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**INTENTIONAL, UNINTENTIONAL AND SUB-INTENTIONAL ASPECTS OF SOCIAL
MECHANISMS AND RATIONALITY.**

The Example of Commitments in Political Life

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Abstract

In this paper, I criticize recent programs and sub-programs in analytical sociology regarding the lack of attention they pay to the issues of rationality and intentionality. I put forward the idea that the rationalist paradigm in social sciences is not reducible to Rational Choice Theory. I also argue that establishing a dichotomy between intentional and unintentional processes is too simplistic: we also need to consider sub-intentional processes. Indeed, I focus in particular on interpersonal commitment (e.g. shipmates committed with each other to row as much efficiently as possible), a kind of social process that may be either intentional or sub-intentional. I then explore the empirical relevance of this conception of commitment by analyzing several historical examples - borrowed from contemporary processes of decolonization and secession - of political commitments or alleged commitments.

Introduction.

I would like to tackle, from within the framework of analytical sociology, two closely related issues in the social sciences: rationality and intentionality. I understand analytical sociology as aiming to *decompose* social phenomena into their elementary components (beliefs, preferences, emotions, relations of trust, relations of authority, social norms, systems of relations, organizations, institutions, states, etc.) and their elementary mechanisms (aggregation, coordination, cooperation, conflict, segregation, secession, etc.). This project includes the analysis of the various sequences that may compose a mechanism (triggering events, domino effects, cascade effects, threshold effects, feedback effects, etc.). The idea of analytical sociology is closely connected with Robert Merton's ideal of constructing, step-by-step, "middle-range theories" or micro-models of phenomena, instead of, on the one hand, creating a global theory aiming at understanding all social phenomena under a set of very few basic concepts or, on the other hand, writing mere narratives.

Although the issues of rationality and intentionality have been investigated at length and in various ways by Thomas Schelling (1978a, b), Jon Elster (1979, 1983), Raymond Boudon (1982, 1994) and James Coleman (1990), who are often viewed as precursors of analytical sociology, these two related issues have been addressed, on the contrary, only cursorily in the *Handbook of Analytical Sociology* (Hedström and Bearman, 2009b) (Bouvier, 2011b). Thus, in their introductory chapter, Bearman and Hedström (2009) criticize the Hempel model of explanation in such an expeditious way that they entirely ignore Hempel and Dray's debate (in particular Hempel's response to Dray's objections in 1962). This debate concerned the role of "good reasons" and "generative mechanisms" in relation to Hempel's other models of explanation in social science. In a more recent publication, Hedström and Ylikoski (2014) establish a close connection between these issues of rationality and intentionality by harshly criticizing Rational Choice Theory. They argue that RCT assumes that actions are necessarily purposive (or "intentional") and contrast it with functionalist theories in

psychology, in particular Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance reduction (Festinger, 1957).¹In fact, the latter, according to the authors, turn out to be at least as relevant to the social sciences as the RCT. Within this context, they understand RCT so broadly that they include Boudon's theory, without mentioning that Boudon's (1996, 2003) theory of "good reasons" goes far beyond RCT.² Indeed, the intentionality issue itself may not be quite as simple as Hedström and Ylikoski seem to think. There may be intermediary mental states between intentional and completely unintentional mental states; and we should perhaps make room for *sub-intentional* states and for *sub-conscious* intentions. Friedrich Hayek's work (1952, 1962) is potentially very fruitful here; although neglected in the recent social sciences, it has proved to be seminal in the cognitive sciences. Furthermore, there have been various interpretations of cognitive dissonance reduction processes and one of them is that the process at issue might be interpreted, at least sometimes, in terms of *commitments* (Heider, 1958, Kiesler, 1971) – that is as *intentional* or, perhaps more accurately, *sub-intentional* processes – instead of purely *unintentional* functional processes. These sub-intentionalist theories of commitments fit in well with Hayek's views.

Gianluco Manzo, editor of the volume in which the Hedström and Ylikoski paper was published, outlines a more open view of the scope of analytical sociology (Manzo, 2014b) although there is no specific mention of the debate between Hempel and Dray nor of Hayek's idea of sub-intentional procedures. In particular, Manzo suggests not only that explanation by "good reasons" has a place within analytical sociology, but also that it is compatible with cognitive functional explanations (p. 21-27). However, Manzo highlights a very specific sub-program of analytical sociology (p.6), which explicitly emphasizes the role of agent-based computational modeling (p.7-10) and, generally speaking, formal modeling (in particular graph theory). While I do not contest the legitimacy of such a sub-program, I suggest that its specific focus does not address the issues of rationality and intentionality in detail. Furthermore, in mentioning that "the two theoretical pillars of analytical sociology" are "actions and networks" and that "analytical sociology is all about the complex interplay between 'actions' and 'networks' (and social structures more generally)" (Manzo, p. 6), Manzo emphasizes the place of network analysis to such an extent that social structures (which include organizations, institutions, States, etc.) seem reducible to mere networks. In other words, macro-sociology becomes reducible to meso-ciology or even to a certain kind of meso-ciology (meso-sociology not being entirely about networks). In this chapter, I will focus on the micro-level - what Manzo prefers to call "actions" - and, still more specifically, on how individual actions may become collective. I will also show the effect of individual actions and interactions at the macro-level of states, exploring how micro-events may trigger macro-events such as secession of states and decolonization processes, thereby examining the link between micro-sociology and macro-sociology (See Schelling, 1978 a, Bouvier, 2011a). Meso-sociology, since it focuses on informal relationships and informal groups as well as intermediate institutions, will fit in this three-tiered framework.

Independently of the specific debate on the issues of intentionality and rationality I have discussed, the concept of commitment is interesting more generally speaking. Recently, it has been one of the most widely used in the social sciences, although with various meanings. We see it in the social psychology of Heider and Kiesler, the economics of Amartya Sen (1977) and the social philosophy of Margaret Gilbert (1989), to take only a few examples.³ However, despite this interest, the phenomena that the concept of commitment is meant to describe have not yet been investigated from the perspective of analytical sociology (with the partial exception of Schelling and Elster's examination of pre-commitments). I maintain that the concept of commitment deserves at least as

¹ The authors also mention Tversky, Kahneman and Slovic (1980), Milgram (1963). One could probably add Sperber (2006, 2011).

² The standard version of RCT in sociology (e.g. Coleman, 1990) stipulates that rationality is adaptation of means to ends (or pragmatic – or strategic - rationality) and that ends are material well-being (the "maximization of utilities").

³ For a useful survey, see also Peters & Spiekermann (2011).

much attention as that of trust, which has been the object of much work in analytical sociology (Gambetta, 1988, Coleman, 1990, Cook & Gerbasi, 2009).

The widespread interest in the concept of commitment – and in particular interpersonal commitment - in the social sciences is understandable by the fact that *commitments* may be a better “cement” of sociality⁴, along with the more passive interiorization of norms *via* processes such as *habitus*⁵, than the mere calculation of material self-interest. Symmetrically, the *lack of commitments* may greatly impede the functioning of social and even economic life.⁶ Furthermore, *violations of commitments* may be one of the sources of major violent conflicts. In fact, violations of commitments in particular may act as *triggering events* to a chain of almost unavoidable other events - that is, as components of particularly obvious social *mechanisms*.

The first section will be devoted to set forth the relevant general philosophical background necessary to ground the issues of rationality and intentionality within an analytical sociological framework. In the second section, I will investigate intentional commitments in relation to the issue of rationality. In the third section, I will describe interpersonal commitments that involve sub-intentions, and thereby challenge those authors who set up a simple contrast between intentionalist and purely unintentionalist theories. In the fourth section, I will outline an analysis of historical case studies illustrating the processes theoretically investigated in the third section.

I. Generative mechanisms, RCT and good reasons. Conscious, unconscious and sub-conscious rationality.

In this first section, I plan to clarify two fruitful ideas: the idea of explanation by “good reasons” and the idea of explanation by referring to sub-conscious or unconscious processes.

Raymond Boudon is commonly viewed as one of the precursors of analytical sociology for two main reasons: he devoted specific attention to Merton’s idea of middle-range theories (Boudon, 1991); and he tried to investigate certain elementary generative mechanisms of social inequality in modern societies (Boudon, 1974, 1982). Boudon was also a strong critic of overly narrow conceptions of rationality in the social sciences, illustrated for example by Coleman’s model of rational action (Coleman, 1990). Boudon suggested, without fully exploring in a philosophical manner, the relevance of two ideas: the idea of “good reasons” (1996, 2003) - at first glance trivial - and the idea of “meta-conscious” processes (Boudon, 1994, 1995) - at first glance obscure. I would like to show, first, that it makes sense to distinguish between three levels of mental states: conscious, sub-conscious, unconscious and, as a consequence, between intentionality, sub-intentionality (as subconscious intentionality) and absence of intentionality. Second, I would like to argue that it makes sense to speak of rationality in terms of good reasons, that is, of rationality in a much broader and more general sense than in the standard, and overly restrictive, versions of RCT that rely on the aforementioned two levels. For pedagogical reasons, I will investigate these two issues in reverse succession, with the second point before returning to the first.

1) RCT, good reasons and mechanisms

I will begin by revisiting a nowadays forgotten debate between Hempel and Dray on the kinds of explanation relevant in the social sciences. Boudon has used the notion of “good reason” a great deal in his explanation of many social phenomena since at least *The Art of Self-Persuasion* (1994) to

⁴ In *The Cement of Society*, Elster (1989) did not investigate the role of interpersonal commitments as elementary components of social life.

⁵ I have no room to discuss Bourdieu’s theory in this paper but one could easily argue that Bourdieu always hesitated on the unintentional or the sub-intentional nature of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990).

⁶ See Sen (1977).

Raison, bonnes raisons (2003). However, he only acknowledged the work of Dray in a very brief footnote and without referring to the latter's debate with Hempel (Boudon, 1994, p. 203, n.38).⁷

In 1957, Dray had contended that explanation by actors' good reasons (or "understanding") was the relevant method of explanation in the social sciences and especially in history. Contrary to what is often assumed, Carl Hempel (1962) largely agreed with Dray on the role of explanations by good reasons in social science. Where they disagreed concerned the compatibility of this kind of explanation with other modes of explanation. Indeed, for Hempel, explanations by good reasons could function in principle *within* the inductive-statistic model (largely used not only in the natural sciences, but also in demography, sociology and economics) and even within the nomologico-deductive model.⁸ Hempel argued that convincing explanations by good reasons were based on the observation of regularities in similar contexts – which is precisely what the inductive-statistic model requires –, although these observations are generally far too rare to permit rigorous statistical correlations.⁹

Hempel (1962) also referred to the "logic of the situation" (p. 28) in the sense of Popper's "situational analysis" (Popper, 1957) to specify what good reasons are: reasons that seem empirically and logically valid to a social actor *within a certain situation* – a situation that is always local and partial. In fact, most of Boudon's analyses, since at least *Le juste et le Vrai* (Boudon, 1995) can be read as brilliant empirical applications of Popper's situational analysis to a number of empirical case studies in sociology, in particular in the sociology of moral norms.

Let us define explanation by good reasons more precisely. Hempel quoted Dray: this is the "reconstruction of the agent's *calculation* of means to be adopted toward this chosen end in the light of the circumstances in which he found himself" (emphasis is Dray's) (p. 25).¹⁰ Certainly, most historians would agree with this. However, Hempel added that explanation in history and the social sciences requires - more generally - the search for generative mechanisms (Hempel spoke of "genetic explanations in history", p. 21-25).¹¹ In these few paragraphs, Hempel outlined almost the entire program of contemporary analytical sociology.¹²

To conclude, I am ready to acknowledge that the issue of knowing whether one should uphold a much larger view of RCT than the standard version (by broadening the meaning of "rational" in "Rational Choice Theory") (Opp, 2013) or go "beyond" RCT (Boudon, 2003) is - to some extent - a lexical issue, as Opp (2013) himself suggests. However, because the concept of "rational" in "RCT" is generally defined rather narrowly, it is probably preferable to forego "RCT" as a label altogether. Since "explanation by good reasons" may seem slightly too trivial, I propose instead the term "rationalist paradigm." This wording is used in history of science in this sense¹³ and refers to what

⁷ The probable background of Boudon's intuitions in Dray has been mentioned by several authors (e.g. Nadeau, 1993 and Di Nuoscio, 1996).

⁸ According to Hempel, the inductive-statistic model of explanation is itself formally reducible to the nomologico-deductive model of explanation. This is why one can speak of a "unique" model.

⁹ Hedström and Swedberg (1998) mentioned the 1962 Hempel paper (p. 8), but retained only the ideas dating back to Hempel (1942) and displaying the nomologico-deductive model.

¹⁰ Hempel also quoted Gardiner (1952, p. 136): "In general, it appears safe to say that by a man's 'real reasons' we mean those reasons he would be prepared to give under circumstances where his confession would not entail adverse consequences to himself" (Hempel, 1962, p. 30). This is what many other authors (e.g., Boudon, 1989, 1996, 2003), call: the *reconstruction* of plausible reasons.

¹¹ Hempel (1962) takes examples of "genetic explanations" in physics; the simplest one is of a falling stone (p. 23).

¹² Hedström, Swedberg and Udehn (1998), rightly emphasized the proximity between Popper and Rational Choice Theory. To my knowledge, Hempel has not been read yet with as much attention as Popper from the viewpoint of analytical sociology. I fully agree on this point with Opp (2013). Demeulenaere (2011) rightly noticed that sometimes in Hempel's accounts covering-law explanations "include mechanism-based explanations" (p. 190) but did not mention the 1962 paper and did not comment either on the Hempel-Dray debate.

¹³ See, e.g., Koyré (1971).

could be called “epistemic rationality,” or “cognitive rationality” as Boudon put it, on suggesting that means-ends rationality requires information (or knowledge) about the ends, the means available, the adaptation of these means to the ends aimed at, etc.¹⁴

2) Meta-conscious or sub-conscious processes *versus* conscious and unconscious processes.

Let us go to the issue of intentionality.

Von Mises (1949) was the main supporter of a radical demarcation line between “actions” (by definition intentional) and “behaviors” (by definition unintentional), and of the correlated idea that social sciences only deal with “actions” (while “behaviors” deal with natural sciences). However, Hayek (1952, 1962), unlike von Mises (who taught Hayek), introduced the idea that one should leave room to what he called “meta-conscious” or “supra-conscious” processes, namely rules guiding perception, knowledge and actions.¹⁵

One interpretation of Hayek’s work is that these meta-conscious processes are radically unconscious because they deal with neurological processes. Another interpretation, especially based on Hayek 1962, is that there is continuity between conscious processes and certain unconscious processes and that the concept of meta-conscious states aims at accounting for these intermediate states.¹⁶ I will retain this second interpretation (the continuity interpretation), which essentially states that rules are not radically unconscious, while assuming that there are also radical unconscious processes, namely the neurological processes. But if a) one generalizes the idea of continuity between consciousness and other mental states beyond the case of rules and b) one focuses on the idea of *degrees* of consciousness, it seems more appropriate to speak of *infra*-consciousness or *sub*-consciousness when one thinks of a low degree of consciousness rather than of meta-conscious or supra-conscious processes.¹⁷

Boudon explicitly borrowed the wording “meta-conscious” from Hayek, with whom he also shared a similar conception of general rules or “a priori.”¹⁸ However, implicit in Boudon’s conception of the meta-conscious are not only general rules but also more particular and contingent sub-conscious processes. In fact, according to Boudon, what an actor clearly identifies *after the fact* as the reasons or intentions behind a particular action, often dismissed as post-factum justifications, could have nevertheless sub-consciously motivated the action in question. This gives rise to the idea of the progressive emergence of intentions or of “proto-intentions” (see third section).¹⁹

To conclude on this point, the search for generative mechanisms can include not only purposive rational choice (like in Coleman’s work), nor even more generally intentional good reasons, but also *sub-intentional good reasons*. Of course, this does not exclude the rationality of *unintentional processes* aiming at the survival or the welfare of living being - a kind of rationality that is very

¹⁴Among the ends, we also need to acknowledge the preferences that social actors do not see as reducible to their self-interest or their personal preferences, but instead as independent objective values. Boudon prefers to refer to Weber’s notion of *Wertrationalität* (axiological rationality) as *opposed* to *Zweckrationalität* (means-end rationality), but the general idea is the same. See section II.

¹⁵ See in particular, Hayek (1952), chap. 6.6 and Hayek (1962). See also Di Iorio (2015) on this dimension of Hayek’s work and on the intellectual relationship between Hayek and von Mises.

¹⁶ On these two interpretations, see Fleetwood (1995), chap. 8. On the second interpretation, see J. Gray, 1984, chap. 2. See also Di Iorio (2015), chap. 2.8.

¹⁷ The idea of supra-consciousness might suggest a higher degree of consciousness. I mean the exact opposite.

¹⁸ See Boudon, 1990, p. 110, Boudon, 1995, p. 138-9, n. 4

¹⁹ Boudon is not explicit on this point. On the more general relationship of Boudon to Hayek, see again Di Iorio, 2015 especially Chap. 5. What Manzo (2014) wrote on recent cognitive theories, in particular the program he has formulated, is also in line with Hayek’s views on “meta-conscious processes” (pp. 25-6). However, Manzo tackled neither the issue of the distinction between sub-intentional and un-intentional processes, nor the issue of the emergence of intentions from proto-intentions.

limited and even “myopic” (Elster, 1979, 2007). Thus, a purely unintentional mechanical processes of reducing mental dissonances to keep one’s mind quiet might be functional (although only weakly). But here I have wanted to highlight alternative theories.

II. Intentional commitments, Rational Choice Theory and “good reasons”.

In this second section, I compare the extent to which the broader conception of explanation by “good reasons” can account for commitments with RCT in its standard version, that is, a very narrow version of rationalism. I first discuss Elster’s account of pre-commitments and then set forth two distinct but correlated accounts (Gilbert’s and Sen’s) of what I take as proper commitment: interpersonal commitment including the idea of obligation or duty. In both cases, I show the relevance of the idea of explanation by “good reasons”.

A/ Pre-commitments.

Elster (1979, 1983), following Thomas Schelling (1978b), described commitment as “deliberate shaping of the feasible set for the purpose of excluding certain possible choices” (1983, p. 114). Homer’s telling of Ulysses and the sirens in *The Odyssey* is a paradigmatic example of this mechanism. Ulysses is afraid of being ensnared by the sirens’ song as he and his shipmates come near sirens’ realm and he is afraid of having their ship destroyed by the reefs on which the sirens rest. Nevertheless, he would like to listen to their famed and entrancing song. His strategy is to ask his shipmates to bind him to the ship’s mast and to request them to fill up their own ears with wax. This way, not only will they not be able to hear the sirens, but they will also not hear Ulysses’ own quite predictable demands, upon hearing the sirens, to be untied and to direct the ship ever closer to the reef.

Ulysses *intentionally* limits his further choices. According to Elster, on the one hand, Ulysses is rational in the sense of means-end or “strategical” rationality, since Ulysses uses means (self-binding) adapted to his aim (listening the siren’s songs); but, on the other hand, Ulysses is irrational since self-binding limits his opportunities by increasing his constraints. Ulysses is therefore partially or “imperfectly” irrational (Elster, 1979).²⁰ One could nevertheless add that what may seem irrational here may be irrational only in the short term and may turn out to be rational in the long term: hearing sirens’ songs *expands* opportunities - though aesthetic, rather than material opportunities - and therefore this kind of opportunity already requires a broader version of RCT, including aesthetic well-being.²¹

Elster (1979) not only gave examples of *individual* self-binding domains such as addiction to tobacco, gambling, etc., but also examples of *collective* self-bindings. Thus, the existence of political constitutions may be explained as a way of *pre-commitments* for Members of Parliament: when MPs will discuss about new laws, there will be bound by the fundamental constitutional laws they cannot change without resorting to very specific assemblies (e.g., in France, the Congress, which is composed of both Members of Parliament and Senators, has to be convened). And the reason why there is a distinction between fundamental laws (written in the Constitution), whose change requires a long process, and other laws is to prevent MP’s of changes that would be motivated by too much contextual (and myopic) intentions.

To conclude, one should notice that pre-commitments, described by Elster as self-bindings, are not proper “commitments”, which involve - in the usual meaning of the term - the idea of

²⁰ Elster (1983) makes another distinction, between a “thin theory” and a “broad theory”. According to Rawls, quoted by Elster, “the thin theory of the good [explains] the rational preference for primary goods” (this fits in with the standard narrow version of RCT) while Rawls acknowledges “that a fuller theory is needed to account for ‘the moral worth of persons’” (Elster, 1983, p. 1, n.1).

²¹ Thus, a even fuller theory would be needed: one that would not only take into account moral values (see previous footnote) but also aesthetical values.

obligation or duty. Ulysses is not under any *obligation* towards anybody. But his shipmates, on the contrary, have *obligations* towards him and are *committed* with him, what Elster did not specify. This is what we have to investigate a little more.

B/ Unilateral, reciprocal and joint interpersonal commitments.

Let us come back to Ulysses' fable. Although Homer does not seem to suggest anything on this point, Ulysses' shipmates were probably not only *unilaterally* committed with Ulysses to fulfill Ulysses' ends but they were probably also *reciprocally* (or even - see below - "jointly") committed 'with' each other to row more efficiently. I will comment in succession on these two notions: reciprocal commitment and joint commitment.

As seen previously, Elster interpreted certain behaviors in a Parliament as self-bindings and not as interpersonal commitments. But there are also interpersonal - and even reciprocal - commitments in a Parliament. In a Parliament, the majority does not only bind the minority and the minority is not only bound by the majority (as Elster emphasizes). MPs are also *reciprocally committed* "with" each other - to abide by the laws that they have voted for and that will deal with everyone's daily life (e.g. civil code, penal code and taxations).

Moreover, when there is a "we-intention" (Tuomela, 2002), that is, an intention of playing one's part in the group (e.g. in a soccer team or in a political party involved in an electoral campaign) and of desiring the success of the group more than one's own personal success, Margaret Gilbert (1989) suggests that we speak of "*joint commitments*." Joint commitments are significantly different from reciprocal commitments. Whereas reciprocal commitments are conditional, joint commitments are not: even if one person does not play his/her role, everyone else is still supposed to fulfill their functions and, in addition, compensate for the defective actor. This means that the "good reasons" to act that way are not material *self-interest* but instead the *group-interest*. This does not exclude the possibility that one obtains personal satisfaction by having acted in that way; however, this satisfaction might be only psychological - the satisfaction of having acted well - and not material. This goes again beyond a narrow version of rationalism such as the standard version of RCT.

In political life, reciprocal - conditional - commitments are frequent, while joint commitments are probably rarer. In a political campaign, the team's members are expected to work for the success of the leader and, as a consequence, to try to play their parts as team members, sometimes without considering rewards (excepting the satisfaction of having acted well). Reality is often less idyllic, since players generally expect rewards and are often tempted to play much more individualistically (like in every group, free-riding is frequent).

Besides, joint commitments in Gilbert's sense, although not conditional, are not necessarily moral either. To take an extreme example, certain Nazis might have felt jointly committed with each other to the extermination of Jews. Thus, the "good reasons," epistemologically speaking, for people to act in a certain way, even when they aim at the collective good for the group of which they are the members, may be bad reasons" morally speaking. The notion of commitment, according to this account, requires a notion of duty that is formal, and not reducible to the more substantial notion of moral duty.

Amartya Sen introduced the concept of commitment completely independently from Gilbert and Elster, albeit within the same framework as Elster, that is a narrow (or "thin") version of RCT. It is well known that Sen's concept is not well defined, its content varying depending on the examples he examines.²² Nevertheless, at least one set of these examples deals with Gilbert's understanding of joint commitments, in particular when Sen (1977) suggests that the British economic system did not function well in the 1970s because most people in the UK prioritized their own material self-interest without considering the public good. In other words, if people look for the public good, they may have

²² See Pettit (2005) for example.

the same “good reasons” for doing that that in Gilbert’s contexts. In other contexts, Sen uses “commitment” and “(moral) duty” interchangeably, which demonstrates that he thinks of rationality in the sense of Rawls’ and Elster’s broad theory of rationality (see above). This is also the case of Boudon (1995), who speaks of “axiological reasons” (*Wertrationalität*) in analyses parallel to Sen’s and closer to Kant than to Weber.²³ The main point here is that good reasons in all these contexts (aesthetical, substantially moral like in Sen’s contexts, only formally moral like in Gilbert’s contexts) are not reducible to RCT in its narrow standard version. However, in all these cases, commitments are supposed to be intentional and therefore fully conscious. We now need to go even further in the examination of the intentionality issue.

III. Sub-intentional “commitments” and sub-conscious good reasons in interactive contexts. *Theoretical and experimental perspectives.*

In this third section, I tackle more subtle and more complex kinds of commitments than those addressed previously. I want to show that, even in these cases, it still makes sense to think of rational actions in terms of good reasons. I will speak of sub-intentional *commitments* as good examples of phenomena requiring a “sub-intentionalist” explanation. The aim is to show in detail that alternatives to purely un-intentionalist explanations work well in certain situations. More precisely, I will try to show that certain theories in social psychology may allow us to go further than Margaret Gilbert on the phenomenological accounts of commitments.

Instead of focusing on explicit joint commitments like those that may occur in Parliaments (or in private juridical contracts), Margaret Gilbert has examined the *implicit or tacit joint commitments* that, she argues, often happen in the simple circumstances of everyday life. These implicit or tacit joint commitments are not expressed by any explicit wordings but are nevertheless common knowledge. They can occur when a member of a group decides to express a view as the group’s view only because nobody disagrees explicitly (“silence means consent”) (Gilbert, 1989). It is easy to hypothesize that, if the supposed commitment was tacit, there might have been some misrepresentations regarding the exact content of the commitment and even on the reality of this alleged commitment. As a consequence, in these situations, people may feel entrapped. (Of course, these tacit commitments may also frequently occur in political life, and this is what I will highlight in the following section (IV)).

One can go further on the investigation of the nature and role of commitments by referring to social psychologists who have identified how people can feel committed without having clearly wanted to commit. Charles Kiesler’s theory (Kiesler, 1971) is based on the idea that people can feel committed *post hoc* to support the general principles that can explain a choice they have made earlier *without thinking thoroughly* about the implication of their initial choice. There is a thin line of demarcation between, on the one hand, believing that we are committed with full awareness and, on the other, feeling entrapped by someone else who may have wanted to lead us where we did not want to go or where we are not sure now whether we had earlier wanted to go. The distinction between these two mental states depends on whether one can recognize the reasons that could have rationally motivated our actions (of which one was not fully aware initially) as the real reasons of our actions.

Kiesler (1971), elaborating on experiments on the foot-in-the-door techniques used originally as a marketing “trick” (Freedman and Frazer, 1966), has argued that *unilateral* and *sub-intentional commitments* (on the part of potential customers, for example) may be not only rationally – in the sense of the RCT (that is strategically) – induced (in the case of market: by sellers) but also rationally justified by good reasons (of customers) and assumed *post hoc*. This phenomenon requires further investigation.

²³ See above, footnote 14.

Regarding the *foot-and-the-door technique*, Freedman and Frazer (1966), in very famous (but still under-exploited in the social sciences) experiments, asked people to place a small card in a window in their home supporting safe driving, without revealing that they were psychologists conducting an experiment. About two weeks later, the same people were asked by a second person to put a large sign advocating safe driving with the same message (“Drive Carefully”) in their front yard. Experiments reveal that this is statistically much more efficient than to simply ask people to put the large sign in the garden from the outset. Functionalist accounts in line with Festinger’s theory would say that this is the outcome of a merely mechanical *unintentional* process: human mind has an inner drive to make one’s beliefs and actions coherent in order to avoid disharmony.

Kiesler’s account is alternative. This is a phenomenological account (it describes intentional or sub-intentional processes). Kiesler argues that in these experiments, people might have felt *retrospectively* that they did not only commit to a single act when they initially accepted to place the small card in their window but in fact to a much more general campaign, even if this retrospective feeling was purely *subjective*, since such an *explicit* commitment was not required at all and they did not explicitly agree on anything of the sort. One can add to Kiesler’s analysis that in both cases, if Kiesler is right, what was at issue as the bases of these behaviors was *not* material self-interest, since they did not receive any financial or material advantage: rather, people acted as they did because they think it was their duty (Sen). Regarding the second case, moreover, Kiesler argues convincingly that the people might have felt committed (or *jointly* committed, per Gilbert’s theory) with the persons (actually psychologists) who seemed to act in favor of the safe driving campaign.

Furthermore, Kiesler adopts a rationalist point of view and assumes that people plausibly reconstruct their *sub-conscious reasoning* (good reasons) as follows. If I agreed to put a card in my window, it is in fact because I supported their road safety campaign (displaying a card being a logical consequence of agreeing with the principle of the safety campaign). However, since displaying a large sign advocating safe driving is also a logical consequence of the same general principle, if I have agreed to this principle, I should also agree to this new consequence and therefore I should agree to put this sign in my front yard. Of course, this reconstruction may be wrong and it may be only a “rationalization” that does not fit the genuine process. But, it is also plausible that the motivation in question was really there and simply not yet clearly recognized or assumed as intention, since it was still a sub-intention – or a “proto-intention” (see first section).²⁴ What could have been at work was an *implicit* sub-conscious or sub-intentional commitment (a “proto-commitment”).

In these cases, often people feel *entrapped* a) because they realize that they are internally constrained to do what they did not initially want to do (or, at least, did *not quite consciously* want to do) - and b) possibly because, in certain cases, they may have good reasons to suppose that someone else had, on the contrary, the quite *conscious intention* to induce such a process. The problem here is *not* that people did not anticipate the consequences of their initial act, but that they did not correctly grasp the true mental content of their *own* acceptance to do what they were asked to do, or the possible interactive context of their first choice. They may even not be quite sure that they had accepted anything else than what was explicitly asked (in this case, placing a small card on their window).

IV. Sub-intentional “commitments” and sub-conscious good reasons in interactive contexts. *Outline of historical case studies: the role of “populism” in the secession of states and the process of decolonization*

In order to prove the relevance in sociology of these theoretical and experimental analyses, I would like to briefly sketch the analysis of a few historical political examples in which people might have felt entrapped by a certain equivocation on their commitments and where sub-intentions (or proto-intentions or proto-commitments) may have even played a significant role. In these examples,

²⁴ Kiesler does not use this notion, which I find relevant here. See Romdenh-Romluc, 2013.

commitments or violations of commitments or alleged commitments – micro-sociological events - either have really acted or could have acted as *triggering* events of a chain of other events – leading to possibly tragic events at the macro-sociological level.

The most obvious cases of commitments-entrapments in political life are those in which people are entrapped by a leader or by activists. One can argue, for example, that many Nazis – or collaborators in occupied countries - did not realize entirely to what extent they were committing when they accepted to do something that was asked by a member of the Nazi Party and that seemed trivial at the time, such as the circulation of a tract. They may also not have been entirely clear about their own intentions (still at a sub-intentional and proto-intentional stage). Festinger's theory, Milgram's theory of submission to authority and Asch's theory of submission to social conformity were initially formulated to try to explain how extreme despotism may have emerged in a country such as Germany (or France). The same theories could be used also to account for explaining the acceptance of Stalinism or Maoism. Alternative theories, focusing on sub-intentional processes (Heider, Kiesler, etc.) have emerged in the same general context.

But I would like to focus on the symmetrical phenomenon, which could be called “populism,” when a leader (or several leaders) feel entrapped by a political body to go further than he/she initially wanted because – either intentionally or sub-intentionally – he/she had given signs that could be interpreted as commitments. In a sense, I am looking here for leaders who were not only self-bound, like Ulysses, but were (or were supposed to be) also jointly committed to their “mates”, unlike Ulysses. I have examined the complex case of Stephen Douglas's accusations elsewhere (Bouvier, 2016). Launched during the famous 1858 *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, these accusations addressed Abraham Lincoln's supposed joint commitments with the Republican Party to immediate and radical abolitionism (while, in fact, Lincoln was a moderate on this issue and Douglas was aware of this) and can be linked to both the triggering of the Secession of pro-slavery States and the Civil War following Lincoln's election as President in 1860. Here, I will examine two or three simpler cases.

My first example is the decolonization of Central Africa in the 1960s. It has been argued that the process of decolonization occurred too rapidly to be fully efficient and that, more generally, many problems of the problems experienced by African countries in the 20th century can be traced back to rapid decolonization. This is not only a Western view that emerged *post hoc* to explain the failure of decolonization, but also one expressed by some of the main contemporary African political leaders during the process of decolonization itself. Although these leaders desired the independence of their countries, the most lucid among them doubted their respective country's ability to make a rapid transition. These political leaders knew that they needed a much higher political, economical, judicial education to build their nations - and perhaps most importantly, to avoid being cheated by Western political leaders during negotiations. However, as soon as they had put “the foot in the door” of the decolonization process, the African leaders were “entrapped” by the people of their own countries. More accurately: they had been entrapped by what could be seen by the people as their own previous commitments with the nation they belonged to. The case of Belgian Congo is well documented on this point. *Moïse Tshombe*, one of the leaders of the independence and a rival of the more charismatic Patrice Lumumba - upheld that he wanted independence but “pas aujourd'hui” (“not today”) because he did not want, he said, to be pushed to take decisions “under the public pressure” (Van Reybrouck, 2010, chap. 6). But this might have been not only a matter of *external* public pressure, but also – more subtlety - a matter of an *internal* mental process (by the sense of obligation inherent to commitments). Moreover, as a) these “commitments” were not written and b) leaders' intentions were not entirely clear for the leaders themselves - they might still have been at a sub-intentional and proto-intentional stage - certain leaders, like Tshombe, finally accepted willy-nilly to run the accelerated process despite (or perhaps due to) their feeling of entrapment.

Another dramatic episode of the same period, better known in many Western countries, is the case of *Charles de Gaulle's* alleged commitments during another decolonization process, this time in

North Africa. Unlike the previous example, the sequence of events here involves only one leader, de Gaulle, who was the representative not of a colonized country but of the colonizing nation, France. In this case, we will consider in particular two very famous historical speeches that could have been understood by the audience as commitments. Indeed, when Charles de Gaulle did not follow through on these understood commitments, he was effectively accused of having violated them, what the Congolese leaders precisely wanted to avoid. First, on June 4, 1958, de Gaulle, then the President of the French Republic, stated to an Algerian-European audience in Algiers, an audience that did *not at all* desire the independence of Algeria, “Je vous ai compris” (“I have understood you”), as if to say he had grasped their (collective) will. Two days later, at Mostaganem (a city close to Oran), in another very famous speech, De Gaulle exclaimed: “Vive l’Algérie française!” (“Long live French Algeria!”). Most listeners thought he was committing (jointly committing) with the European population to keep Algeria as a French department, although what was occurring might have been a typical example of what happens in everyday life: there was equivocation whether it was or was not a commitment and, if so, on the exact matter of this commitment, since it was not a formal commitment at all. De Gaulle might have been entrapped by the crowd’s excitement and thereby felt compelled to use an ambiguous formulation. Nobody really knows – although many have claimed to – what De Gaulle wanted nor even if he was himself clear on his own intentions, which might have been at this time still only sub-intentional, alternating between several options and dissonant proto-intentions (Baumel & Delpla, 2006). Whatever his intentions may have been, the feeling shared by numerous people that de Gaulle later violated this commitment because of a cynical *strategic* rationality and an entirely conscious intention *triggered* the violent reaction of the partisan of French Algeria, leading to a putsch attempt by general officers in 1961, in Algiers, to an assassination attempt against de Gaulle in 1962, at the Petit-Clamart, near Paris, to an amplification of the gap between Algerian-European and Algerian-African people and finally, as a counter-productive effect, not only to the independency of Algeria but also to the unavoidable exodus of almost all the white community (“pied-noirs”) from Algeria to France.

There is no doubt, on the contrary, that when, on July 24, 1967, De Gaulle claimed in Montréal, “Vive le Québec libre! Vive le Canada français!” (“Long live free Quebec! Long live French Canada!”), this was deliberate, fully intentional and in accordance with the mythic vision that De Gaulle had of the greatness of France (Peyrefitte, 1997). It could have triggered the secession of Québec, but it did not. We may trace De Gaulle’s pronouncement to a myopic rationality regarding the international relationships (seriously cooled down between France, Canada and many other countries after this speech), although it admittedly reinforced the visibility of Quebec in the world. In any event, De Gaulle could not fulfill what could be interpreted as a commitment to support the secession of Quebec because he retired two years later. Finally, the Prime Minister of Québec, Daniel Johnson, despite being in favor of Québec’s sovereignty, played the role of Tshombe in Congo: he did not want to be *entrapped* by the pro-independency Québécois, who had been galvanized by De Gaulle, and instead successfully (unlike Tshombe) slowed down the process of independence (Thompson, 1990).

Conclusion:

Analytical Sociology, Goods Reasons and Rhetorical History.

In this paper, I have argued for the importance of commitments as components of social phenomena and for the relevance of the issues of rationality and intentionality, as understood respectively by Hempel and Hayek. In my opinion, these issues have been far too neglected in recent books devoted to analytical sociology. That is not to say that every behavior and belief is fully rational or is fully intentional but rather that issues of rationality (in a broader sense than in RCT) and intentionality (or sub-intentionality) are pivotal in the social sciences at the micro-level of explanation. We must leave room for them, so to speak, in the social sciences: many actions, in particular, may have sub-intentional sources but nevertheless be rational from a certain viewpoint. Nevertheless, I entirely acknowledge that this does not reject the possibility of entirely unintentional processes.

Finally, I have tried to show – by outlining the analysis of several processes of decolonization or secession – how macro-sociological phenomena (concerning, for example, states or nations) such as civil war, secession, decolonization, may be triggered by micro-sociological events. This does not preclude the possibility that these micro-sociological events themselves involved not only individuals but also meso-sociological networks and entities such as informal groups (e.g. crowds in Congo, Algeria or Canada) or institutions (e.g. the emerging Republican Party in the US).

The absence of a careful investigation of these issues in the *Handbook of Analytical Sociology* may explain why the chapters devoted to history and to anthropology in this volume are so frustrating. The room left for history and ethnography is so meager that these “perspectives” are only presented in a fourth section as coming “from other fields and approaches,” as if the sociological analysis of mechanisms itself should not include – as such – an historical dimension.²⁵ A sub-program at least, crossing Manzo’s program for example, in the continuity of historical sociology, is both legitimate and needed (see, e.g., Elster, 1990).

Moreover, in the continuity of my short case studies, I would like to specify that if one wants to investigate the entanglement of intentional and sub-intentional unintentional “good reasons” in the dynamic of social phenomena, emphasis should be given to what could be called “rhetorical history”.²⁶²⁷

²⁵ See, in particular, the two last chapters: “Analytic Ethnography” and “Historical Sociology”, respectively by Diane Vaughan and Karen Barkey.

²⁶ On rhetorical history, cf. Zarefsky (1998) and Bouvier (2016). Zarefsky devoted many publications to the *Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (see, in particular Zarefsky, 1990, 2014). On both the scope and limits of Boudon’s theory itself on this matter, let me mention Bouvier (2007), and, on the more general issue of the relationships between Argumentation Theory and Rational Choice Theory, Bouvier (2002).

²⁷ I would like to thank Edward H. Barnet and Raphaël Künstler for their suggestions on the penultimate version of this paper.

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