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978-0-521-37607-5 - The Cement of Society: A Study of Social Order

Jon Elster

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THE CEMENT OF SOCIETY

STUDIES IN RATIONALITY
AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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Preface and acknowledgements

This book has a complicated genesis. For many years, I have been interested in the problem of collective action. Discussions with Brian Barry and Russell Hardin helped me to see roughly where the main problems were located, but I never seemed to get them fully into focus. Concurrently with this preoccupation, and spurred largely by proddings from Amos Tversky and Fredrik Engelstad, I became increasingly puzzled by the relation between rational choice and social norms. I discussed this problem with Pierre Bourdieu, and together we organized a conference on the topic. Once again, I seemed to make progress up to a point, and then confusion descended on me. Clearly, I was going against the grain.

The catalyst for further progress came in 1985, when Nils Elvander of the Swedish Council for Management and Work Life Issues (FA-Rådet) asked me to write a report on bargaining and collective action in the context of their project on collective wage bargaining in Sweden. I accepted in the belief, mistaken as it turned out, that my earlier work on rational-choice theory might help me explain the strategies, stratagems and outcomes of collective bargaining. It soon became clear that the complexity of these bargaining problems defies explicit modelling. My analytical skills, in any case, were not sufficient to reduce the moving, fluid process of collective bargaining to manageable proportions. In the Swedish system of collective bargaining, as I try to explain in Chapters 4 and 6, everything is up for grabs: the identity of the actors, the rules of the game, the set of payoffs, the range of acceptable arguments. The more I understood what was going on, the lower I had to set my sights. The initial aim of explanation was gradually transformed into one of 'thick' phenomenological description. Yet I came to see that here was a set of problems that lent themselves ideally to an exploration of the relation between individual and collective rationality, and between self-interest and social norms. Things that had been out of focus suddenly came together.

More or less simultaneously with this work I completed two other books that complement the present one. Each of them reflects an increasing dis-

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illusionment with the power of reason, be it at the level of social actors or at the level of the social scientist who is observing them. In *Solomonic Judgements* I argue that rational-choice theory yields indeterminate prescriptions and predictions in more cases than most social scientists and decision makers would like to think. In *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*, written for a more general audience, I argue that the basic concept in the social sciences should be that of a *mechanism* rather than of a *theory*. In my opinion, the social sciences are light years away from the stage at which it will be possible to formulate general-law-like regularities about human behaviour. Instead, we should concentrate on specifying small and medium-sized mechanisms for human action and interaction – plausible, frequently observed ways in which things happen. If this sounds vague (and it does), I have to refer the reader to the substance of the three books for proof of the pudding.

The level of discussion may puzzle some readers. It may be too technical for some and insufficiently rigorous for others. Martin Heidegger is reported to have dismissed an argument by saying, ‘Nicht tief genug gefragt’. On the other side of the Atlantic or the Channel, dismissal often takes the form of asserting, ‘Not clear enough to be wrong’. Many of my arguments will be dismissed on both counts. I can only hope that what is lost in depth and clarity is partially compensated by variety and diversity.

I have benefited greatly from comments I received when presenting parts of this material at the European University Institute (Florence), at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (Paris), at Gary Becker and James Coleman’s Rational Choice Seminar at the University of Chicago, at the Philosophy Department of the University of California at San Diego and to the annual meeting of the ‘September Group’ in London. I am grateful to Jens Andvig, Kenneth Arrow, Lars Calmfors, G. A. Cohen, Michael Dennis, Nils Elvander, Fredrik Engelstad, Aanund Hylland, John Padgett, Philippe van Parijs, Adam Przeworski, Ariel Rubinstein and Michael Wallerstein for comments on earlier drafts of several chapters. Special thanks are due to Stephen Holmes and Cass Sunstein for making detailed written comments on the whole manuscript, to Karl Ove Moene for unflinching patience in teaching me the basics of noncooperative bargaining theory and to Aanund Hylland for doing his best to keep me intellectually honest. Steve Laymon’s skilful and imaginative research assistance has been invaluable. A final acknowledgement is owed to Thomas Schelling, whose work on bargaining and collective action serves as a model and inspiration for all who work in this area.