AGAINST DURKHEIM AND FREUD: UNDERSTANDING IN SOCIAL FIELDS OF AGENTS AND OBJECTS

John Levi MARTIN, *The Explanation of Social Action* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011)

THE ISSUE OF THE CONCEPTUAL basis on which the social sciences understand or explain social action, and of how they ascribe reasons or causes to it, has been a classical question since the turn of the 20th century. Again and again social scientists and philosophers have sought to clarify the foundations of their approach to action and its explanation. Four historical waves were of specific importance here: the debate concerning nomothetic and ideographic approaches in the context of 1900 neo-Kantianism; the rivalry between the conception of "unified science" on the part of the Vienna Circle of logical empiricism and post-Wittgensteinian approaches to language games in the 1950s and 1960s; the debate as to the status of intentionality within analytical philosophy in the 1970s and finally the issue of the consequences of the renaissance in materialism and realism in the philosophical field. Around 1900, discussions in philosophy and in the social sciences were still closely linked, as notably exemplified by Max Weber and Georg Simmel. Since then, it seems that the debate concerning the explanation of action has more and more been narrowed down to an exclusively philosophical affair to which sociologists pay hardly any attention. However, since the 1990s there have been several attempts to close the gap between social theory and philosophy again, for instance in James Bohman's "New Philosophy of Social Science" and in Theodore Schatzki's "Social Practices."

It is in the context of this new linkage between social theory and philosophy that "The Explanation of Social Action" by John Levi Martin—who is professor of sociology at the University of Chicago—can be situated. Martin raises the question of what social scientists do when they "explain" action in a new way—and he does so by referring less to philosophers than to social theorists. In the course of the book it turns out that Pierre Bourdieu plays a major role in this attempt at a new foundation, but a Bourdieu to some extent read against the grain. Generally, however, Martin's book is not primarily a book about

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other authors, but about phenomena: actions, perceptions, habits, fields and so on. In his introduction, he concedes that not all of his arguments might sound new and that the heritage of Heidegger, Husserl and Wittgenstein—of the "interpretative tradition"— is probably perceivable to some readers. Yet, Martin refuses a detailed discussion of these "classics" as rather superfluous, and he also takes a distance towards Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology. Again, he anticipates the number of parallels the reader will probably find between Garfinkel and himself but criticizes the latter above all because of his often ambiguous style. (Though, in a footnote at the beginning, Martin at least hints that "the overlap is greatest with the work of Anthony Giddens and Barry Barnes," XI, fn 4.)

So if Martin is a little unwilling as far as his allies are concerned, he is all the more clear against which opponent his approach is directed: it is Durkheim and the tradition of Durkheimian sociology with its specific version of explaining action. Martin's main argument is as follows: the Durkheimian legacy has left social science with a highly damaging preference in favour of "third person accounts" of action in relationship to "first person accounts." Martin refers to Kant's opposition between two different ways of conceptualizing persons—namely to take persons as things which are determined by other things or to treat them as persons who determine themselves—to the Durkheimian approach: when Durkheim treats the social as facts, he presupposes that human action can be observed from the outside as determined by alien forces. So, to explain human action, for Durkheim it is at any rate necessary to take a distance towards the participants' own accounts of action and to explain the actions from a third person's perspective. Martin takes the opposite position. Here he agrees with the arguments that interpretative sociology has put forward: the social scientist has to refer to the actor's own understanding of his actions, not to dismiss it. To explain actions then means to reconstruct how people react to the qualities which objects possess in their world.

The original move in Martin's argument consists in his linking the explanation of action closely to the task of reconstructing *sensual perceptions*: the perceptions of the world by the agents. Thus, in a generalized way, social theory has to strive for an "aesthetics of action" or a "social aesthetics"—not in the sense of a beautiful theory or of a theory of beauty, but in the general meaning of "aesthesis" as a discipline of sensual perceptions. As a consequence of the popular marriage between Durkheim and Freud, however, large parts of social theory have tended to dismiss this level of subjective perceptions, according to Martin.

In the search for a framework for analyzing the link between action and perceptions, Martin first refers to Vygotsky and the Russian activity school, then to Gestalt psychology and finally to Dewey and American pragmatism. The crucial point for him is that human perceptions are in fact rooted in their practical actions. Thus, for Martin, the Durkheimian tradition of treating the cultural classification systems which allegedly regulate perceptions as arbitrary remains in a distorted third-person-stance. Martin insists that insofar as the perceptions fit into a practice and enable the actors to handle the world, they are not "arbitrary" in the strict sense. It is exactly this practical character of perceptions which he finds first in Vygotsky who is interested in "the child's practical activity" and all the more in German Gestalt psychology. However, it is Dewey who seems most promising to Martin here: "Like the Gestalt theorists, the pragmatists argued that the organization in our cognition could come from the organization of experience, itself grounded in the patterning of nature [...] But they tended to emphasize the organization that comes from the action of persons singly and together, as opposed to the natural organization that preexists the entrance of the human or animal observer" (182). Here, we arrive at an important point in Martin's argumentation: against cultural relativism, he insists on a certain realism of the agents' perceptions—but a realism which is not rooted in an epistemological reflection and objective knowledge, but in the practical ability of dealing with the world.

The task of outlining a "social aesthetics" leads Martin subsequently to Kant—and finally to Bourdieu (and back to Gestalt theory). With Kant, the sphere of aesthetics rests upon *judgements* which for Martin—unlike cognitive representations à la Durkheim (and structuralism)—are qualitative experiences of concrete objects in the world. Unlike Kant, however, the sociability of these judgements must be stressed—it is in these sensual perceptions that a "we" is formed. Simultaneously, unlike Kant, Martin insists that these qualities are not mere "constructions" of the subjects, but qualities of the worlds as they (!) are experienced. There is no opposition between mind and world, but the minds are made for the world—for socially variable worlds though. It is exactly here that Bourdieu sets in: According to Martin, in the English-speaking discussion, Bourdieu has often been misunderstood and reduced to a neo-Marxian class theorist with structuralist tendencies. However, the interesting point in Bourdieu is rather that he treats aesthetics as a model for cognition and perception. Perception then is not a question of arbitrary

classifications, but of practical senses and judgements that are transmitted in social groups and fields which dispose of their respective objects. For Martin, in order to understand perceptions, the dominant model of "vision" turns out as highly misleading: the model of seeing tends to presuppose passive objects and subjects. *Taste* seems to be a far better model to grasp human cognition, albeit understood as a practical activity in which objects themselves stubbornly offer their qualities (the saltiness of salt, for instance). Martin again and again stresses that we have to proceed from a basic "consubstantiality" between actors and things embedded in joint activities. In the end, his account amounts to a rehabilitation of field theory which combines Bourdieu and Gestalt psychology: Action mainly is situated in these fields which are "fields of organized strivings," and fields of "affordances" on the part of specific objects. They are games of habits with rules, but rules which are no abstract principles, but rather form a common "sense of appropriateness." So, in the end the boundary between explanation and description must lose its plausibility for the social sciences: explaining action means understanding what is going on in a social field of agents and objects.

Martin has presented a piece of social theory of the highest rigour. Indeed, as he remarked himself in his opening chapter, many of his key ideas remind the reader of a version of a post-Wittgensteinian form of social theory. But there are two aspects which Martin distinguishes from other authors: his insistence on a "social aesthetics" which is focused on the sensual character of social practices—a sensual character irreducible to cognitive systems of representation—and on the autonomous force of the object world which is nevertheless integrated in a field of human activity. Of course, the reader might be interested to know how Martin judges the conceptual offers on the part of a phenomenology of the senses and of philosophical anthropology, and on the other hand the attempts on the part of Bruno Latour and actor-network-theory to strengthen the world of objects against radical culturalism. At any rate, Martin has presented a significant, compelling work which goes far beyond a discussion of problems of explanation but penetrates a complex highly important to future social theory: the interconnection between social practice, sensual perceptions and the "consubstantiality" of the object world.

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