

Social Theory Now

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CHAPTER SIX

On the Frontiers of Rational Choice

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As early as 1990, a prominent proponent of Rational Choice Theory acknowledged that the theory “ha[d] come under severe attack.” The offensive, launched by “experimental economic methods, research by psychologists, and other empirical work, . . . ha[d] revealed major empirical anomalies associated with this approach” (North 1990, 18). A key turning point in the elaboration of this critical diagnosis was the conference held at the University of Chicago in October 1985 (Hogarth and Reder 1987). Thus, for more than two decades, Rational Choice Theory has been under fire in the very discipline that had elevated it to the rank of referential framework. Since then, sociologists and political scientists have relayed, refined, and expanded rebuttals (e.g., Green and Shapiro 1994; Somers 1998).

Usually, frameworks that undergo a barrage of criticisms from multiple quarters and for a sustained period of time quietly leave the scene after a while. Witness the fate of functionalism in social-scientific academic circles. Rational Choice, by contrast, has proved remarkably resilient.¹ It has remained a source of analytical inspiration grounded in empirical research in a wide range of fields in sociology. Suffice to mention collective action (Ermakoff 2008; Oliver and Myers 2003; Opp, Voss, and Gern 1995), crime (Gambetta 1993; Matsueda, Kreager, and Huizinga 2006; Pezzin 1995), education (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Gambetta 2000 [1987]), exchange and transaction (Buskens and Raub 2013; Kollock 1994; Yamagishi and Cook 1993), fertility (Wu 1996; Yamaguchi and Ferguson 1995), migration (Jasso and Rosenzweig 1990), norms (Ermakoff 1997, 2010; Horne 2001), religion (Chaves and Cann 1992; Finke and Stark 1988; Iannaccone 1991, 1992, 1994), revolutions (Lindenberg 1989; Opp 1994; Pfaff 2006), state struc-

tures and formation (Adams 1996; Kiser 1994; Kiser and Schneider 1995), stratification (Brinton 1989; Goldthorpe 1996, 2007b; Gould 2002; Logan 1996; Manzo 2007), violence (Gould 1999), and voting patterns (Brustein 1996; Weakliem and Heath 1994).

Taking stock of the critiques leveled at the standard model of rational choice, the responses that these critiques elicited and the empirical work deployed in the wake of these controversies, this essay sets forth three claims. The first one states the need to conceptualize rational choice as a mode of action identifiable in terms of specific subjective orientations. The second claim is that we cannot appraise the resilience of a framework centered on rational choice, that is, its ability to sustain fire in the face of systematic empirical objections, unless we acknowledge its contributions as a method of inquiry grounded in a coherent conception of action under constraints. Third, a modal understanding of rational action calls for a systematic analysis of processes of belief formation. This claim redraws the research program usually identified with the theory of rational action. Let me briefly expound each claim before I outline the argumentative logic.

The first claim acknowledges the problems encountered by the theory of rational choice whether we are considering the standard model, grounded in the axiomatic theory of preference consistency, or the less specific versions. An axiomatic and purely deductive approach does not account for a wide range of behaviors that a priori fit the scope conditions of the theory (Della-Vigna 2009, 347–54). Conversely, versions of the theory that relax core assumptions runs the risk of falling into tautological or “Panglossian” assertions (Bohman 1992, 212). A modal understanding addresses the problem of empirical significance by theorizing rational choice as the mode of action geared to optimization. We can trace empirically this mode in light of specific subjective orientations. Recast in these terms, rational choice claims avoid the trap of ad hocness or tautology.

Second, the contributions of Rational Choice to both empirical and theoretical explorations owe much to its method. Here, the main claim is that “social phenomena can and should be explained as resulting from the action and interaction of individuals” (Goldthorpe 1996, 485). This “methodological individualism” has the value of a test: it requests that any explanatory argument clearly specify, or be able to specify, its microfoundations in terms of the rationale underlying strategies of action (Wittek, Snijders, and Nee 2013, 5). The test helps identify claims that remain incomplete or unaccounted for (“black boxes”) (Hedström and Swedberg 1998, 78). By way of consequence, it helps identify analytical sleights of hand. Importantly, as I shall argue when theorizing the emergence of self-limiting norms, it

also helps probe further the soundness of explanations that wear a Rational Choice label.

Third, a modal understanding of rational choice calls for a systematic analysis of how individual actors forge, and relate to, their beliefs. This line of inquiry takes stock of the brunt of the criticisms underscoring the standard Rational Choice model's inability, or unwillingness, to theorize belief formation (Boudon 1996, 123; Montgomery 1996, 443). I tackle this issue by examining how to make sense of the empirical evidence showing that in numerous instances, individuals willfully ignore information directly relevant to the prospect of making the best decision.

This essay elaborates these three claims by examining how much explanatory power we gain when we adopt a rational choice focus to tackle hard cases, that is, research problems that pose *prima facie* challenges for the standard model. The argumentative strategy thus amounts to submitting the approach, redefined along modal lines, to multiple trials by fire. (1) What leads agents to endorse norms that curtail their ability to realize their interests? (2) Which strategies of action do agents elaborate when they face situations that defy understanding and predictability? (3) How can agents deceive themselves, that is, give credence to beliefs that they know to be mistaken?

(1) The puzzle of self-constraining norms challenges the standard claim that agents seek to optimize their choice. Substantively, this puzzle invites us to investigate the connections between individual strategies and collective outcomes. Lurking in the background is this research agenda is the problem of order. (2) The focus on problematic situations calls into question the claim that the theory of rational choice has no relevance beyond the narrow confines of the "small world" of decisional routines (Gintis 2009, 236; Savage 1972 [1954], 16). (3) As for self-deception, it brings us right to the heart of irrational beliefs. Here, the challenge is directed at the notion that agents have an interest in forming accurate beliefs and in getting the information most relevant to their choice.

Before we tackle these three research problems, we need to clarify what we mean by "Rational Choice." This will be the subject of the first three sections. The first section, "The Model and Its Critics," delineates the standard model grounded in microeconomics. In "Elaborations," I examine how the criticisms leveled at this standard model have been coupled with different theoretical stances and counterstances. Given this background of critical exchanges, defining Rational Choice amounts to specifying which dividing lines we draw among the theoretical arguments that have been part of these exchanges. The demarcation should be precise enough to clearly delimit a

set of theoretical stances that share a common denominator and have empirical relevance. In this essay, I characterize as "Rational Choice" the family of arguments that hypothesize a mode of action geared to optimization (section "Which Demarcation Line?").

Given this definition, the fourth to sixth sections tackle the three research problems laid out above: self-limiting norms, rules of decision in problematic situations, and self-deception. "Self-Limiting Norms" explores the paradox of self-limiting norms by probing the soundness of a Rational Choice account in terms of resource asymmetries and transfers of right. This discussion illustrates the critical clout of a method of investigation centered on the micro-underpinnings of collective processes. It shows how the method can be used to challenge the very content of Rational Choice claims. In the section "Problematic Situations," I discuss the possibility of drawing on Rational Choice to explore decision-making in situations that *a priori* fall outside of the approach's domain assumptions: situations agents experience as problematic. "Self-Deception" shifts the focus to one of the dimensions of action left out by the standard Rational Choice model: the ways in which actors relate to their beliefs. I do so by addressing the challenge of self-deception.

A word on terminology: these introductory remarks have referred to "frameworks, research programs, theories, models, and method." These are terms often used and, quite often, used in a loose fashion. To avoid any confusion, let me state their meaning right away. By "framework," I mean a more or less tightly organized collection of ideas and hypotheses that orient explanations. A research program is grounded in a set of core claims that practitioners view as axiomatic—which Lakatos (1978) characterizes as "hard core"—and that have generated a stream of empirical studies. A research program achieves paradigmatic status when it dominates and regulates research in a given field (Kuhn 1996). A "theory" designates a claim or a set of interconnected claims about a class of empirical objects that can be tested in light of traceable indicators or observable implications. A "model" is a theory that has been formalized, that is, translated into a set of propositions couched in symbolic language. A method simply describes a way of investigating an empirical referent.²

THE MODEL AND ITS CRITICS

Let us first clarify "Rational Choice." What do analysts usually mean by the term? There is actually no straightforward answer. As several reviewers have noted (Boudon 2007, 71; Goldthorpe 2007a, 140, 163; Hechter and Kana-

zawa 1997, 194), multiple theoretical stances on rational action have emerged over the years. Assessing how these relate to one another—which ones are congruent, which ones are incompatible—is far from obvious: whereas some protagonists of the field emphasize a lack of congruence, others stress complementarity.³ As a propaedeutic step, I trace the development of these stances. The perspective is genealogical. It outlines a pattern of development fueled by objections, counterobjections and theoretical elaborations.

Consistency Axioms

In its “most general form,” Rational Choice Theory simply states “that people act so as to get the greatest possible utility available to them” (Palmer 1982, 185). “We can then say that the person acts so as to maximize utility, as long as we keep in mind that this is nothing but a convenient way of saying that she does what she most prefers” (Elster 1989, 23). Being rational in terms of choices means first and foremost being consistent with regard to one’s preferences. Stated in these terms, the theory actually is nothing more than a “framework for specific explanations” (Palmer 1982, 185). The crux of the matter resides in the formal specifications of preference consistency that undergird optimization.

The model thus elaborated rests on three core assumptions (Gächter 2013, 35; Gintis 2009, 4–5): completeness, transitivity, and the independence of irrelevant alternatives. “Completeness” means that the individual decision maker—let us call this individual decision maker “the actor”—can rank all the options that constitute her choice set. Transitivity states that if the actor prefers *a* to *b* and *b* to *c*, she also prefers *a* to *c*. As for the independence of irrelevant alternatives, the claim is that “the relevant attractiveness of two choices does not depend upon the other choices available to the individual” (Gintis 2009, 5).

Any breach of these core assumptions makes the notion of preference consistency logically irrelevant. An agent who satisfies these consistency requirements chooses optimally. In other words, “no other action exists whose consequences [this agent] prefers to the chosen action” (Abell 1992, 191). In this conception, utility maximization is not so much a postulate than a derivation of its core consistency requirements (Gilboa 2010, 17; Manzo 2013, 371). “To say that someone maximizes a utility function is merely to say that she is coherent in her choices” (Gilboa 2010, 17).

This model of rational choice, which I will henceforth designate as “standard” because it has “served, even in default, as a benchmark” (Abell 1992, 197), often is presented as if it assumed perfect information and self-regarding

		States of the world		
		s_1	s_2	s_3
Acts	a_1	c_{11}	c_{12}	c_{13}
	a_2	c_{21}	c_{22}	c_{23}

FIGURE 1. The decision matrix

preferences: the actor would be omniscient and egoistic.⁴ Strangely enough, at times both critics *and* proponents of the model have presented the model in this light (e.g., Boudon 2007, 76; Sen 1977, 321; Taylor 1988, 66). The presentation, however, is mistaken. The standard model “requires only preference consistency” (Binmore 2009, 9; Gilboa 2010, 4; Gintis 2009, 1). It does not assume that agents are egoistic (Abell 1992, 199; Hechter and Kanazawa 1997, 194).⁵ Nor does it assume perfect information.

The standard model, on the other hand, does assume that the actor has a clear understanding of (1) the alternatives that constitute her choice set, (2) the different contextual scenarios (“states of the world” in the language of decision theory) that will condition the consequences of her choice, and (3) the outcomes of her action in light of these contextual scenarios. In formal terms, the standard model conceptualizes a decision problem *D* as a function relating a consequence (*C*) to the choice of an act *A* given a state of the world *S* (Binmore 2009, 2–3; Savage 1972 [1954], 13–15). “In deciding on an act, account must be taken of the possible states of the world, and also of the consequences implicit in each act for each possible state of the world” (Savage 1972 [1954], 13). Figure 1 represents for each act $\{a_i\}$ the consequence of this act $\{c_{ij}\}$ depending on the state of the world $\{s_j\}$ (Binmore 2009: 3).

$$D: A \times S \rightarrow C$$

Objections, Refutations

The standard model has encountered three classes of objections. The first one draws on experimental and empirical observations at odds with its core claims. At issue is the empirical validity of the model. A second class of objections addresses assumptions regarding cognitive processes and computational abilities. Here, the gist of the critique is that the model is wanting because it lacks a realist understanding of belief formation. The third class

of objections addresses the issue of scope. Consistency and optimality requirements cannot be confined to preferences and decisions: they have to be extended to other components of action such as beliefs, desires, and the search for relevant information.

DEVIATIONS

The most formidable criticisms have been empirical. Objections along these lines cover a wide gamut of claims regarding preferences, beliefs, and decision-making (Chaves and Montgomery 1996, 141; DellaVigna 2009). Experimental and observational data have shown that decision-makers violate consistency requirements (Allais 1953, 527–30), hold time-inconsistent preferences (Ainslie 1992; Thaler 1981), and make contradictory choices depending on how the decision problem is framed (Tversky and Kahneman 1986, S254–56). Similarly, in contradistinction with the assumption that agents correctly gauge the states of the world conditioning outcomes, experimental and field evidence underscore systematic inference and overconfidence biases even among agents with economic expertise (Alpert and Raiffa 1982; Tversky and Kahneman 1974).

Because “deviations from the standard model are not confined to laboratory decisions” but describe decisions in a wide range of settings (DellaVigna 2009, 365), these observations have particular force. They raise doubt on the validity of the model. From this perspective, the axiomatic conception of rational choice should be interpreted as a “normative model of choice,” which cannot be reconciled with a descriptive theory: these deviations are “too widespread to be ignored, too systematic to be dismissed as random error, and too fundamental to be accommodated by relaxing the normative system” (Tversky and Kahneman 1986, S252).

LACK OF REALISM

Resonant with arguments addressing issues of empirical validity is the claim that the standard model fails to capture the essentials of choice involving risk (Allais 1953, 504). In particular, it assumes unrealistic computational and attention abilities and, in so doing, misrepresents cognitive processes. The human mind cannot process highly complex information in a synchronic fashion. Attention is selective and computational power limited. Yet, the standard model disregards these internal limitations, portraying actors as if they mastered the successful application of probability laws to decision problems (Simon 1955, 101; 1985, 302; Tversky and Kahneman 1986, S252). By conflating cognition with the requirements of formal logic,

Rational Choice analysts make knowledge and belief formation a black box (Gigerenzer 2008, 8).

The critique directed at the model's lack of cognitive realism has a far-reaching implication regarding another of its trademarks: optimization. If the ability to process multiple pieces of information at once is limited, then we should expect agents not to systematically engage in the types of cognitive investments that would allow them to optimize. Instead, we can expect them to contend themselves with selecting a line of conduct that satisfies them, without inquiring further about the information available or the pay-offs of other options. It follows from this line of argument that satisfaction, not optimization, should be conceptualized as the standard decision rule in the case of agents who appraise the possible consequences of their choice (Selten 2001, 15; Simon 1985, 295).

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE RATIONAL?

The third class of objections leveled at the standard model pertains to its scope. We usually do not view an individual as rational only with regard to the course of action she opts for. We also take into account whether she adequately searched for the information relevant to her choice, whether the beliefs she formed regarding the different dimensions constitutive of her decision matrix are sound, and whether her desires reflect her “independence of will” (Schumpeter 1942, 253). In light of these criteria, the standard model appears too narrow. It fails to integrate an assessment of information searches, judgments and volitions (Elster 1989, 20–35; Goldthorpe 2000, 116).

Information gathering in fact should be analyzed as a second-order maximization problem related to the time and resources required to collect the relevant information when it is not available and the search is costly. The challenge for the actor is to figure out how far she wants to pursue this search (Elster 1989, 35; 2007, 205; Simon 1955, 106). Based on this information gathering process, we can appraise the actor's beliefs to be “rational” if these beliefs are “optimally related to the evidence available” (Elster 1990, 20).⁶ As for desires, the issue is whether they are manufactured and determined by forces that escape the actor's control. “One cannot be rational if one is the plaything of psychic processes that, unbeknownst to oneself, shape one's desires and values” (Elster 1990, 22).

ELABORATIONS

Empirical and analytical objections have not been the sole challenge confronting Rational Choice pundits. In addition, critics have developed theoretical frameworks—Prospect Theory, Bounded Rationality, Cognitive Rationality—that they portray as alternatives to the standard model. The pundits' responses to this multifaceted offensive have been of two kinds. Endorsing the adage that the best defense is a good offense, the first response refutes the validity of the objections. The second response takes the opposite stance: instead of rejecting criticisms, it incorporates them by amending claims and derivations. In either case, both responses are intended to demonstrate that these various criticisms have not struck a crucial blow at the fundamentals of the model.

Theoretical Developments

Experimental findings documenting nonstandard preferences underlie the elaboration of what Tversky and Kahneman (1986) have termed Prospect Theory. The thrust of the theory rests on the claim that choice making is a two-stage process: agents first frame the decision problem and then evaluate the framed prospects. The framing stage pertains to the terms used to describe the choice problem.⁷ The evaluation stage pertains to the assessment of losses relatively to gains, value differences, and probabilities. On this score, Prospect Theory sets forth several claims: agents grant more importance to losses than to gains; the value they impute to differences decreases as the absolute value becomes greater; and they overweigh low probabilities as well as probability differences involving certainty and impossibility (Tversky and Kahneman 1986, S257–58).

Less formal than Prospect Theory are arguments that point to the empirical significance of “good reasons” to account for anomalies (Boudon 1996, 124; 2007, 93–97; Lupia, McCubbins, and Popkin 2000, 7). We can construe a choice as rational when the actor has good reasons for making the choice she is making even though this choice does not satisfy the requirements of the standard model. “[In this conception] beliefs . . . are assumed to be derived from reasons, though reasons which cannot be reduced to mere considerations of costs and benefits” (Boudon 1996, 124). Accordingly, “a rational choice is one that is based on reasons, irrespective of what these reasons may be” (Lupia et al. 2000, 7). Boudon (1996, 124; 2007, 92) labels this approach “Cognitive Rationality.”

Furthermore, the charge that the standard model lacks realism has been a

major thread of the Bounded Rationality approach (Simon 1985). Bounded Rationality draws attention to the ways in which agents process information given the limitations of their computational power and the structure of their environment (Simon 1955, 101; 1956, 129). Analysts have pursued further this line of research by documenting and theorizing the heuristics on which agents rely as they search for cues, decide to stop the search, and make up their mind (Gigerenzer 2001, 43–46; Gigerenzer and Selten 2001, 8).

Responses

Faced with this assault on multiple fronts, Rational Choice analysts have adopted two contrasted lines of defense. One dismisses the validity of empirical refutations by invoking the corrective effects of different mechanisms and the robustness of Rational Choice deductions at the macrolevel. (1) As the size of the groups increases, deviations cancel out (Becker 1976; Goldthorpe 1998, 43–44). Aggregation combined with the law of large numbers does the trick (Goldthorpe 2007, 141). (2) From an evolutionary standpoint, only optimal, that is, best-adapted strategies are bound to prevail. Time thus operates as a natural selection mechanism (Tsebelis 1990, 35–36). (3) Furthermore, since beliefs approximate reality in equilibrium situations—that is, situations in which no one has an incentive to deviate given mutual expectations—accurate beliefs inform optimizing choices in these situations (Tsebelis 1990, 28–30).

Whichever rationale is being considered, it should be noted that this line of defense is off the mark: it opposes theoretical justifications to empirical arguments. Ultimately, empirical validity is the issue at stake and the matter can only be decided in light of the evidence available. Furthermore, empirical studies cast at the aggregate level, even when they focus on the behaviors of actors trained to be strategic (e.g., investors) do not support the “correction” contention (DellaVigna 2009, 360–66), either because the deviations are systematic—“they tend to be in the same direction” (Thaler 1994, 5)—or because agents experience no incentive to correct mistaken beliefs (Opp 1999, 190).⁸

A second line of defense consists in absorbing criticisms by redefining the terms of the theoretical entity labeled Rational Choice. This strategy has two variants. (1) Analysts who take the axiomatic theory of preference consistency as their compass draw on formal specifications to accommodate time-dependent preferences (Ainslie 1992), the lack of independence between feasibility and desirability (Gilboa 2010, 8), limited information processing, and variable reference points for assessing prospects (Gintis 2009, 1, 246).

"While in some important areas, human decision makers appear to violate the consistency condition for rational choice, in virtually all such cases . . . consistency can be restored by assuming that the current state of the agent is an argument of the preference structure" (Gintis 2009, 237). Accordingly, "contradictions are progressively ingurgitated and the basic framework is saved" (Manzo 2013, 367).⁹

(2) A different strategy of absorption relaxes core assumptions and moves away from the stringent constraints of an axiomatic model. Reconfigured as a "wide" theory of rational choice, this conception asserts the centrality of preferences, constraints, and maximization without assuming axiomatic criteria of consistency (Boudon 2003, 3–4; Opp 1999, 173).¹⁰ Agents appraise the constraints they face in a way that is primarily subjective. Assessments may be detached from objective conditions. Rational choice gets redefined in a way that sets the agents' reasons at the center of the analytical stage (Boudon 2007, 90) provided that their actions are geared to optimization (Hechter 1987, 30; Opp 1999, 175–76).¹¹

WHICH DEMARCATION LINE?

This plurality of views and theoretical stances raises a challenge. To what extent, and in which respects, can these theories of rational choice be said to belong to the same "family" as some have presumed (e.g., Hechter and Kanazawa 1997, 194)? What do they have in common and, if not, where shall we draw the dividing line? The following remarks contrast three different ways of conceiving a common denominator by assessing their merits and drawbacks. In light of this assessment, I specify a definition of Rational Choice as the set of approaches assuming a mode of action geared to optimization.

Rationality

The first lead is the reference to rationality. Consider Wittek, Snijders, and Nee's (2013) definition drawing explicitly on Goldthorpe (2007, 163): Rational Choice designates a "family of theories explaining social phenomena as outcomes of individual action that can—in some way—be construed as rational" (p. 5; my emphasis). This view of the demarcation line is broadly inclusive: for a theory to qualify as "Rational Choice" it is enough to portray individual actions as rational *in some way*. The practitioners have full leeway in filling up the category as they wish. Defining rational action is left

to their discretion. By this criterion, Bounded Rationality, Prospect Theory, and Cognitive Rationality can be subsumed under the same rubric.

However plausible this view may seem at first, it creates more problems than it solves. Not only is the notion of rationality vague. It is also semantically fluctuant (Opp forthcoming-a). It lacks the specificity required to set definite demarcation criteria. Wittek, Snijders, and Nee's (2013) implicitly acknowledge this indeterminacy by leaving specifications open ("in some way"). Whichever demarcation lines may be invoked in the name of rationality, these will turn out to be blurry and fluctuant.¹²

Even more troubling, precisely because this understanding of the dividing line has no precise content, "rational" becomes a residual category of "irrational." This problem is most acute in the case of "Cognitive Rationality." Boudon (1996, 2007) never properly specifies how we might differentiate "good" reasons from "bad" ones. Nor does he indicate which validation criteria we should take into account to assess his post hoc interpretations of some mistaken probabilistic judgments (e.g., Boudon 1996, 131–35).¹³

PREFERENCE CONSISTENCY

At the opposite end in terms of analytical specificity is the reference to an axiomatic conception of preference consistency. According to this yardstick, only theories that can be subsumed to the standard model deserve the "Rational Choice" label. Those that cannot be reconciled with the axiomatic model, or lack the specificity required for this purpose, cannot join the band. This view of the common denominator is as exclusive as it is stringent. By this standard, Bounded Rationality and Prospect Theory fall under the sway of the Rational Choice label (Gintis 2009, 246; Manzo 2013, 366, 369; Opp forthcoming-b). By contrast, Boudon's "Cognitive Rationality" and the heuristics approach do not.

In setting preference consistency as the dividing line, however, analysts leave out a huge swath of preferences, beliefs, and decisions that are not standard by the criteria of the axiomatic theory, yet fulfill the scope conditions of the model: decision-makers face a limited number of options, incentives are clearly defined and agents can draw the consequences of their choice for their own welfare. Remarkably, this observation applies to choices that take place in market or incentive-driven settings: choices by investors (Barberis, Schleifer, and Vishny 1998; Odean 1998), consumers (Cronqvist and Thaler 2004; Madrian and Shea 2001) and employees at work (Camerer et al. 1997). Given the interests at stake (e.g., retirement savings, stocks, paychecks), it would be preposterous to assert that these economic agents do

not seek to maximize somehow. Yet, from the standpoint of the standard model their choices are not rational.

OPTIMIZATION

This last point brings us to a third conception, more specific than the reference to rationality and less stringent than the axiomatic theory of preference consistency. According to this third conception, Rational Choice theories are theories that postulate optimization. This view of the demarcation line needs not refer to any optimization rule in particular (e.g., minimax, maximin, expected utility, risk dominance) because rules vary in relevance depending on the decision problem agents face. Nor does this definition of Rational Choice make any assumption regarding the agents' cognitive abilities and the ways in which they process information. It only makes the claim that the reference to optimization under constraints is the distinctive feature of a Rational Choice theory (Hechter 1987, 30; Opp 1999, 173).

This conception faces three challenges. First, as several analysts have observed (Gambetta 2000 [1987], 18; Goldthorpe 2007, 146; Hollis 1994, 185–86), claims inferring choices from preferences and constraints bracket agents as loci of decision-making. They paradoxically describe choices that elude choice-makers. Second, and related, as long as we do not specify goals, preferences, and constraints, equating rational choice with an optimization criterion amounts to an empty claim (Blossfeld and Prein 1998, 8). The notion has “no empirical content” (Kelle and Lüdemann 1998, 114). We get out of this emptiness if we develop auxiliary assumptions that bridge the gap between abstract subjective variables and the characteristics of social situations (Esser 1998, 94; Lindenberg 1992, 6; 1996, 129). Third, unless we spell out the theoretical content of these bridge assumptions, we run the risk of ad hoc arguments (Lindenberg 1996, 130–1).

A MODAL APPROACH

The analytical stance adopted in this essay draws on these critical remarks. We restore the sense of individual agency inherent to the very process of making a choice if, instead of presuming optimal choices codetermined by preferences and constraints, we conceptualize rational choice as the mode of action geared to optimization. This mode of action is necessarily “incentive-driven and goal-directed” (Raub, Buskens, and van Assen 2011, 14). It requires that the agent reflect upon alternative courses of action, assess likelihoods, and compare consequences with a rule of optimization in mind. Thus, from a modal standpoint, rational choice implies a reflexive engagement with the future (Ermakoff 2010, 541–43; 2013, 91–94, 100–1).¹⁴

Two consequences follow. First, conceptualizing rational choice as a mode of action makes it empirically traceable in light of the phenomenological markers I have just outlined: the agent projects herself into the future of possible consequences for the purpose of acting on this assessment. By the same token, these markers differentiate rational choice from other modes of action: for example, the explicit endorsement of a normatively loaded call for action (ideological mode), the tacit adoption of a script collectively shared (cultural mode), or the reliance on a routine for its own sake (habitual mode).¹⁵

Second, a modal understanding of rational choice calls for an analysis of the situational factors that are propitious to its emergence. For instance, it is plausible to argue that the rational choice mode becomes likely when agents: experience their relational environment as increasingly competitive (see “Self-Limiting Norms” section), are bereft of a clearly defined behavioral script (Ermakoff 2008, xxv, 316; 2013, 97; Kronenberg, Yaish, and Stocké 2010, 10), or are unexpectedly confronted with the prospect of costs to their welfare (Ermakoff 2010, 541; 2013, 96; Lindenberg 1989, 55). This line of research is consistent with a problematic centered on the analytical specification of different “logics of situation” (Hedström and Swedberg 1998: 72; Popper 1994, 164–68) provided that we understand “situations” as dynamic configurations of relations shaping incentives and informing actors' understanding of their options.¹⁶

Accordingly, I define an argument as “Rational Choice” if this argument either postulates, documents or implies a mode of action geared to optimization. Given this definition, I now examine three research problems that at face value challenge the explanatory clout of Rational Choice arguments. What explains actors' willfully endorsing norms limiting their capacity to realize their interests? How do agents cope with situations that, because of their disruptive character, defy the scope conditions of rational choice? Can we account for the possibility of self-deception? These three research problems speak to the core issues of order, disruption, and belief formation.

SELF-LIMITING NORMS

If we assume gain-maximizing behaviors, then the case of agents' endorsing normative regulations that constrain their ability to maximize—let us call this class of norms “self-limiting”—cannot but appear perplexing. From a heuristic standpoint though, normative endorsements of that kind should retain our attention. First, their stringent character makes them norms par excel-

lence, that is, "prescriptions about what behaviors (or states of the world) are required, prohibited, or permitted" (Ostrom 1985, 465). Second, they speak to the broader issue of social order. The processes whereby such norms get implemented provide us a clue to the emergence of self-regulation.

Conjoint, Disjoint

Following Coleman (1990, chapters 10 and 11), let us first distinguish between "conjoint" versus "disjoint" norms. Conjoint norms are norms for which the "set of persons who impose the norm, the beneficiaries, is the same as the set of persons to whose action the norm is directed [the target actors]" (Coleman 1990, 250). Disjoint norms are norms for which these two categories of actors are separate. Those who set forth the rules are not the primary targets of their jurisdiction. Their claims are exercised against others.

Regarding the emergence of conjoint norms, the thrust of Rational Choice accounts has been evolutionary game theory (Voss 2001, 114–19). Actors interact with one another and modify their behavior as a result of the payoffs of their encounters. The structure of the game may revolve upon a coordination (Young 1998) or a prisoner's dilemma (Hill 1997). At any point in time, interactions reflect the history of previous states. The norm emerging as dominant is the convention that prevails at the equilibrium (Hill 1997 198–200; Young 1998, 145). In this conceptualization, the evolutionary path is sensitive to the initial distribution of types of players and to the accumulation of random deviations.

While considerable attention through formalization and simulation has been paid to the emergence of conjoint norms and the possibility of sub-optimal outcomes (e.g., Centola, Willer, and Macy 2005), much less analysis has been devoted to disjoint norms. Yet, in numerous instances, demands for norms emerge in situations in which one group engages in activities that have negative consequences ("externalities") for another group. As a consequence, the latter seeks to curb the activities of the former through the imposition of norms. How, then, can we explain that target actors might "accept the legitimacy of others' claim to a right to control their action when this acceptance constitutes an immediate disadvantage" (Coleman 1990, 287)?

A case in point is aristocrats' shift in attitude toward the matrimonial norms defined by the church's canon law in the central Middle Ages (Ermakoff 1997). Until the end of the eleventh century, European male nobles disregarded church rules that forbade them to repudiate their wives and marry their cousins. Repudiation and endogamy were critical to strategies of political and military aggrandizement. A century later, ecclesiastical pre-

cepts were gaining precedence over such practices. Aristocrats no longer considered their matrimonial practices outside the normative bearings set by the church. This does not mean that they never breached these prohibitions. This means, on the other hand, that any breach had a cost, psychological and social, which is another way of saying that the norm had become effective.

The Asymmetry Thesis

To account for the process whereby disjoint norms get effectively implemented, Coleman (1990) outlines a two-pronged explanatory model cast in terms of sanctioning asymmetries and transfers of rights. The argument about sanctioning asymmetries states that beneficiary actors are in a position to impose their norm when they control resources on which target actors depend for their welfare (Coleman 1990, 262). If the latter do not comply with the normative request, beneficiary actors can retaliate by restricting or barring access to the resources that they control.

However, a norm does not effectively regulate behaviors if it does not entail the target actors' consent. This basic point motivates the second prong of the argument about a transfer of rights from the target actors to the beneficiary actors. The beneficiary actors' normative request works effectively as normative restraint if target actors endorse it as such. The asymmetry in sanctioning capacities needs to translate into a transfer of right (Coleman 1990, 266). Target actors recognize the claimants' right to regulate their own behavior.

The problem with this explanation is that it fails to explain the central piece of the transformative process: the emergence of consent. It is one thing to trace shifts in the beneficiary actors' sanctioning capacity and their ability to have target actors toe the line in exchange for access to resources that these actors value. It is another thing to claim that target actors toe the line because they endorse the norm. While publicly conforming to an official normative demand, actors targeted by the request may actually resist it in private.

Thus, an explanatory model cast in terms of differentials in sanctioning capacities does not tell us why target actors initially opposing a normative regulation ultimately accommodate themselves with it. Endorsement appears all the more puzzling when the norm crucially undercuts the target actors' ability to optimize their interests. This critique can be reformulated with regard to the issue of right. The claimant's right to control a focal action presumes the target actors' consensus that indeed the claimant is entitled to

such a control. The key issue in the process of norm implementation therefore concerns the emergence of such a consensus.

Checking Competitors

Accounting for this transfer of right from target to beneficiary actors requires shifting the focus from the dynamics of inter-group relations to the dynamics of intra-group relations (Ermakoff 1997, 407). This shift in focus, fully consistent with the methodological inspiration of a Rational Choice approach, highlights the conditions under which target actors develop a "regulatory interest" (Heckathorn 1989, 78), that is, an interest in sanctioning deviants. For instance, in situations when competitive relationships intensify, it is in the interest of target actors to invoke the norm as a strategic resource to check the expanding power or encroachments of their competitors. In so doing—and this consequence is unintended on their part—they contribute to the plausibility and regulatory scope of the norm while, by the same token, making it more difficult for themselves to elude its behavioral grip (Ermakoff 1997, 416).

A Rational Choice approach thus contributes to the study of normative orders in two respects. First, this approach invites us to identify and investigate relational configurations conducive to the emergence of an interest in normative regulation among target actors. The shift in focus, from inter-group confrontations to intragroup processes, draws on a key tenet of Rational Choice as a method of investigation: the need to lay bare the etiology of social phenomena in terms of the rationales motivating individual agents' strategies of action. Interestingly, this methodological requirement helps identify gaps in the analytical architecture of arguments that have a Rational Choice label, such as Coleman's (1990) account of norm emergence in terms of transfer of right. This fact alone testifies to the heuristic payoff of the method. Second, a Rational Choice account highlights the effective implementation of a norm as the unintended consequence of its strategic usage. This observation, it should be noted, has broad relevance for our understanding of the problem of order.

PROBLEMATIC SITUATIONS

Formal theorists of rational action emphasize that the standard model only applies under certain conditions (Binmore 2009, 117; Gintis 2009, 236; Sav-

age 1972 [1954], 16, 83). Savage (1972 [1954], 16) characterizes the model's scope conditions as distinctive of "small-world" decisions. The world to which the standard model applies is "small" with regard to the terms and consequences of the decision. The decisional situation is "relatively simple" and "isolated" (Savage 1972 [1954], 83). The actor has no difficulty assessing probabilities, making deductions, and determining her preferences with respect to outcomes. Buying a car is a typical example (Elster 1990, 47).

Why so small a world? The answer lies with the consistency requirements of the model. The actor cannot reasonably be expected to rank alternatives in a systematic and coherent fashion if she has to contemplate a high number of them. Goal ambiguity is more than likely when the decision problem involves multiple types of outcomes and when the actor views these types as incommensurable (Elster 1989, 32). Similarly, mapping out the consequences of one's choice becomes a dubious matter if the ramifications are far-reaching in addition to being multidimensional. The world of rational choice in its standard version needs to be small so that it be cognitively tractable and devoid of goal ambiguity.

By way of consequence, in the case of small-world decisions, incentives are well defined (Taylor 1988, 90). The actor is dealing with a "well-structured situation" in which "the actors' identity and goals are established and the rules of their interaction are precise and known to the interacting agents" (Tsebelis 1990, 32–33), and in which she can gauge how mistakes on her part will affect her welfare (Schumpeter 1942, 253). The decision, repeated over time (Tsebelis 1990, 38), makes learning from one's mistakes possible (Lucas 1987, 218). In sum, the standard model is predicated on a world that is small in the sense of being "routine" (lack of ambiguities, clearly delineated choice set, unmediated payoffs) (Gintis 2009, 237) and familiar (Binmore 2009, 23–24).¹⁷

In contradistinction with these disclaimers, I argue that the theory of rational choice redefined as a mode of action is of considerable analytical relevance for understanding situations of disruption and crisis. First, the micro-analytical focus induced by the theory allows us to ground empirically a class of conjunctures characterized by the breakdown of institutional or habitual routines. Second, a Rational Choice understanding invites us to pay attention to the significance of decisional moments in these conjunctures, and to specify in which sense a decisional context can be said to be problematic from the actor's standpoint. Third, depending on the type of uncertainty at play, we can expect agents to engage in different strategies of uncertainty resolution. I elaborate each point in turn.

Disruptions

Times of disruption are notoriously difficult to grasp. Habitual or institutional patterns either crumble or are in jeopardy (Ermakoff 2010, 539; 2013, 93). A priori, they defy systematic understanding. From a microanalytical standpoint, though, we can discern two contrasted types of subjective experience. One is characterized by a sense of opportunity. The actor reads the situation as enhancing her capacity for action. The other is marked by the perception of a challenge however objectified this challenge might be. The actor may be at a loss to figure out how to interpret the situation. Or she may know how to interpret it but is unable to draw clear-cut implications in terms of actions (Ermakoff 2009, 8).

These two subjective orientations—opportunity, challenge—vary across groups—formally constituted or not—and across time. Individuals who believe that their time has come are not immune to the experience of a sudden challenge if subsequently the disruption brings with it abrupt and unexpected developments. Conversely, groups initially at a loss may benefit from circumstances that lead them to believe that they can have the upper hand. In either case, whether the sense of opportunity or challenge prevails, the conjuncture compels actors to think about the situation, ongoing developments, and options they might be facing (Ermakoff 2010, 541).¹⁸ The more they realize the extent to which they might expose themselves to future costs, the greater the incentive to assess risks and consequences, that is, the greater the likelihood of the rational choice mode (Ermakoff 2010, 541).

One example helps flesh this claim out. The context is the summer of 1940 in France. The rout inflicted by German armies upon the French ones in June led to the formation of a new government headed by Marshall Pétain (June 16) and to the signature of an armistice with Germany (June 22). Right afterward, Pétain appointed Pierre Laval as vice-premier. Laval did not lose time in persuading his colleagues in the government that a meeting of the National Assembly (the Chamber of the Deputies and the Senate convening together) was necessary for the purpose of a constitutional revision. As deputies and senators started to meet in the spa town of Vichy where the government had settled, Laval was actively laying the groundwork of his plan for action (Blum 1955, 65–72).

Clearly, for Laval the situation created by the military defeat—a situation characterized by dramatic disruption—provided him with the opportunity for a major “political gamble” (Ermakoff 2008, 175). He had a card to play, and he intended to play it to the best of his advantage. For those politicians who were not part of his clique or who were not willing to jump onto the

wagon, Laval's gamble was a major challenge, which they experienced as such, because the constitutional revision was to be the prelude of an alignment with Nazi Germany's political institutions and foreign policy (Ermakoff 2008, 125–28). In more analytical terms, one set of actors (Laval and his allies) was making a power bid while another was on the defensive. Both were actively engaged in assessing risks and consequences.

Types of Uncertainty

To investigate the collective dynamics emerging in such conjunctures, it is necessary to understand in which respects actors experience the situation as problematic and how this experience evolves across time. The matrix representation of the decision function (Figure 1) is analytically helpful to advance this research agenda. It sheds light on two broad classes of problematic conditions. The first one reflects an indeterminate ranking of preferences over outcomes, which translates into unstable preferences over actions. The actor's uncertainty in this case is behavioral. The second class of problematic conditions is cognitive. The actor has a hard time ascertaining knowledge regarding one or several dimensions of the decisional matrix.

BEHAVIORAL UNCERTAINTY

In contrast to routine, low-stake, and “isolated” decisions, “grand-world” decisions are likely to be loaded with multidimensional stakes overflowing the immediate context of the choice. In formal terms, assume a binary decision $\{a_1, a_2\}$ with two types of outcomes at stake: $\{c_{ij}\}$ and $\{d_{ij}\}$ (Figure 2). The actor does not view these two types of outcomes as commensurate. That is, she does not subsume them to a single utility function. She is considering

		States of the world		
		s_1	s_1	s_1
Acts	a_1	c_{11}	c_{12}	c_{13}
		d_{11}	d_{12}	d_{13}
	a_2	c_{21}	c_{22}	c_{23}
		d_{21}	d_{22}	d_{23}

FIGURE 2. The decision matrix with incommensurate outcomes

the consequences of her acts either in the terms of one or the other of these two types.

Assume moreover that $c_{ij} > c_{2j}$ and $d_{ij} < d_{2j}$. When the actor is considering the payoff matrix in light of $\{c_{ij}\}$ her preference goes to a_1 . When, on the contrary, she is considering the $\{d_{ij}\}$ outcomes, her preference is a_2 . Her ranking of the alternatives is inconsistent and she is unable to opt for a course of action. Her uncertainty is behavioral. Here, the problematic character of the decisional situation stems from the fact that the actor is considering different types of outcomes and depending on the type she is considering, she is shifting back and forth between action preferences that contradict one another. The problem is one of valuation. The actor has to determine which type of outcomes she values most.

To illustrate this oscillation and the ambivalence that goes along, let us examine again the case of politicians facing an authoritarian challenge such as French parliamentarians in July 1940. Politicians by definition are dealing with multiple sets of interests: their individual fate, the standing of their affiliation group if they have one, their normative ideals, and their constituents' welfare. High-stake decisions bring to the fore these different dimensions. In July 1940, four types of outcomes were at stake: exposure to sanctions in case of noncompliance, the preservation of parliamentary mandates, the regime issue, and status among political affiliates (Ermakoff 2008, 184–85).

For most politicians, preference rankings across these different types of outcomes implied noncongruent action preferences. The commitment to democratic values and the desire to preserve a parliamentary mandate motivated opposition to a constitutional blank check. Risks of reprisals motivated acquiescence. Considerations of status among political affiliates for their part motivated alignment with the majority. The behavioral oscillation that many observed in Vichy reflected these shifts from one action preference to the other depending on the type of outcome taken into consideration (Ermakoff 2008, 315–16).

It would be mistaken to suggest that dilemma of this kind are confined to political actors. The possibility of behavioral uncertainty is inherent to decisions that the decision-maker knows might negatively affect other people's welfare (negative externalities). That is why members of any group are not immune to such dilemma when they are requested to perform actions at odds with the moral representation they have of themselves (their moral selves), or with their public image among those whose social judgment they value (their significant others). A case in point is the French police officers being asked by their hierarchy to massively arrest Jewish families in the summer of 1942 (Ermakoff 2012, 225–27).

COGNITIVE UNCERTAINTIES

The second type of problematic condition stems from cognitive uncertainty (Ermakoff 2008, 367). Models of rational choice under risk (expected utility models) also take into account the inability to assert knowledge. However, this uncertainty of knowledge is confined to the "S" (states of the world) element of the $A \times S \rightarrow C$ decisional matrix while the "A" (acts) and "C" (consequences) elements are clearly defined. Furthermore, the uncertainty about S is limited in scope. It simply means that the actor cannot view any state of the world as either certain or impossible. This lack of information does not prevent her from assessing likelihoods. The focus of the standard model is therefore on a bounded form of cognitive uncertainty, which takes the guise of imperfect knowledge about the contextual scenarios (i.e., the "states of the world") conditioning the outcomes of alternative courses of action.

Times of rupture and disruption evoke more far-reaching types of cognitive uncertainty: first, the actor cannot determine the alternative actions $\{a_i\}$ that constitute her choice set; second, she is unable to assess the likelihoods of the different contextual scenarios ("states of the world") $\{s_j\}$ that will condition outcomes; third, she does not know how to map out the consequences $\{c_{ij}\}$ of her acts. Each problematic condition reflects the inability to assert knowledge regarding a constitutive element of the $A \times S \rightarrow C$ decisional matrix: alternative actions (options), states of the world and consequences.

The uncertainty about options conditions the very possibility of a decisional matrix: if the actor is uncertain about which options she should be considering, considerations about contextual scenarios and consequences lose all relevance. The reverse is not true. The actor may be uncertain about contextual scenarios and consequences while having a clear understanding of the options defining her choice set. The inability to determine alternatives is likely to emerge in situations characterized by an unprecedented and sudden challenge—one that leaves agents at a loss regarding the definition of the situation. Unable to state what exactly is going on or, to put it differently, unable to figure out the nature of the challenge, agents cannot clearly envision which courses of action they should be considering (Bunce and Csanádi 1993, 266–67).

Strategies of Resolution

This microanalytical focus on sources and factors of uncertainty is of considerable relevance for understanding the dynamics of actors' subjective experience and, because this subjective experience conditions behavioral stance, the dynamics of collective processes in problematic situations. An individual

actor gets out of her behavioral uncertainty when she ranks outcome types and does not modify this ranking (Ermakoff 2008, 316). In some instances, the actor determines by herself which type of outcomes should have priority, and she finds the resilience to remain committed to this ranking. The stabilization of preferences over outcomes amounts to a metadecision that the actor enacts on her own in an autonomous fashion.

Most often, however, strategies of uncertainty reduction draw on other agents' efforts. Two scenarios are conceivable. Both make one class of outcomes more salient than the others. In the first scenario, some agents come up with a definition of the situation that sets one type of outcomes as referential, and this definition appears to receive wide acceptance. The individual actor aligns. In the second scenario, salience is induced by the social relations in which the individual actor is involved.

Consider the behavioral oscillation that some parliamentarians report in their accounts of the Vichy 1940 events. Gradually, as they interacted with one another in the parks, the alleys, and the grand casino (transformed into a parliament), and as they shared their concerns and expressed their anxiety, status considerations among parliamentary peers gained phenomenological salience while regime and political representation issues receded to the background (Ermakoff 2008, 241). The content of their interactions—saturated with peer relations—induced the way in which they were prioritizing the types of outcomes at stake.

What about cognitive uncertainty? How do actors get over it? That is, how do they figure out what are the options and which possible "states of the world" they should be considering? Again, two scenarios are possible. The first one describes an individual actor observing how people react to the disruption and then assessing options and possible consequences in light of this behavioral information. The second scenario depicts actors seeking their cues from one another. Coordination is "epistemic" (Ermakoff 2010, 545–48).

Regarding epistemic coordination, three points are worth underscoring. First, agents adopting a wait-and-see attitude when their routine world becomes problematic behave in a way that is strategic and rational. Their irresolution testifies to a shared sense of caution. Looking for definitional clues before opting for a behavioral stance, they signal that in their view any unconditional move on their part would unduly expose themselves. Second, the process whereby agents coordinate on a shared definition of the situation requires a great deal of assessment and inference making. For instance, agents can form a mental representation of the situation in light of the statements

and behavioral cues provided by highly visible actors (Ermakoff 2008, chapter 6). In so doing, they demonstrate their ability to appraise the situation in interactive terms.¹⁹ Third, and this point follows from the previous one, dynamics of interaction should also be understood in cognitive terms. I now address this third point with an analysis of self-deception.

SELF-DECEPTION

Rational action implies an active and reflexive engagement with the evidence available. We gauge the extent to which an actor's beliefs can be deemed rational by considering whether they are grounded in the information available and in the search for additional information when required (Elster 1989, 30; 2007, 191). Approaches cast in terms of subjective rationality (Boudon 1996, 2003, 2007; Opp 2013) or heuristics (Gigerenzer 2008) expand this line of research by examining the cognitive logics underlying information processing. Inferences may be biased yet consistent with well-established cognitive patterns.

Self-deception, however, is a radical departure from an assumption of logical or cognitive consistency because, as the actor deceives herself, she denies to herself information that she knows to be true. "If our subject *persuades* [herself] to believe contrary to the evidence *in order to evade*, somehow, the unpleasant truth to which she has already seen that the evidence points, then and only then is she clearly a self-deceiver" (Fingarette 1969, 28; emphasis in text). Self-deception is a "hot" mistake, "hot" in the sense of "being motivated" by one's desire (Elster 2007, 133). At issue is the capacity to ignore information directly relevant to one's choice.

Two questions come to the fore. The first concerns whether such a move can be construed as "rational." At face value, deceiving oneself contradicts a basic premise of Rational Choice, which states that a rational individual seeks to make the best use of the information available. Is there ground to argue that the deliberate suppression of relevant information might serve a strategy consistent with a well-ordered set of preferences? The second question concerns the feasibility of willful acts of information suppression. Analysts of various stripes have pointed out the phenomenological puzzle lodged at the heart of self-deception. The actor simultaneously knows and ignores what she knows. Self-deception is a "conflict state" (Penelhum 1966, 258). How can it be possible?

Falsifying Beliefs

Is there room for self-deception in a Rational Choice framework? Two scenarios are conceivable. In the first one, the actor develops an interest in deceiving herself because she is confronted with facts that are costly to acknowledge: these facts are at odds with what she would like to believe. As a result, she experiences dissonance. In suppressing her knowledge, she suppresses the immediate source of her dissonance. The act is rational insofar as it is geared to a principle of cost minimization. A second scenario depicts the actor endorsing a belief that she knows to be false "because of the good consequences of holding it" (Elster 2007, 134). For instance, the actor seeks to shield herself from a certain kind of behavior and, for this purpose, willfully inflates the risks associated with this behavior (Elster 2007, 134).

Whether we are considering cost avoidance or self-management, both readings stumble on the issue of self-persuasion. It is not enough to decide to suppress, or to invent, knowledge. Self-deception implies a genuine act of self-persuasion that remains puzzling given the actor's initial state of knowledge. "Unless the process has a *self-erasing component*, by which the origin of the belief in the desire to acquire it is eliminated from the conscious mind, the desire is likely to remain a mere wish" (Elster 2007, 134; emphasis in text). The key question here pertains to the feasibility of self-deception.

"Selective Inattention"

How could the actor decide no longer to know what she knows? Elster (1983, 149) mentions "massive clinical, fictional and everyday experience attesting to the reality of the phenomenon." Numerous examples testify to its pervasiveness in the realm of politics (Schumpeter 1942, chapter XXI). The clue to the paradox, I suggest, is to be found in the interactional underpinnings of framing and belief formation. Self-deception demonstrates the extent to which the truth content that the actor imputes to a much-desired belief is a function of its framing and the credibility that this frame receives from peers and significant others. This argument applies more broadly to mistaken beliefs that, on the face of the available evidence, should objectively be hard to believe. Here are the main claims.

1. Self-deception is possible if the actor is capable of cognitively manipulating the salience of the information she has to deal with. This means, if she has the ability to foreground information that backs up the belief in which she has a vested interest and to background pieces of information that challenge, undermine, or contradict this belief. The structuring of information through a grid of salience is the stuff proper of frames. We process multiple bits of information by framing them, that is, by making them more or less worthy of attention. A frame, minimally defined as a schema of interpretation, organizes salience (Tversky and Kahneman 1986, S257). By the same token, it generates "selective inattention" (Sullivan 1953, 170).
2. From this perspective, we may conceive self-deception as conditional on the adoption of an interpretive frame that downplays the significance of the evidence we want to ignore or falsify. We relegate these pieces of information to the background of our awareness. Reinterpreted along these lines, self-deception is a reconfiguration of knowledge. Its cognitive *tour de force* implies a shift in frame and, conjointly, a shift in differential valence. In the imposition of a grid of salience lies the possibility of self-deception. The analytical challenge is to specify the factors that make this shift possible.
3. Correlatively, this conception restates the genesis of willful ignorance. We do not "suddenly" deny and forget. Nor do we, properly speaking, "ignore" or falsify our knowledge. Such a move is bound to be self-defeating in the same way the injunction "be spontaneous!" is bound to miss the mark. Rather, we put this knowledge at bay and gradually lose sight of it (unless of course some unwanted piece of information thrusts itself in a way impossible to ignore). Simultaneously, we downgrade the value of this knowledge so that to make it less salient, less worthy of attention, less noticeable, and by way of consequence, less memorable. The downplaying of items of information is a possibility closely linked to the way in which we process information.
4. Although these few remarks identify the cognitive process whereby self-deception becomes possible, they do not specify the conditions under which this process is likely to take effect. What makes a shift in frames possible when the actor is seeking to suppress unpleasant information? The claim here is that the actor is in a position to give credence to an interpretive frame that backgrounds the "unpleasant" information when she can assume that others among peers and significant others endorse it as well (Ermakoff 2008, 319–22). Cognitive effectiveness is indexed on social credibility (Lewin and Grabbe 1945, 57). The corollary of this hypothesis is that the actor has a hard time deceiving herself when she gets reminded of the information she wants to conceal.

1. Self-deception is possible if the actor is capable of cognitively manipulating the salience of the information she has to deal with. This means, if she has the ability to foreground information that backs up the belief in

Misrepresenting the Nazi Threat

Consider German politicians convincing themselves in the spring of 1933 that Hitler, at the helm of a coalition government since January 30, 1933, embodied the moderate side of Nazism and that a political *modus vivendi* with the Nazis was possible. The point applies in the first place to the political representatives of German Catholics. At the end of March 1933, Prelate Föhr, a parliamentary delegate of the Center Party—the political voice of German Catholics—described the cooperation of the center in the new Reich a “duty” (Evans 1981, 387; Morsey 1960, 369). In early April (April 5, 1933), the *Kölnische Volkszeitung*—one of the most widely read Catholic newspapers—published a long article, entitled “The Path of the Center Party” (*Der Weg des Zentrums*) most likely written by the party chairman, Ludwig Kaas, about the possibility of an “objective collaboration” between the Center Party and the Hitler government.²⁰

The author explained that a “passive abstinence” toward contemporary political developments would not fulfill the “political imperative of the time.”²¹ Consequently, Catholics were to partake in the construction of the new state. The task was to reconstruct Germany and to put an end to its status of pariah in the realm of international relations. Tellingly, Carl Bachem, historian of the Center Party and former parliamentary delegate who remained in close contact with the party leadership, observed in his personal notes dated April 24, 1933: “from all sides we hear voices that seek an understanding with the National Socialists, in order to promote within this movement our religious ideals as much as we can.”²²

Catholic leaders’ resoluteness to collaborate with the Nazis rested on several correlated premises. The first was that German Catholics shared with Hitler an interest in reviving the nation within and abroad. The second claim was that Hitler could be trusted. The third was that a *modus vivendi* with the Nazi leadership could be reached. And the fourth premise, capping this ideological construction, was that collaboration was possible and necessary to achieve this *modus vivendi*. These premises were the basic idea elements of an interpretation of the political conjuncture which I call the “frame of national collaboration.”

There is no indication that the representatives calling for collaboration with Hitler were playing a cynical game. If the point was to buy time, these representatives could have adopted a cautious wait-and-see attitude without compromising themselves. The decision to ask Catholics to dutifully collaborate with the system of rule implemented by the Nazis indicated a faithful play on their part. Primary evidence testifies to this point. Significant in this

regard was Kaas’s diary account of his exchange with von Papen, the vice-chancellor, in early April on his way to Rome: Kaas’s offer of collaboration was in good faith.²³

The striking fact is that this assessment of the political situation blatantly contradicted these representatives’ previous diagnoses of Nazism (Ermakoff 2008, 141–43). Numerous statements delivered until March 1933 indicate that the political representatives of German Catholics had clearly assessed the totalitarian character of the Nazis’ claim to state power. Central to this assessment of the Nazi threat before April 1933 were the beliefs that (1) Hitler’s claims to state power were exclusive ones, (2) his rule would mean the suppression of fundamental individual rights, and (3) Nazism represented a fundamental ideological challenge to Catholicism.

In light of this assessment of the threat posed by the Nazis, the subsequent belief that accommodation was possible represented a significant turnaround. In assuming that it was possible to compromise with Hitler, the representatives of the Catholic parties decided to downplay what they knew about the Nazi Party and the threat it represented. In so doing, they deceived themselves.

A close focus on the workings of self-deceiving beliefs invites us to investigate how agents form, and commit to, their beliefs. Given agents’ ability to misrepresent what they know, a theory of choice-making cannot make the economy of a theory of belief formation. In this respect, the argument presented in this section expands and complements claims central to the bounded rationality approach and prospect theory by underscoring the conditions under which agents can successfully shift to a frame of interpretation downplaying the pieces of information they want to suppress.²⁴ Self-deception is a test case that lays bare a crucial underpinning of belief formation. It is heuristically fruitful because it is a test case.

CONCLUSIONS

While axiomatic theories of rational choice have been empirically battered, less specific versions of the theory run the risk of being “empty” or tautological. A modal approach, as I have conceptualized it, makes rational choice at once empirically traceable and realistic. Modes of action can be identified in light of specific empirical subjective orientations such as, in the case of rational choice, the reflexive effort to assess consequences in light of an optimization criterion. There is no reason to assume that optimization is the dominant mode across contexts, even when the focus is on small and routine

worlds. There is every reason to believe, on the other hand, that this mode of action comes to the fore when both incentives and cognitive conditions intersect to make it motivationally relevant.

This essay has emphasized the heuristic fruitfulness of this approach by tackling research problems that stand on the frontiers of the standard model but speak to core sociological issues. First, how can we explain actors' endorsing norms curtailing their capacity to maximize their interests ("self-limiting norms")? Second, how do individuals determine a line of conduct in nonroutine and disruptive situations? Third, what accounts for agents' ability to engage in self-deception? The first question raises the problem of order. The second invites us to examine the flip side of order, disruption, and the possibility of rational action in conjunctures defying stable predictions. The third question sets the issue of belief formation at the center of the analytical stage.

To explain why and how a set of actors (the "target actors") agree to endorse a norm that limits their ability to realize their interests, it is not enough to argue that the norm becomes effective when the actors who benefit from its implementation (the "beneficiary actors") acquire a sanctioning capacity vis-à-vis the target actors (Coleman's bargaining model). A rational choice account brings into relief the causal significance of relational dynamics within the target group, and highlights the possibility of an endogenous shift in target actors' propensities to invoke the norm for their own strategic purposes. The key factor in this respect is whether target actors develop an interest in sanctioning one another when they deviate from the norm. They do so when relationships among them become increasingly competitive. As they invoke the norm to check their competitors, lo and behold they set it upon themselves.

Regarding problematic situations, the present essay set forth three claims. First, a modal understanding of rational choice and the microanalytical focus that this understanding induces helps pin down the types of subjective orientations emerging in these situations. Second, this approach deconstructs the broad and diffuse concept of uncertainty by considering both its mode (behavioral versus cognitive) and its referent (states of the world, options, outcomes). Third, of particular significance for our understanding of the dynamics of these situations is the question of whether, at which point, and how actors overcome the uncertainty they face.

Finally, the argument about self-deception underscores the need to elaborate a phenomenology of belief formation in order to account for the subjective makeup of rational choice. The ability to manipulate our beliefs is conditional on the adoption of an interpretive frame relegating the information

we want to ignore to the background of our awareness. Gradually, thanks to this frame, we lose sight of the "unpleasant" information. The credibility of the frame, however, rests on the shoulders of significant others and peers—those with whom we identify. Then, and contra to the standard model, we may engage in strategic action and yet be self-deceived.

NOTES

1. As a terminological convention, I capitalize *rational choice* when the term refers to the theoretical framework.

2. I would like to thank Gianluca Manzo, Karl-Dieter Opp, and the two external reviewers for their comments. The usual disqualifiers apply.

3. Contrast, for instance, Simon (1985, 294), Tversky and Kahneman (1986, S252), Gigerenzer (2008, 18–19), and Blossfeld and Prein (1998, 5) with Boudon (1996), Gintis (2009), Witter, Snijders and Nee (2013: 5), and Opp (forthcoming). The first set of authors oppose their own theoretical perspective to that of the standard Rational Choice model whereas the second set view several of these perspectives as susceptible to being subsumed to the standard model.

4. Given its referential status, we could also describe this model as the "root" model of rational choice. Neither "standard" nor "root" should be understood as evoking privileged epistemic status in contradistinction with the connotation a term such as "canonical" might suggest.

5. "Theory does not suggest that these wants are necessarily of an exclusively egotistical character. We want many things not for ourselves, but for others; and some of them, like battleships, we want for the interests of the community only" (Schumpeter 1909, 215).

6. "Rational beliefs are those that are shaped by processing the available evidence using procedures that, in the long run and on average, are most likely to yield true beliefs" (Elster 2007, 202).

7. For instance, whether the impact of a medical treatment is presented in terms of survival or death rates (Tversky and Kahneman 1986, S254–S255).

8. "In most settings, there is no plausible incentive to eliminate a bias and, hence, the effect of nonstandard behavior aggregates linearly" (DellaVigna 2009, 366). Furthermore, as Raub, Buskens and van Assen (2011, 16) remark, there is no sound theoretical ground for the claim that nonstandard deviations cancel out on the macrolevel, or the claim that macrolevel standard Rational Choice predictions are robust to various micromodels.

9. In this conception, the axiomatic model enjoys paradigmatic status: "there is no alternative to the traditional decision-theoretic model on the horizon, and there is not likely to be one, for one simple reason: the theory is mostly correct, and where it fails, the principles accounting for failure are complementary to, rather than destructive of, the standard theory" (Gintis 2009, 246).

10. "Rational-choice theory is commonly identified by the assumption that preferences

and constraints affect behavior and, most importantly, that individuals optimize in some ways" (Opp 1999, 176).

11. "When faced with a choice among various courses of action, . . . individuals will choose the course of action that, given the information available to them, *and their ability to process it*, they think will produce maximum utility" (Hechter 1987, 30; my emphasis).

12. For instance, Wittek, Snijders, and Nee (2013) view Bounded Rationality as an integral part of the Rational Choice framework. They also acknowledge that not all the insights yielded by a cognitivist approach are compatible with the standard model's core claims. "By elaborating on the cognitive foundations of human decision-making (that is, rendering assumptions about the intrapersonal antecedents of behavior more complex), research following this strategy arrives at surprising hypotheses and insights, which sometimes are at odds with the predictions of the standard model, and sometimes can be incorporated into it" (Wittek, Snijders, and Nee 2013, 5). How can the cognitivist conception of rationality be at once in and out of Rational Choice?

13. As these few remarks indicate, the major drawback of a framework cast in terms of "good reasons" is its lack of exposure to empirical refutations. Conjointly, it provides no hint of how we might derive predictive claims (Manzo 2012, 39).

14. "A conscious mode of action whereby actors intentionally select a course of action after having assessed the probable consequences of alternative options" (Ermakoff 2010, 541).

15. For an analytical description of the type of behavioral clues that can be expected when the ideological mode is at play, see Ermakoff (2008, chapter 5).

16. For concrete instances of a dynamic analysis of relational configurations and the identification of situational logics this analysis makes possible, see Ermakoff (2008, 2015). *Ruling Oneself Out* identifies the "logic of situations" conducive to drastic collective alignments by reference to the notions of critical decisions and mutual uncertainty (Ermakoff 2008, xxvi). Likewise, "The Structure of Contingency" identifies the situational logic of moments of indeterminacy endogenous to collective processes by theorizing these moments as instances of a "configuration of relations . . . hollowed out by the exacerbation of interdependence in the absence of a group stance" (Ermakoff 2015, 67).

17. "As long as individuals are involved in routine choice and hence have consistent preferences, they can be modeled as maximizing an objective function subject to constraints" (Gintis 2009, 236).

18. "Moments of disruption compel individuals to bring assumption about themselves and others to the fore of their consciousness" (Ermakoff 2010, 541).

19. These remarks complement arguments on the significance of "frame activation"—the so-called Model of Frame Selection formulated by Esser (2001, 2009) and formalized by Kronenberg (2005)—by focusing on the interactive underpinnings of frame emergence if by "frame" we mean how the members of a collective define the situation.

20. This article is anonymous. A short note simply indicates that the author belongs to the leading circle of the Center Party. As Becker (1961, 195) persuasively argues, there are strong reasons to believe that Ludwig Kaas is the author of this piece.

21. "Eine solche [passive Abstinenz] würde [nicht] . . . dem staatspolitischen Imperativ der Stunde entsprochen haben." *Kölnische Volkszeitung*, April 5, 1933.

22. Stadt Archiv Köln, Cologne, Nachlaß Bachem, 1006–859, handwritten notes dated April 1933.

23. Bundesarchiv, Coblenz, KL. Erwerb. Nr. 190–2.

24. "The narrowness of the span of attention accounts for a great deal of human unreason that considers only one facet of a multifaceted matter before a decision is reached" (Simon 1984, 302).

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Systems in Social Theory

DIRK BAECKER

TECHNICAL VERSUS SOCIAL

There are no easy definitions of systems. Earlier definitions, such as "elements constituting a whole," "structures performing functions demanded (or at least tolerated) by a whole," or "boundaries open with respect to energy and closed with respect to information," all involve a certain degree of ontological thinking, which suggests that systems are indeed out there. In fact, engineers may be able to build systems relying on the establishment of causal connections between parts and operations, containing these connections within some apparatus isolated from them, and describing them as logical ones (Gibson 2011). In social theory, however, dealing with systems means dealing with issues of ambiguous or equivocal communication. There are causal connections—in fact, a myriad of them—but they do not constitute systems. Causal connections happen to them, are experienced by them, are among the material a social systems theory works with, yet the emergence of a social system is a question of links established by actions considered as communication indicating the possibility of further communication.

This chapter starts by looking a little closer at the difficulty involved in defining a system in social theory, briefly revisits the history of the idea of systems in sociological theory, proceeds by giving some examples of type, looks at the history of human society and at a systems theory of contemporary society, and concludes with some comments on a systems methodology for social research.