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BOURDIEU AND HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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RATIONAL CHOICE MAY TAKE OVER

Times of crisis, in which the routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures is brutally disrupted, constitute a class of circumstances when indeed "rational choice" may take over, at least among those agents who are in a position to be rational.

—PIERRE BOURDIEU AND LOÏC WACQUANT, *AN INVITATION TO REFLEXIVE SOCIOLOGY*

In this chapter I weave variations on a single theme: Pierre Bourdieu, rational choice, and historical analysis. For this purpose, the statement quoted as epigraph will be my running thread and my lead. Why this thread in particular? The motivation is threefold. First, the quotation brings us straight to the subject matter. Bourdieu sets the stage for a possible *modus vivendi* with rational choice against the backdrop of historical time. History adjudicates the relevance of alternative theoretical frameworks. These frameworks can coexist provided they acknowledge where they stand. Crisis is the domain of rational choice. The theory of practice reserves for itself the time of patterns, structures, and routines.

Second, the quotation is paradoxical. There is no want of disparaging rebuttals of the fundamentals of rational choice in Bourdieu's oeuvre. In contrast, this short statement asserts the possibility of a peaceful coexistence. Rational choice has its *raison d'être*, however qualified it might be. A *modus vivendi* is conceivable once domains of competence have been identified. Indirectly this statement reveals how Bourdieu typifies rational choice and its (restricted) domain of expertise. One interesting issue is whether rational choice analysts might recognize themselves in this characterization. A further issue is whether and how they could make sense of the claim given the explicit tenets of their theoretical framework.

Third, the quotation is intriguing. Interpreted literally, it suggests that in

situations of a fit between subjective and objective structures, actors are not properly rational, at least not rational in the sense rational choice conceives rationality. What does it mean to say that when the fit is disrupted, “‘rational choice’ may take over”? Why would rational choice take over? Which conception of rationality is implied here?

To address these points, I develop the argument here in four steps. Drawing on Bourdieu’s theoretical elaborations, I first consider the analytical rationale for apportioning classes of historical situations between theoretical frameworks. Second, I ask whether the conception of rational choice implied by Bourdieu’s proposal accords with the rational choice analysts’ own understanding of their core claims. The third section adopts a more empirical outlook and discusses Bourdieu’s account of the crisis of May 1968 in France. My purpose in the third section is to gauge the fit between, on the one hand, the empirical account of a case which, in Bourdieu’s analytical framework, has emblematic status and, on the other hand, the short pronouncement presented in the epigraph. Finally, I develop the implications of these observations for the analysis of historical change.

As this outline suggests, the structure of this chapter varies the standpoints between theoretical frameworks and genres of inquiry. In the first two sections the discussion is pitched at the level of generality presumed by Bourdieu for the purpose of assessing the validity of a general claim. The upshot of this discussion corroborates a broader point: whether we adopt the bearings of the theory of practice or those of rational choice, the claim does not stand firm. It leaves out too many qualifying clauses. The third section shifts to a more empirically grounded type of inquiry. I develop the argument about a *modus vivendi* between these two frameworks by engaging empirical observations mostly derived from the case which Bourdieu analyzes at length: May 1968 in France.

A word on the core concepts and assumptions that identify the two frameworks I consider: the key concepts of rational choice revolve around the notion of utility maximization (Green and Shapiro 1994: 14). Actors seek to optimize their interests (Coleman 1990: 14–15), assuming that their beliefs and intentions are consistent (Elster 1986: 12–13; Tsebelis 1990: 18, 24–27). The key concepts of the theory of practice are the *habitus* and the *field*. The *habitus* is a system of enduring dispositions, cognitively informed by a system of classification, that constitutes a generative principle of practices (Bourdieu 1984a: 110, 1990a [1980]: 56–57). A *field* is the system of objective relations—between positions differentiated in terms of various forms of capital—that at once gives shape and validates this system of dispositions (Bourdieu 1996a: 83, 182–84).

Rationale

What justifies the claim that in crisis situations rational choice can take over? Answering this question requires, first, that we clarify how Bourdieu construes the core assumptions and internal logic of rational choice and, second, that we identify the defining features of crisis conjunctures. These two sets of considerations combined together justify the claim. I start with the characterization of rational choice and follow up with an analytical definition of crises. The fit between the object crisis and the framework rational choice becomes much clearer and less intriguing once we place consciousness at the center of the stage, as Bourdieu invites us to do. Crisis situations are amenable to the tools of rational choice because they elicit a heightened level of consciousness. Routine patterns and conjunctures are propitious to the theory of practice since they make reflexivity superfluous.

CONSCIOUSNESS AND ITS AFFIDAVITS

In the shadow theater which Bourdieu imputes to rational choice, the main character is, as we might have expected, the individual actor, and this main character has several typical features. First, her knowledge is unencumbered. She has complete and perfect information (Bourdieu 1988: 61, 63). Second, this agent is freed from the debilitating impact of constraints. That is, she is freed from representations about herself that limit her capacity. Third, reflexivity and consciousness are her hallmarks. The rational choice actor is the epitome of a consciousness that calls herself to order. This last premise is the arch stone of the edifice. I therefore start with this assumption.

Three features. The rationality of rational choice designates a conscious mode of action in which actors intentionally select a course of action geared to material interests after having assessed the probable consequences of alternative options.¹ As Bourdieu writes, “The ‘rational actor’ theory, which seeks the ‘origin’ of acts, strictly economic or not, in an ‘intention’ of ‘consciousness,’ is often associated with a narrow conception of the ‘rationality’ of practices, an economism which regards as rational . . . those practices that are *consciously oriented* by the pursuit of maximum (economic) profit at minimum (economic) cost” (1990a [1980]: 50, emphasis added).² The rational choice actor is a consciousness *en acte*, fully aware of the ins and outs of her action and its material consequences.

This representation has two correlates. One is the assumption of full knowledge. The information available to this actor is complete and perfect (Bourdieu 1990a [1980]: 50, 61, 63). “The champions of rational action theory believe” that “social agents are conscious and knowing subjects acting with full knowledge

of the facts" (Bourdieu 1998d: 24). The world is, so to speak, transparent to the designs and intentions of the actor.³ This knowledge applies to material interests and to the options available to fulfill these interests. A second correlate is that consciousness is not warped by a sense of constraints. These have no grip upon mental structures (Bourdieu 1990a [1980]: 50). The rational choice actor is mentally unburdened by the limits of her practice. The world is transparent also in the sense that it does not play tricks with consciousness. It is what it is.

Autonomy under influence. Under Bourdieu's lens, the rational choice actor is the epitome of a conscious subject loaded with the plenitude of full knowledge, eluding the mental grip of constraining conditions and enacting the principle of her autonomy. As such, this actor turns out to be almost the exact negative of the agent conceptualized by the theory of practice. Whereas, according to Bourdieu, reflexivity and awareness are the centerpieces of the rational choice edifice, the theory of practice investigates the rationality of action embodied in a practical sense informed by habitual experience. In this realm of experience, consciousness is subsidiary. The habitus is "a spontaneity without consciousness or will" (Bourdieu 1990a [1980]: 56). Similarly, practice logic is "a logic in itself without conscious reflexion" (Bourdieu 1977: 92). Individuals are inhabited by dispositions that shape their sense of the possible and their capacity for improvisation. The "ontological complicity between the habitus and the field is 'infra-conscious'" (Bourdieu 1998d: 79).

This contrast explains why the prototype which Bourdieu imputes to rational choice borrows her features as much from Jean-Paul Sartre as from Jon Elster. Consciousness, full knowledge, autonomy: this conceptual language is not incidental. Bourdieu combines the critique of the Sartrean conception with the critique of rational choice in the same chapter and under the same heading: "The imaginary anthropology of subjectivism" (Bourdieu 1977: 42–51). Both proceed from the same erroneous anthropological postulates evoking "the ultra-finalist subjectivism of a consciousness 'without inertia'" (Bourdieu 1990a [1980]: 46).⁴ Consciousness is indeed the dividing line with the realm of action investigated by the theory of practice.

The paradox is that this ultrafinalist conception ends up offering a strict determinist conception of action (Bourdieu 1990a [1980]: 46, 1998d: 24–25). The rational choice actor asserts her autonomy of choice by engaging in intricate strategic considerations aimed at her self-interest. However, since the choice criteria and the mental processes at play are assumed to have universal validity, actors confronted with the same decision problem behave in the same way given their overriding interest in maximization. Hence, rational choice oscillates between, on the one hand, the fantasy of a psyche that demonstrates

autonomous mastery and, on the other hand, an "intellectual determinism" that could be couched in very mechanical terms if it were not for a "few differences in phrasing" (Bourdieu 1990a [1980]: 46).⁵

PRACTICE DISRUPTED

Let us now consider the second term of the equation: crisis conjunctures. Here the focus is on the disruption of habitual patterns. Times of crisis are times of disjuncture. Practices do not produce their anticipated effects. Dispositions inherited from the past are dysfunctional, out of phase and disconnected from situational challenges or imperatives. They have lost their relevance. As a result, actors are at odds with the world that is emerging before their eyes. Bourdieu (1988: 183–84) evokes the shock (*stupeur*) experienced by French academics in May 1968 as they experienced their world turned upside down—a shock not so different from the old Kabyle peasants' incredulity when confronted with "the heretical methods of cultivation practiced by the young" (183).

If times of crisis are situations in which, since dispositions are being decoupled from their structural conditions, the habitus is "out of sync," then the theory of practice a priori has little to say. The domain of predilection of the habitus is a realm of experience marked by the concordance between structures and practices when actors can develop their practical sense thanks to the fit between structures and expectations. Experience confirms expectations, which in turn reinforce structures. Once the fit becomes problematic, the relevance of the theory becomes questionable. It makes sense a priori to look for another ship to carry the day.

Still, this does not tell us why rational choice would carry the day. The justification for the proposal lies in the impact of disjuncture on actors' dispositions. In times of concordance, actors can afford to be irreflexive. In times of rupture, this luxury becomes problematic. The point is no longer to make virtue out of necessity but to figure out where the necessity lies and, accessorially, why virtue has been lost. Actors realize that their dispositions no longer provide them with a sense of the game. They have lost their practical understanding. The loss compels them to gauge and reflect on their own presumptions. Their understanding of practice becomes less practical, less implicit, and less obvious as it becomes loaded with a sense of disjuncture.

Moments of crisis are thus times of greater awareness. They bring to light background assumptions. In the process of departing from a practical sense that has become obsolete and irrelevant, actors accede to a state of consciousness which for the most part eludes them in highly predictable and recognizable situations, when their habitus provides them with the appropriate cogni-

tive and bodily clues.⁶ The hiatus between what used to be their practical sense and the social world as they now experience it—far removed from the “sanctity of what had always been” (Weber)—goads their awareness.⁷

Now we can connect the dots. Crises are the domain of predilection of rational choice because, according to Bourdieu, they induce a higher level of consciousness and reflexivity. The “double consciousness” characteristic of actors mobilizing the categories of two distinct symbolic universes (e.g., religious and economic) “is at the basis of a very great (partial) lucidity which is manifested above all in situations of crisis and among people in precarious positions” (Bourdieu 1998d: 113). As consciousness asserts itself and actors shift from an irreflexive mode to a more reflexive one, so does their propensity for instrumental rationality, self-awareness, and a conscious assessment of the future. Actors objectify the ins and outs of their behavior.⁸ Their action, being *deliberately* oriented toward a goal, fits the theoretical postulates of rational choice.

The Pundits' View

Does this characterization accord with rational choice analysts' own conceptions? Can there be a rational choice justification for the suggestion that its conceptual tools and assumptions apply to crisis situations in the first place? As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, I use the rational choice label to designate studies that either assume or demonstrate the prevalence of strategic rationality geared to a criterion of optimization. This definition is more specific than conceptions broadly equating rational choice with strategic rationality.⁹ It is also consistent with the way in which systematic commentators characterize the framework (Green and Shapiro 1994: 14–15).

CORE ASSUMPTIONS

Optimization. For the proponents of rational choice, optimization, not consciousness, is the central assumption. At best, consciousness and reflexivity can be construed as derivations of the search for maximization. The issue, however, is not decisive. Of greater significance is the analysis of the logic of optimization and the criteria relevant to capture analytically this logic. In this analytical universe the reference to consciousness does not have the centrality Bourdieu assigns to it.¹⁰ True, Elster (1983b: 117–18) elaborates the contrast between “sour grapes” and “character planning” as revolving in part on this criterion. “Sour grapes” designates a causal and unconscious adaptation to constraints. It operates “behind the back” of the actor, who downgrades the options which she cannot reach as a way to cope with the frustration. “Character planning” on the other hand, designates a process of deliberate preference adjustment.

Yet the distinction between sour grapes and character planning takes place within a broader discussion of the rationality of beliefs (“thick rationality”) that is peripheral to the technical specifications of instrumental rationality (“thin rationality”).¹¹ Among rational choice circles, most of the debate about the distinction between rational and nonrational action has focused, first, on the distinctiveness of purposive action in contrast to expressive or impulsive action (Coleman 1990: 16–17) and, second, on criteria of choice and belief consistency (Elster 1983b: 6–7; Tsebelis 1990: 24–27). From the standpoint of rational choice, the theory of rational action is a theory of consistency.

Similarly, for a critic of rational choice as systematic as Herbert Simon, the main issue is less consciousness than cognitive capacity: rational choice stumbles against the limited cognitive power of the human mind. Choices are constrained not only because of the objective characteristics of the situation, but also because of the way in which human beings process information. These are internal constraints. Rational choice lacks realism inasmuch as it is oblivious to these limitations and to the correlate power of framing effects. Selective attention is one facet of this limited cognitive capacity (Simon 1985: 302; Tversky and Kahneman 1986: 260). Hence, we cannot a priori assume that “all alternatives are known to the agent without cost”—a claim which Coleman (1990: 506) depicts as standard in rational choice.

Complete information. This brings up a second issue: full knowledge. The imputation of complete information is problematic. A great deal of the analytical refinements yielded by rational choice concerns the engineering of decisions with incomplete information (Harsanyi 1967, 1995: 292).¹² Individuals face a decision that can be costly to themselves and others. Yet they do not have all the information required to assess the costs involved. The decision is risky and entails a significant amount of uncertainty. Rational choice has identified several decision criteria, such as the minimax criterion and the principle of expected utility maximization, to assess the rationality of decisions made with incomplete information.¹³ Most of the critical debate has focused on the empirical plausibility of these criteria. Thus the cardinal assumption made by rational choice is *not*, as Bourdieu presumes, that actors are fully informed about the ins and outs of their choice. It is that actors make the best possible use of the information available to them.¹⁴

Constraints. What about constraints? The cognitive and dispositional impacts of these constraints is not at the center of the rational choice analysts' agenda. The latter confine their domain of investigation by treating values (normative beliefs) and normative preferences as given. This methodological decision implies no definite stance on the relationships between social positions and normative beliefs. For instance, North, who interprets economic

developments in light of a “neoclassical model of the state,” has no difficulty acknowledging that “people differently positioned in terms of experience have differing rationalizations or views of the world around them and have no way to confirm or reject definitely these different views” (1981: 50).¹⁵

The impact of constraints on preferences and dispositions, however, is not outside the purview of a rational choice theory focused on cost considerations. The constant call to order imposed by constraints has a psychological cost. It is costly to experience dissonance. In internalizing or rationalizing these constraints and in molding their dispositions so that these anticipate the structure of objective relations, actors minimize the costs inherent to dissonance. This rationality fits the standards of rational choice.¹⁶ It is less costly to make virtue out of necessity than to engage in a fruitless denial of reality that would amount to a denial of structures. Better make peace with constraints that appear indomitable than exhaust oneself in vain, with glory perhaps, but in vain. Sour grapes illustrates an adaptive process of this kind (Elster 1983b: 118).

MODUS VIVENDI?

I now address the second question raised at the outset of this section: from the standpoint of rational choice can we justify Bourdieu’s proposal for a division of intellectual labor, as stated in the epigraph? There is no definite answer to that question. Or, rather, one should say, two rational choice answers are possible, and they are at odds with one another. One draws attention to the incentives for strategic rationality generated by the prospect of having to bear significant, tangible costs. The other states that times of rupture are also conjunctures in which the standard scope conditions of rational choice are open to question. It is therefore far from clear whether in these conjunctures individuals are in a position to be strategically rational in the sense postulated by rational choice. I discuss each answer in turn.

Cost assessment. The first answer emphasizes the shift to instrumental rationality geared to an optimal assessment of consequences. When individuals are confronted with new options that are risky as a result of the uncertainty begotten by the future and the incomplete character of the information available, they can no longer rely on the cognitive short circuits which routine situations give way to and make possible. Given these risks, their prime consideration is to minimize potential future costs (Lindenberg 1989: 55). Threats to basic (material) interests are very powerful incentives to “face reality” (Elster 2000: 692).¹⁷ Cost considerations are now at center stage. Actors develop an instrumental understanding of their behavior geared to a principle of cost avoidance. They pay greater attention to assessing consequences.

Scope conditions. The second answer, by contrast, questions the relevance of

rational choice in crisis situations given the model’s scope conditions. For individuals to deploy their strategic capacity, certain minimal cognitive conditions are required. Actors must be able to exercise their judgment and apply some criteria of consistency to uphold this judgment (Schumpeter 1942: 253). They need to be able to map out risks and alternatives and to assess how the consequences of their choices will affect their welfare (Taylor 1988: 91). If uncertainty blurs the future to the point of incapacitating their ability to discern alternative courses of action and to make reasonable assessments, then a very different mode of action might be at play—one regulated by the explicit script of ideological pronouncements. Hence rational choice applies if in a minimal sense actors can identify which alternatives they face. Situations of disequilibrium or unstable equilibria do not fit this prerequisite (North 1990: 22).

A reversal in stance. This line of argument reverses the assertion quoted in the epigraph. It is in routine times, when institutional conditions are well established, that actors can fully exercise their capacity for instrumental rationality, for when institutional conditions are well established the scope conditions of rational choice can be reasonably assumed to be in place (Simon 1978: 14). Individuals can develop the cognitive resources to learn the rules of the game. They can also stabilize their judgments. Bourdieu’s views of historical processes are congruent with this interpretation. Whether we adopt the grid of reading of rational choice or of the theory of practice, we are witnessing actors who primarily seek to preserve, consolidate, or expand their interests. “Agents . . . have no other choice than to struggle to maintain or improve their position in the field, thus helping to bring to bear on all the others the weight of the constraints” (Bourdieu 1990e: 196; quoted by Calhoun 1993a: 143).

Not surprisingly, commentators have noted the parallel between this view of history and rational choice. Postone, LiPuma, and Calhoun (1993) emphasize the drive for maximization: “Unaware of some true possibilities, unable to take full advantage or conceive of other possibilities due to their class habitus, agents nonetheless seek to *maximize* benefits, given their relational position within a field” (5, emphasis added). Biernacki (1995) points out that “like rational choice theorists, [Bourdieu] underscores the agents’ *unceasing* manipulation of their symbolic and material environment” (22, emphasis added). Steinmetz (1999) makes consonant observations: “Bourdieu . . . evokes a quasi-Hobbesian world of struggle for competitive advantage, one that in many ways recalls microeconomic descriptions of rational actors pursuing their material interests” (28).

In documenting the constant struggle for competitive advantage as it takes place in history and different institutional contexts, ethnographically oriented accounts actually flesh out historical actors who, in their rational choice guise, often look shallow and devoid of substance, as if their main reason for show-

ing up on the stage was to corroborate the plausibility of theoretical claims. Given rational choice analysts' insistence on agency (for example, Coleman 1986: 1312), this lack of substance is surprising. It becomes less so when we take cognizance of the status granted to theoretical arguments in historical explanations that have the rational choice label. Theory basically has it all. As sites of agency, actors cannot be expected to deviate from the model. De facto they do not. As a result, narratives ensconced in the rational choice mold make them highly predictable.

To recapitulate: When we try to uncover the analytical underpinnings of the claim that rational choice takes over in times of crisis, the inquiry proves inconclusive and the claim elusive, irrespective of the theoretical standpoint we adopt. It is not so clear why rational action should become the dominant mode when the correspondence between dispositions and objective relations gets disrupted. There is no sound theoretical reason for arguing that in such conjunctures actors are more likely to behave as rational choice would lead us to expect. The difficulty is compounded when we pause on a case that has acquired paradigmatic status, given the amount of attention Bourdieu devoted to it: the crisis of May 1968 in France. For in this case, the concept that comes forward is deprivation and its correlates, not a greater sense of rationality.

Maladjusted Expectations

Two concepts stand out in Bourdieu's (1988) analysis of the crisis of May 1968: "dispossession" and "maladjusted expectations." "Dispossession" refers to a situation in which people do not get what they believe they are entitled to. The frustration thus generated is the proximate cause of the crisis. "Maladjusted expectations" describe the generating mechanism. People cannot fulfill their aspirations. In May 1968 students could not expect positions that would fulfill their social expectations (Bourdieu 1988: 168). Hence they felt deprived and they revolted.

Why were their expectations maladjusted? According to Bourdieu (1988), the discrepancy between aspirations and abilities had its origin in the "increase in the number of students" (163; see also 166; Bourdieu 1998d: 21). This increase in number contributed to the devaluation of educational credentials, and, by way of consequence, it caused a generalized "downclassing." Bourdieu (1988: 163) analyzes the hiatus between "the statutory expectations . . . and the opportunities actually provided" as a structural phenomenon. The more widely shared this experience, the greater its social significance and the greater its objective character—objective in the sense that it can be assessed by independent external observers.

Whether we consider the basic mechanism at play (the expectation-cap-

abilities gap), its diffuse character resulting from macrosocietal factor (devaluation), and the type of explanation being set forth (psychological versus political), the parallel is striking between this explanatory account of May 1968 and the relative deprivation explanation of collective unrest (e.g., Davies 1962; Feierabend and Feierabend 1966, 1972; Gurr 1970). In both cases, the starting point of the analysis is the presumption of a discrepancy experienced by individual psyches, and in both cases the discrepancy results from a societal process, the significance of which can be assessed from an external (objective) standpoint independent of the groups of actors thus affected. Relative deprivation arguments track unrest back to economic slowdown or downturns. Bourdieu's explanation tracks collective dissatisfaction back to academic devaluation.

As Tilly noted in 1975, this representation of collective upheavals "has been around a long time. Individuals anger when they sense a large gap between what they get and what they deserve" (1975: 495). The apparent power of this explanation is that, from a retrospective viewpoint, it is "true by definition" (Tilly 1975: 486, 493), that is, by definition, people who revolt are angry. It seems therefore obvious and commonsensical to argue that deprivation is the main causal factor of rebellion and unrest. If people rebel because they are frustrated, in times of wealth they can be frustrated only because things do not go well enough: opportunities do not match up with their aspirations.

Whether we give credence to this explanatory account or not, it is at odds with a rational choice argument. From a rational choice standpoint, we expect actors appraising costs and benefits, assessing consequences, and devising plans and strategies. These actors would not necessarily act alone contra Tullock's (1971) mistaken assumption. In times of disruption and uncertainty, we may safely assume that they will strive to act as members of a group or within a collective setting (Ermakoff 2008: 181–82). Yet they act by paying close attention to the possible consequences of their action for their own status and welfare as well as for those whom they define as peers.

The dispossession/maladjusted expectations argument does not portray actors reflecting about options for the purpose of protecting themselves against the worst, preserving their interests, or taking up opportunities. Rather, it portrays actors venting their frustration and being swept away by the perception that "everything is possible" (Bourdieu 1988: 162). The claim stated in the epigraph does not apply. Rational choice does not analytically take over. It has stepped back away from the scene. Bourdieu describing the crisis of May 1968 contradicts Bourdieu stating the broad relevance of rational choice when the focus is on crisis situations.

Faced with these contradictory assessments, one is tempted at first to con-

clude that they are mutually exclusive and cannot both be relevant. A closer focus shows that this conclusion is mistaken. Some actors are quite strategic as they opt for a course of option. They ponder the pros and cons, assess likelihoods as much as they can, and decide for the line of conduct that seems to them the best one given the circumstances. Others let themselves be carried out by the spirit of the time. Their action is mainly expressive and devoid of a master plan. The conjuncture displays both modes of action. This variance does not simply concern types of individuals. It is also diachronic within the same individual psyches.

Moments and Modes

These few remarks underscore a broader point. Times of crisis elicit a multiplicity of modal responses (Ermakoff 2010: 542–44). Some actors become self-centered and instrumental. Others adopt a line of conduct that is mainly expressive. Still others elaborate an ideological definition of the situation (Gilcher-Holtey 1995: 47–50). Bourdieu refers to the strategic mode when he sets forth his claim about rational choice taking over. He points to the expressive mode when he provides an analytical account of the May 1968 demonstrators' subjective dispositions. Both modal responses take place within the same conjuncture, and each is amenable to a different theoretical framework. Instrumental action *a priori* fits rational choice axiomatic claims. Action geared to a set of symbolic categories that are normatively laden belong to the domain proper of the theory of practice. The meaning and resonance of these symbolic categories rest on the living legacy of past practices.

To illustrate the plurality of responses elicited by times of disjuncture, suffice to note the contrast between Bourdieu's general remark about rational choice coming to the fore in such conjunctures and his remarks about actors stubbornly, "contrary to all reason," sticking to a set of dispositions leading them to "social death" (Bourdieu 2000b: 161). For instance, the "inheritors of great families in Béarn condemning themselves to celibacy" (Bourdieu 2000b: 161), the "elects of the French elite schools endorsing a model of career" that "condemned them to give way to newcomers" (Bourdieu 2000b: 161), and the "pathological traditionalism" of the Algerian fellah organizing agrarian production for the satisfaction of immediate needs in a context marked by dramatic impoverishment and the breakdown of the collective structures conducive to provident behaviors (Bourdieu and Sayad 1964: 18–19).

Here the actors are far removed from a strategic response to the crisis. The prevailing mode is adherence to a behavioral script at odds with the strategic imperatives of adaptation or innovation imposed by shifting constraints. Only in an awkward sense can this script be assumed to exemplify value

rationality. The extent to which actors invest tradition with value varies. The scions of the French elite schools are very likely to proclaim aloud their sense of value. This type of consideration is obviously foreign to Algerian peasants struggling with the necessities of daily survival in the coercive environment of a colonized society. In addition, these cases involve actors with vastly different resources. We would expect students of the French elite schools to display the greatest capacity for adaptive rationality à la rational choice. Bourdieu suggests that even they may be trapped in self-defeating reproductive strategies.

UNCONDITIONAL CLAIMS, LOST CAUSE

Two implications follow. First, apportioning classes of historical conjunctures among theoretical frameworks does not do if there is no one-to-one correspondence between these classes of situations and the types of action to which the frameworks supposedly apply. Second—and related—theories of action cast in broad, unconditional terms are bound to miss the mark. By design, these theories cannot cull the multiplicity of modal responses elicited by a situation of disruption (Ermakoff 2010: 530, 549). Furthermore, because these theories are cast in such general and unconditional terms, it is always possible to find instances that invalidate their unconditional scope. Indirectly, this observation points to the key issue. No modal response has exclusive privilege. The challenge is to identify and theorize the factors conditioning their possibility.

This last point is consistent with Bourdieu's (1977: 63, 1998d: 93) critique of the universalist pretensions of rational choice. Individuals situated in time and space rely on categories and taken-for-granted assumptions that inform their practices and understandings. From this perspective, reason can indeed be said to be "historical through and through" (Bourdieu 1998d: 138). The "rational habitus which is the precondition for appropriate economic behavior is the product of particular economic condition" (Bourdieu 1990a [1980]: 64). Yet rational choice analysts proceed as if this historical and institutional variation was of no consequence to actors' preferences. Postulating a model of action that is atemporal and universal, they abstract actors away from the situational context of their practice.¹⁸ "Actors are always assumed to be equally rational" (Kiser and Schneider 1995: 789).

In short, rational choice errs in substantializing a model of action that is valid only in specific circumstances (Bourdieu 1998d: 93). It is typical of the scholastic illusion whereby the analyst imputes to actors his own intellectualist disposition (Bourdieu 2000a: 19). That is why this model rests on "anthropological fictions" (Bourdieu 1990a [1980]: 47). "The pure model of rational action cannot be regarded as an anthropological description of practice. . . . real agents only very exceptionally possess the complete information and the

skill to appreciate it, that rational action would presuppose" (Bourdieu 1990a [1980]: 63). By way of consequence, analyses of historical change should start by acknowledging the variation inscribed in the genealogy of practices and the conditions that shape this formative process. The anthropology posited by rational choice needs to be made situation- and institution-specific (Katznelson and Weingast 2005: 7–12).

COMPLEMENTARY

We cannot explore this variation without examining how collective and individual actors construe their interests and act accordingly. For this purpose, both frameworks are necessary. This point holds for conjunctures of disruption as well as for times of routine expectations—times in which expectations are bounded by a sense of rules and which as a result could be called institutional, insofar as such rules define our understanding of institutions. Whichever class of conjuncture we are considering, the analytical grids provided by rational choice and the theory of practice complement one another in highlighting different facets of preferences and actions. In so doing, they help hone specific empirical claims.¹⁹

I first consider institutional times. These are times pervaded by a sense of the familiar. Actors know what to expect. They elaborate their strategies of action in light of what they assume to be regulated patterns of behaviors. These reveal shared normative definitions and more or less implicit rules of behavior. Documenting these shared understandings is the domain proper of the theory of practice. Bourdieu's analytical framework highlights repertoires of action which actors regularly enact as they seek to preserve, consolidate, or expand their interests. This framework also highlights the "feel for the game" and the institutional factors shaping this practical sense. The focus here is on actors' understanding of the rules at play and the consequences of breaching them.

Given the values at stake and actors' understanding of what they deem acceptable and worthwhile, rational choice provides tools for analyzing the type of inferences which actors draw and the strategies which they deploy given the configuration of resources they have, the constraints they face, their beliefs about other agents' assets, including those of their competitors, and the likely strategies of these agents. This set of tools has relevance when the stakes are high and relations geared to these stakes are competitive. In these settings, individuals are most likely to think about consequences, their potential costs and best strategies.

What about processes of historical change in times of disruption? Is there room for collaboration between the two frameworks? We are then considering conjunctures in which the sense of the familiar has collapsed. The prospect of

mutual regulation is dubious. Bearings have been blurred. Times of disruption call into question the prospect of patterned relationships not only with competitors and opponents but also with peers and allies, all the more so in that the disruption is dramatic and actors experience it as a challenge to their vested interests. The point is critical. Such conjunctures make the need for coordination with peers more pressing and obvious (Ermakoff 2008; Laitin 1998: 24). Ultimately, the goal is to ensure coordination of action. Group members need to achieve a shared understanding of where they stand.

In this type of collective conjunctures, the theory of practice helps understand how individuals draw on their stock of culturally shaped expectations and on their experience of past practices to draw inferences about their peers' and their competitors' beliefs (Schelling 1960: 90–118; O'Neill 2001: 45–62). In particular, this approach to past practices highlights the relative salience of symbols and past events in the collective memory of the group under consideration. Rational choice, for its part, investigates how actors make their strategic bids in light of this knowledge. More broadly, it highlights dynamics of strategic inferences.

The *pas de deux* I have just sketched is based not on a distinction of classes of situations but on the distinction between different moments in collective and individual decision-making processes (Ermakoff 2008: chapter 6). The theory of practice and rational choice complement one another insofar as they offer tools and hypotheses for analyzing the beliefs and behavioral choices of actors departing from past patterns and in so doing enacting historical change.²⁰ This observation is not confined to times of crisis. It applies as well to all the micro adjustments which over time produce gradual changes and contribute to large-scale shifts (Ermakoff 2010: 530–38). What is specific about situations of rupture is that they expand the scope of uncertainty. As a result, these situations contribute to making the reconfiguration of patterns and processes more highly visible and more synchronic in time.

Conclusion

In line with Bourdieu's suggestion and in contradistinction to canonical representations of academic turfs of war, my discussion has emphasized the need for and the possibility of analytical collaboration between two frameworks which critics and proponents alike invite us to view as antithetical. There are multiple venues for setting up the antithesis. One can focus on key concepts, on underlying anthropological conceptions, on predictions, on core hypotheses, or on research agendas. All this is fine for scholastic purposes (as Bourdieu would say). If, however, the point is to theorize processes of change through the lens of their etiology and as they take place in time and space, the

confrontation breaks down. Rational choice and the theory of practice shed light on how individuals and groups position themselves, engage in conflict relations, deal with uncertainties, and devise lines of conduct. In so doing, both frameworks complement one another.

Bourdieu therefore is right. An analytical *modus vivendi* indeed is possible. Yet, this conclusion has paradoxical implications for his own proposal—that is, rational choice takes over in times of crisis while the theory of practice reserves for itself “institutional times” as I have defined the term, that is, as conjunctures in which a shared sense of rule regulates patterns of relations and expectations. If both frameworks are valid, they cannot be valid at once. Their ontology sets them far apart. Furthermore, they cannot be valid at the level of generality posited by Bourdieu in the epigraph. Their validity is necessarily conditional. Their truth resides in their qualifying clauses.

Indirectly, I have underscored this point when I considered the possibility for rational choice analysts to justify Bourdieu’s claim from the standpoint of their own theoretical framework. This exercise—a scholastic one for sure—led to a reversal of claims. A priori, it is perfectly plausible to argue that the tools and assumptions of rational choice apply in the first place to institutional times. The problem here is the lack of specification. In the end, we do not know what makes one framework more likely to be relevant and valid than the other. Both are true when pitched at this level of generality because both can be equally deemed to be true. The flipside of this point is that it is always possible to turn up instances that flatly refute each. The cast shed on May 1968 by a relative deprivation argument is an instance of that kind. It illustrates the paucity of broad pronouncements that forget to specify their conditions of possibility.

The additional implication is that our focus should be on qualifying clauses. There is one clause of this kind in the epigraph: “‘rational choice’ *may* take over, *at least* among those agents who are in a position to be rational” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 131, emphasis added). Not everybody is in a position to be rational in the sense postulated by rational choice (as the theory of practice depicts it). Actors are more or less equipped to be deliberately instrumental and self-reflexive. The capacity is a potentiality inscribed in their habitus. Yet even for those “in a position to be rational,” the claim remains hypothetical (rational choice “*may* take over”). We are left with a question mark. When, that is, under which conditions, does rational choice take over? The shift to rational choice is conditional on preexisting dispositions. It is also conditional on something else that remains to be specified.

Notes

1. The proponents of a “utilitarianist vision” make two anthropological assumptions. First, they “pretend [that] agents are moved by conscious reasons, as if they consciously posed the objectives of their action and acted in such a way as to obtain the maximum efficacy with the least cost.” Second, “they reduce everything that can motivate agents to economic interest, to monetary profit” (Bourdieu 1998d: 79). The rational choice framework “reduces the universe of exchanges to mercantile exchange” (Bourdieu 1986b: 242).
2. Bourdieu emphasizes the same point in his exchange with Wacquant: rational choice conceives action as determined by the conscious aiming at goals explicitly defined (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 125).
3. “The rational calculator that the advocates of rational action theory portray as the principle of human practices is no less absurd . . . than the angelus rector, the far-seeing pilot to which some pre-Newtonian thinkers attributed the regulated movement of the planets” (Bourdieu 1998d: 133).
4. Wacquant and Calhoun (1989) propose a similar characterization, with Coleman as exemplar: “It is striking to observe how much Coleman endorses as obvious the subjectivist philosophy of rational action, understood as a *self-reflexive* sequence [*enchaînement réfléchi*] of *conscious* decisions by an actor free of all economic conditioning” (47; my translation, emphasis added).
5. “If choices are made to depend, on the one hand, on the structural constraints (technical, economic, or legal) that delimit the range of possible actions and, on the other hand, on preferences presumed to be universal and conscious, then the agents . . . constrained by the logical necessity of ‘rational calculus’, are left no other freedom than adherence . . . to the objective chances” (Bourdieu 1990a [1980]: 46).
6. “In contrast to what happens in situations of concordance when the self-evidence linked to adjustment renders invisible the habitus which makes it possible, [in moments of crisis] the relatively autonomous principle of legality and regularity that habitus constitutes *appears very clearly*” (Bourdieu 2000b: 160; emphasis added).
7. On a more micro scale, these faltering moments take the form of flickering bouts of reflection quickly engulfed by the force of habit: “Habitus has its ‘blips’, critical moments when it misfires or is out of phase: the relationship of immediate adaptation is suspended, in an instant of hesitation into which there may slip a form of reflection which has nothing in common with that of the scholastic thinker and which, through the sketched movements of the body . . . remains turned towards practice and not towards the agent who performs it” (Bourdieu 2000b: 162).
8. By contrast, individuals who remain stuck in the confines of their condition are not in a position to realize the structural logic that keeps them stuck. “Absolute alienation deprives the individual of the consciousness of alienation” (Bourdieu 2008a: 210). The Algerian urban underclass in the early 1960s is a case in point: “They are poverty and destitution, suffering and misery. They are not removed enough from their condition to constitute it as an object” (Bourdieu 2008a: 209).
9. See, for instance, Levi: “rational choice—that is, the theory of individual strategic

decision making" (1988: 7–8). Contrast with O'Neill's definition: "Rational choice theory refers to the general approach that parties pursue their material self-interest, pay attention to objective likelihoods and maximize their expectations in a conscious, calculated way" (2001: 259). In light of this definition, O'Neill observes that one can work within a strategic paradigm—"players judge likelihoods and pursue goals" (259)—without endorsing the core assumptions of rational choice such as the assumptions of objective probabilities and maximization. This point is important and helps avoid confusions and misunderstandings.

10. Collins, who extends rational choice to the determinants of emotional action—"individuals apportion their time to . . . various activities to maximize their overall flow of emotional energy" (1993: 205)—explicitly states the subsidiary character of consciousness for the viability of rational choice: "If an unconscious mechanism exists that leads toward medium-run optimizing outcomes, then individuals who rise to the level of conscious calculation would tend to come to the same conclusions as the nonconscious behavior" (205).
11. "We should evaluate the broad rationality of beliefs and desires by looking at the way in which they are shaped" (Elster 1983b: 15).
12. A point of precision: to say that actors know about alternative options is not to say that they have complete information about these alternatives.
13. Tsebelis (1990: 26) observes that "the overwhelming majority of rational-choice studies assumes that rational actors maximize their expected utility."
14. "The choice-theoretic approach to economics assumes that in making choices values exist but are fixed, and people are acting rationally in the sense of making efficient use of information" (North 1981: 49).
15. This observation underlines North's critique of Stigler and Becker (1977). They ignore "the ethical and moral judgments that are an integral part of an individual's ideological makeup" (North 1981: 49).
16. Personal commitments, for instance, can be analyzed as "acquired by rational choice, by comparing the advantages and the disadvantages associated with any commitment (including advantages and disadvantages of a purely subjective psychological nature)" (Harsanyi 1969: 523). This assumption is one of the four "motivational postulates" which, according to Harsanyi, are required by rational choice models of noneconomic social behavior.
17. In making this claim, Elster retrieves Schumpeter's (1942: 253) basic argument about the conditions fostering individual rationality.
18. The "illusion of ahistorical universalism" that is characteristic of the concepts and categories of economics is based on the forgetting of their genesis" (Bourdieu 2000a: 16).
19. The exchange between Gorski (1995) and Kiser and Schneider (1995) is instructive in this regard. Beyond the paradigmatic oppositions that frame the exchange (Gorski 1995: 783; Kiser and Schneider 1995: 789–90), the debate ultimately boils down to a critical assessment of the evidence available and its significance. Analytically, this discussion points to a qualified argument about the role of religious affiliations in strategies of institution building.

20. Along consonant lines, Sewell's call for a more direct engagement with the "dialectical complexity" of social action enacting historical change does not foreclose a priori the analytical relevance of rational choice. This engagement will have to "borrow heavily from anthropology and history" (1987: 170). Still, "Coleman's problematic . . . can help to illuminate real instances of social change" (169).