

Explanation Explained

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The quality of an explanation depends much on the relationship between the sociologist and her informants. The more unequal it is, the more she will resort to “third person” explanations—a tendency most visible among the fathers of the discipline. Yet listening to the actors does not necessarily mean turning to a “soft” sociology—because actors are able to map and explain the social space in which they live.

Reviewed: John Levi Martin, *The Explanation of Social Action*, Oxford University Press, 2011, 416 p., \$35.

“How do we explain things? When have we done a good job?” (p. 3). Sociologists have no satisfactory answers to these questions. What they have are very poor answers that no one, put on the spot, would think of taking literally. To save face, sociologists never miss an opportunity to declare that of course things do not really play out as they explain. They revel in conditionals such as “everything happens as if,” “all things held constant,” or “*mutatis mutandis*.” But what are explanations worth that are not even meant to be realistic? This problem has often been acknowledged, without provoking any reaction. As observed elsewhere by the author of this exceptional essay, sociologists seem to “operate on the Warner Brothers’ principle that even if you have run off a cliff and there is nothing under your feet, you will not actually fall so long as you do not look down.”¹

¹ <http://understandingsocietyglobaledition.wordpress.com/2012/03/02/response-to-little-by-john-levi-martin>

Martin is professor of sociology at the [University of Chicago](#). He is the author of several well-noted articles that successfully combine innovating formal methods with original subject-matters, such as the division of labor between animals [in a children's book](#). He is also a first-class theorist. His previous book, *Social Structures*,² received the prestigious *Theory Prize* of the *American Sociological Association*. But Martin's new volume draws much from French authors (in particular Merleau-Ponty). It also criticizes intellectual traditions firmly rooted in French sociology. Finally, it sparks an original dialogue with the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, and has strong affinities with Laurent Thévenot and Luc Boltanski's pragmatic sociology.

Sociological Explanations, Good and Bad

Martin starts with the observation that sociologists have a morbid attraction for “third-person” explanations (chapter 1). This is the kind of explanation we give of other people's action, when we attribute what they do to imaginary entities, such as capitalism or patriarchy, after rejecting as a naïveté the “first-person” account that they could give us themselves for what they are doing. Then again the Kantian first and third-person terminology is not completely adequate, concedes Martin. While there is indeed a person in first-person explanations, the existence of individuals as autonomous subjects is negated by third-person explanations, which describe humans as passive objects bombarded by external forces. Still, it so happens that when we describe other people's actions using the third-person, we usually deny that they acted for the reasons they say, while we readily grant ourselves our own reasons, when we describe in the first-person what we are doing. Of course, it may happen that in examining our past record, we retrospectively treat ourselves as would a critical spectator. Now, although similar observations have been made by Boltanski before,³ Martin does not conclude from them, as does the latter, that actors in a situation of justification are best capable of accounting for what they do; quite the opposite, he argues that this is where the temptation to blame it on external forces is the most irresistible.

Contrary to what the reader might expect at this point, Martin does not go from rejecting third-person explanations to yet another crusade against explicative sociology in the name of some ultimate version of softer-than-soft comprehensive sociology. In fact, he shows

² John Levi Martin, *Social Structures*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2009, 408 p.

³ Luc Boltanski, *L'Amour et la justice comme compétences. Trois essais de sociologie de l'action*, 1990, Paris, Métailié, p.130-132.

that third-person explanations are chained to absurd conceptions of causality (chapter 2). First-person explanations, far from eschewing causality, serve it better.

Why do sociologists as a rule reject first-person explanations, then? And where did we get the idea that science requires breaking with common experience? The culprits are well-known. First, Charcot and Freud popularized the theoretical trump card that proves scientists right with or without their subjects' approval: if research subjects accept their explanations, then the former are right; but if the same subjects offer any resistance, their denial is also taken as confirming evidence (chapter 3). Second, it is partly Durkheim but mostly the neo-Durkheimians whom Martin blames for reducing common sense to some kind of cultural arbitrariness which science should divorce with a vengeance (chapter 4). Martin neatly dismantles this epistemology of rupture; he also takes this opportunity to bash three scientific "myths" that are often used to support cultural relativism: the infinity of words to describe snow among the Eskimos,⁴ the relativity of zoological classifications across societies, the existence of a third sex among certain Amerindian tribes. This is one of the most humorous parts of the book (which is, by and large, witty and fun to read).

After taking stock of the antidemocratic epistemology that sociologists have inherited from Freudianism and Durkheimianism, Martin turns to three intellectual traditions which have taken first-person explanations more seriously (chapter 5): Gestalt psychology, Vygotskian activity theory and American pragmatism. In these traditions, actors' judgments about the world are not arbitrary at all; they are not relative to a cultural grid of interpretation, varying across societies; on the contrary, they are grounded in reality, in things themselves, or more exactly in the relations between things and the actors who perceive and act on them. If the edge of a cliff looks more menacing as I get closer, it is because I can fall. And if the cliff looks much safer from the beach, it is not because I have changed the pair of cultural glasses I am supposed to be wearing; it is that I am objectively no longer in danger of falling. According to where I stand, my perception will change then, and for all intents, the object I perceive will have changed its nature.

The analysis of these traditions ultimately calls for a "sociology of judgment" (chapter 6). Here Martin makes due reference to Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, who have

⁴ Also see Emilie L'Hôte, « [Alice au pays des langues](#) », *La Vie des idées*, 30 janvier 2012

proposed a similar orientation in *On Justification*.⁵ But instead of following, as do the latter, a practical wisdom going back and forth between orders of generality and concrete situations, Martin connects actors' motivation to the positions they occupy in relation to one another in an organized space. In other words, Martin brings in field theory. This was already Bourdieu's solution to the problem of explaining social action. But Martin does not go back to Bourdieu uncritically. In effect, the latter is guilty of the two faults Martin criticized in previous chapters. Roughly speaking, then, Martin proposes a field theory expurgated from Durkheim and Freud, and instead insists on the compatibility between the way the world is organized for us and our capacity to produce judgments about the world. Martin calls this a relation of "ontological complicity," altering the meaning of a phrase coined by Bourdieu, as this complicity, in his view, is not something we should be suspicious of; more reasonably, it is the foundation of actors' motivation as well as of all successful critique of the social world (chapter 7). Martin, borrowing from Dewey, calls "habit" the attainment of this ontological complicity, instead of "habitus," Bourdieu's own term (for reasons discussed below). This choice of word is not unambiguous, concedes Martin (as did Dewey), because this mutual adjustment is not always a quiet routine.

According to Martin, the transformations of this mutual adjustment can be summarized as a succession of moves between positions in an organized social space, i.e. in a field. Two metaphors allow us to understand how fields work (chapter 8): sociological fields can interchangeably be compared to force fields and to game fields. The first metaphor comes from physics, the second from playing. We know this all too well, but probably not for the right reasons: thus, what is common in a sociological field and a force field is not so much unequal balance of power, as the idea of action at a distance between separate objects; likewise, sociological fields and game fields are not similar in that they obey sets of rules, but in that in both cases people play without a manual on their knees; rules need not be made explicit because players act according to indexical references perceived in the field (thus the threatening appearance of the cliff vigorously stops me from taking one more step—begging the question [going back to Martin's comment on the Warner Bros' principle]: why do sociologists eagerly jump over the edge?). A field, then, is not just another abstract

⁵ Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006.

sociological construct, because the constitutive elements of a field all have a concrete equivalent in the environment that actors actually perceive.

The last chapter proposes to retool the explicative power of sociologists with first-person explanations, such as those that seem acceptable when accounting for our actions to others. But this does not mean that we should indiscriminately buy whatever actors say. Actors, too, occasionally make the mistake of explaining their actions and those of others in the third-person. A good explanation must pass over such mistaken explanations (often creeping in a posteriori justifications), which are no better than sociologists' third-person explanations.

Furthermore, this does not mean that a good explanation should be limited to micro entities; it can legitimately make reference to large entities such as the army, the Republican Party or the IRS, so long as these entities actually enter our field of perception. Although they do not have well-defined contours, large entities may still serve as coordinates to our actions (precisely because they are so big), manifesting themselves somewhat like a mountain or an island: you cannot miss them, even though you cannot exactly say where they begin and where they end.

At bottom, then, a good sociological explanation is no different from a good explanation between friends or colleagues. Indeed, all explanations, lay or scientific, are social situations; they are more or less egalitarian relationships in which one person attempts to make another one get it. Thus the value of any particular sociological explanation is strongly related to the kind of relationship sociologists try to establish with the people they investigate. The more unequal that relationship the more it will tend to produce third-person explanations and abstract entities. The founders of sociology enthusiastically multiplied these entities to explain complexity away, but as the whimsicality of this method is no longer accepted, we now ask actors to confabulate for us. This is not a step forward: we have only delegated the production of third-person explanations. The real solution is to stick to these elements which have phenomenological validity for actors. This does not imply that we should restrict our attention to each actor's narrow field of perception. One advantage of field theory is that it combines in a coherent fashion the perspective of each and every one in a big picture. Without going so far as unveiling the doings of hidden entities, we may thus make

visible things that are not necessarily seen by all, because not everything appears in plain sight. This is in fact what Martin himself does, when he shows that abstract, third-person explanations are, in the final analysis, concrete social situations in which the inequality between laypeople and sociologists is seen only by the latter, who cultivate it.

Sociology of Judgment, Sociological Aesthetics and Critique

Martin notes on several occasions that his project shares much with Thévenot and Boltanski's own blend of pragmatic sociology (p. 108, 194-196, 227, 248, 332, 344). Like them, he calls for a sociology of judgment. Like them also, he suggests critical orientations that do not purport to unveil the power of hidden entities. But while Thévenot and Boltanski have grounded their theory of *moral* judgment in the ethics of public justification, Martin is interested in a theory of *perceptive* judgments, based on a sociological "aesthetics." This program, however, is not wholly incompatible with more recent developments within French pragmatic sociology. Thévenot, in particular, has extended the model he initially developed with Boltanski, to take into account the situational ecology of judgment, using the concept of "setting" (*dispositif*).⁶ Settings organize actors' environment by preselecting relevant forms of judgment. Without going into details, Martin gives a somewhat comparable function to the concept of institution. But according to him, the study of actors' judgment cannot be limited to the more or less formalized equipments that may be serviceable to them, when push comes to shove, because in the majority of cases, actors make do without them. In practice, actors do not often need these collective equipments because they are capable of finding their way in social space according to the position they occupy in relation to the things and beings they perceive around them. It is this ordinary capacity to simplify reality that makes field theory useful: indeed a major advantage of field theory is that it schematizes reality in a way that dovetails with how actors do it themselves.

This is not the only advantage of field theory; it also allows asking questions that sociologists in the pragmatic tradition have often ignored, because they got ready-made aesthetics, from James and Dewey, which may have been exaggeratedly optimistic about

⁶ Laurent Thévenot, *L'Action au pluriel. Sociologie des régimes d'engagement*, Paris, La Découverte, 2006, 310 p.

actors' capacity to react to all the misfortunes that may befall them.⁷ Of course, other sociologists, starting with Bourdieu, have been overly pessimistic in return. But at bottom, Dewey and Bourdieu really drew opposite consequences from similar conceptions of critique: for both of them, critique is a superior regime of reflexivity, disentangled from the habitual dynamics of action, and most importantly, it is considered successful when it makes these derail. Now, as Martin laconically suggests, well-conducted critique does not aim at suppressing our habits, even the most monotonous; instead it uses them (what else?) to change the world. In short, critique does not mean taking a step back. Hence, it may not be the privilege of the sociologist judging action at a distance.

Although this suggestion is appealing, the reader only gets a taste of it. Martin rapidly sketches his ideas about critique in a digression of chapter 7 and a "Coda" in the final chapter, which he recommends skipping to those of his readers who cannot help but roll their eyes whenever they hear of critical sociology. Sacrificing to that audience, these sections may leave more enthusiastic readers hungry for more.

Other threads of the book are also left hanging. By replacing Bourdieu's concept of habitus with Dewey's habit, for instance, Martin exchanges a vocabulary that does not quite capture what he has in mind for one that does not do much better. While Bourdieu's habitus is bodily and unconsciously pegged to actors (as noted by Martin), Dewey's concept of habit hollows out in a continually changing environment: in other words, habitus resists external pressure, but habits adapt to it. Neither idea is appropriate to the kind of field theory Martin develops, I would suggest. Because Martin defends the idea that fields have an "obduracy" of their own (p.180, 231, 305, 337), his theory downplays the hysteresis effect of habitus, namely its resistance to external changes (a central feature of Bourdieu's field theory). But this should also mean by the same token that our ontological complicity with the world has more to do with the latter being made for us (as argued on p. 203) than with our being habituated to it (which Martin, somewhat contradictorily, later claims on p. 266).

⁷ Also see, Joan Stavo-Debaugé, "Des 'événements' difficiles à encaisser. Un pragmatisme pessimiste," in Daniel Cefaï, Cédric Terzi (eds.), *L'expérience des problèmes public*, Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS (« Raisons Pratiques », 22), 2012, p. 191-224.

While Martin may still be furbishing the concept of habitus,⁸ he has successfully carried out a splendid revitalization of field theory. Not only has he freed it from the elements which may have given it a dogmatic character in the past, he has also provided it with a strong and coherent conceptual base. If new elaborations of field theory are desirable, they should really begin here, rather than with the bizarre ideas Bourdieu inherited from Freudian psychoanalysis and Durkheimian sociology of knowledge. Martin's arguments should make us especially wary of the current temptation to retain from Bourdieu only his impatient rejection of actors' judgments and his quest for a transcendental critique of reality. Although *The Explanation of Social Action* offers a less grandiose project, it is one that is both more realistic and more defensible.

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⁸ [Martin's personal website](#) indicates that he has a forthcoming piece on habitus.