes. In both cases, the dynamics of changes were understood to be independent of what individuals did or what their motivations were. Elster used analytical tools, nonstandard logic, and statistical theories, among other instruments, in order to explore the old dialectic aspiration of finding "general laws" capable of explaining social evolution. The second domain is the domain of social theory, and in particular the theory of history – or, more generally, theories of social changes. Elster had a special interest in the study of technical change, a topic that, for Marxist theory, resided at the very core of its views about social change. In effect, and according to Marxism, social change was clearly related to the persistent contradiction that appeared between productive forces and relations of production.<sup>7</sup>

#### THE SUBVERSION OF RATIONALITY

The second important period in Elster's work has, at its center, the theory of rational choice.<sup>8</sup> If one could not expect much from holistic proposals, perhaps he could deposit his confidence in theories based on the assumption of *homo economicus*.<sup>9</sup> These views were typical among those interested in economic

<sup>7</sup> Elster, *Explaining Technical Change*.

<sup>8</sup> Elster and Hylland, *Foundations of Social Choice Theory*.

<sup>9</sup> By *homo economicus*, we mean to say the assumption of an individual that is both rational and selfish, who carefully compares the different available options, before he or she acts, and finally chooses the alternative that maximizes his or her well-being.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Road toward Disillusion*

7

theory, and microeconomics in particular – disciplines which, by that time, had begun to export their explicative strategies to other realms of social research. Now, Elster already knew a good deal about social theory so as to simply take for granted the numerous simplifications incurred by economists (it should be noted that some of the best of these economists were his contemporary colleagues at the University of Chicago). Many economists did not seem to be concerned with the apparent unreality of their psychological assumptions (i.e., the idea that individuals were rationalist, hyper-selfish calculators). Following Milton Friedman,<sup>10</sup> they claimed there was no need for worry in this respect, for the predictions they made from those assumptions came in line with the world that they observed. Their strategy was undoubtedly controversial, particularly if we take into account that their explanations were, in many cases, simple retrodictions, this is to say, ex post explanations of events that had already occurred. In those conditions, a correspondence with reality that is guaranteed from the beginning lacks any theoretical interests. Nowadays, when a good deal of economic research is directed at demonstrating the falsity of the psychological assumptions of traditional economic methods,<sup>11</sup> it is refreshing to recall that Elster was a pioneer in pointing to the empirical shortcomings of these models, with an analytical sophistication that was totally unusual within the domain of experimental economics. In sum, once again, Elster was coming back from his explorations with an empty sack: the tools that he employed with confidence in the beginning were shortly thereafter the object of his critical analysis. From being an expert in the tools offered by rational choice theory, he had become an expert in the weaknesses of these same tools.

Elster's first important publication on the topic of rationality was *Ulysses and the Sirens*. The main goal of the book was to show the limitations affecting the classical models of rationality (sometimes known by the term “instrumental rationality”) that were widely used among economists. Usually, economists assumed in their studies that individuals ordered their preferences according to a utility function, which they always tended to maximize. In a critical approach with this assumption, Elster tried to show, from different perspectives, the limitations confronted by such a view. Among the cases that he examined in *Ulysses and the Sirens*, one of the most important and interesting, is the one that gives the book its title. It refers to the case when someone sacrifices part of his or her present freedom in order to maximize future freedom.<sup>12</sup> The Ulysses described in the book, for example, engages in this kind of “precommitment” when he orders his sailors to tie him to the mast of his ship so as to prevent him

<sup>10</sup> Friedman, “The Methodology of Positive Economics.”

<sup>11</sup> Camerer et al., *Advances in Behavioral Economics*.

<sup>12</sup> At play in this case, there seems to be numerous concepts that belong to Jean Paul Sartre's initial work (the player's weakness of will, bad faith, anguish) and which find the refinement of the social sciences through Elster's work. For a more systematic exposition, see Elster “Deception and Self-Deception in Stendhal.”

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from changing the planned route should he be seduced by the lure of the Sirens.<sup>13</sup> This case allows us to recognize that people can make short-term sacrifices in order to obtain better outcomes in the long run.

After *Ulysses*, Elster's next important book on the same topic was *Sour Grapes*, which was more directly aimed at studying irrationality or the subversion of rationality. In this book, Elster focuses his attention on two crucial defects of rationality. The first refers to "states which are essentially by-products" (42–ss), as we can see in the case of spontaneity or, perhaps more clearly, in the case of sleeping: wanting to fall asleep tends to keep one awake. The irrationality that is present in this situation consists of trying to bring about by the states of will that which are essentially by-products. The second important situation examined in the book is the one of "adaptive preferences" (the reduction of cognitive dissonances), which Elster takes from the work of psychologist Leon Festinger. The case has to do with altering one's preferences in light of the options that are seen as available. In other words, it refers to the fact that people tend to adjust their aspirations to their possibilities. Again, the fable that gives *Sour Grapes* its title—the tale of the fox and the grapes—provides an excellent illustration of this phenomenon: in this case, the fox maintains that the grapes are sour after realizing it could not reach them.

Undoubtedly, notions such as that of "adaptive preferences" seem to have an enormous fertility for the social sciences, as Elster himself recognizes. Adaptive preferences seems a useful notion for the philosophy of explanation, for moral psychology, and, more significantly, for theories of distributive justice. Think, for example, about the situation of overexploited workers who assume that their situation is acceptable, or about the pariah who sees his situation of discrimination with satisfaction.<sup>14</sup>

These rationality problems come together with many other difficulties, such as counteradaptive preferences (manifested in the proverbs "the forbidden fruit tastes best" and "the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence") or the better known case of weakness of the will.<sup>15</sup> When we take all these quandaries together, the difficulty of maintaining the old, traditional version of rationality, advanced by economists, becomes apparent. In other words, the

<sup>13</sup> The example of Ulysses became particularly important, since then, for thinking about the Constitution as a collective precommitment strategy. See also Elster and Slagstad, *Constitutionalism and Democracy*. However, Elster in *Ulysses Unbound* challenged the parallel that he himself had created.

<sup>14</sup> Following a similar view, Nobel Prize-winner Amartya Sen stated: "The most blatant forms of inequalities and exploitations survive in the world through making allies out of the deprived and the exploited. The underdog learns to bear the burden so well that he or she overlooks the burden itself. Discontent is replaced by acceptance, hopeless rebellion by conformist quiet, and – most relevantly in the present context – suffering and anger by cheerful endurance. As people learn to survive to adjust to the existing horrors by sheer necessity of uneventful survival, the horrors look less terrible in the metric of utilities" (Sen, *Resources, Values, and Development*, 309.)

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Elster, "Weakness of the Will and the Free-rider Problem."



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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Road toward Disillusion*

9

most important and successful theory of rationality appeared to be imprecise, if not directly false. This situation, of course, not only affected economic studies, but the social sciences in general. It suffices to recognize the enormous influence acquired by economics in other disciplines. Take, for example, the impact exercised by the *economic analysis of law*, for instance, in the work of Ronald Coase, or by the *public choice theory*, particularly after the work of James Buchanan.<sup>16</sup>

#### EXPLANATIONS BECOME MORE COMPLEX: SOCIAL NORMS AND EMOTIONS

Shortly after *Ulysses*, Elster made it explicit that the program of rational choice theory – as an omni-comprehensive explanatory apparatus for the social sciences – was bankrupt. This claim was presented, initially, in two books, namely *Solomonic Judgements* and *The Cement of Society*, and immediately after, in the volumes that he published in French under the title *Traité critique de l'homme économique*. In all these works, Elster continued to call our attention to the incapacity of rational choice theory to provide unequivocal guides for action in matters that, in fact, should have been a central part of its explanatory realm. Rational choice, for example, seemed unable to provide us with guidelines for action in situations of uncertainty, where agents are unable to anticipate the future consequences of their actions and lack a reliable method for comparing alternatives. The same goes for many other situations of strategic interaction, where one's decisions depend a great deal on other people's decisions.

The roots of Elster's disenchantment with rational choice were twofold. On the one hand, it was a normative disenchantment, given that the theories being examined were unable to tell us what our decision should be when we most needed theories that help us to decide. On the other hand, Elster's disenchantment was positive, given that the theories neither helped us to describe nor helped us to explain the actual behavior of real-world agents.

To a great extent, it was this second dissatisfaction – of empirical nature – that was behind Elster's next step on this road toward disillusion, the road that took him to the study of norms and emotions. Perhaps, Elster might have said, rationality was unable to explain things that norms or, later on in his approach, emotions could explain.

The origin of Elster's interest in social norms came after a request by the Swedish Association of Employers to write something for them on the Swedish system of collective wage bargaining. From the beginning of his research, Elster realized that the instruments he used to employ seemed incapable of providing him with an explanation of the egalitarian patterns that prevailed within the Swedish labor movement. The egalitarian outcome did not seem to reflect a

<sup>16</sup> Coase, "The Nature of the Firm," and Buchanan (with Brennan), *The Reason of Rules*.

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[More information](#)

simple equilibrium, which conjugated each player's best choice (taking into account the restrictions posed by the rest of the players' choices), as advocates of bargaining theory would have expected.

Conventional theory aspires to see whether the final results of a simple case of negotiation theory were a balance that translated the best choice of each party in the face of the limitations drawn up by the other negotiators. Here, there seems to be no room for each party's idea of what is fair. Law and justice were understood as solutions to negotiation problems or social coordination, as agreements that, rather than responding to normative ideals, were the "lesser evil" that each party could achieve without suspending negotiations or, in the Nash Equilibrium, conventions that all parties are willing to respect as long as everyone respects them. Moral norms were just one way of sanctioning those who, while getting their own way, had a negative external impact or who undermined essential public assets, such as trust, that make human interaction much smoother. The operation was anything but an example of *finezza*, and Elster, who is more concerned with realism than formal sophistication, was among the first to warn that things would not work in that way.

For Elster, the case represented an interesting example of the limitations of rational choice's explanatory capacities. The Swedish example referred him to egalitarian attitudes that seemed to be more connected with past events (social mandates of egalitarian character) than with rational, future expectations (as rational choice theory would claim). It was then that, following advice from Amos Tversky and Fredrik Engelstad, he decided to "add social norms to the repertoire of motivations for behavior."<sup>17</sup>

The case for social norms was first presented in his book *The Cement of Society*, where Elster explored them in a systematic and careful manner. The idea was that social norms could explain numerous conducts that seemed to be more related to past conventions than to individual, future-oriented calculus. In the book, Elster paid particular attention to two specific phenomena affecting rationality, namely brute uncertainty and strategic uncertainty – the first related to uncertainty coming from the difficulty of anticipating future consequences of present actions, and the second related to uncertainty derived from interdependent decision making. However, his views, at the time, seemed more skeptical and pessimistic than ever before. Elster claimed in *The Cement of Society*, for example, that he could not "offer a positive explanation of norms" and concluded that he did not know "why human beings have a propensity to construct and follow norms, nor how specific norms come into being and change."<sup>18</sup>

The subsequent step in this trajectory (which came to expand and complicate even further Elster's already complex explanation of human behavior) led him to explore the difficult domain of emotions. The study of emotions in recent years

<sup>17</sup> See Elster, "Going to Chicago," 22.

<sup>18</sup> Elster, *The Cement of Society*, 125.