

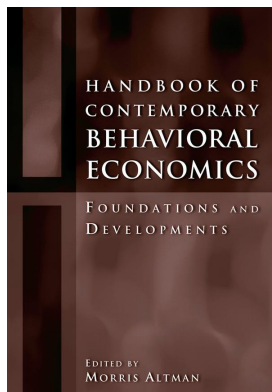
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RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY VERSUS CULTURAL THEORY

On Taste and Social Capital

PETER LUNT

There is, quite justifiably, a great deal of excitement and interest in the achievements and the potential for interdisciplinary collaboration between economics and psychology. In this essay, while not wishing to detract from these developments at all, I will consider a potential area for collaboration that remains relatively unexplored: the intersection between economics, social psychology, and sociology. The dominant approaches to the intersection between psychology and economics are applications of ideas from cognitive psychology to problems in economics. Psychologists have offered alternatives to economic accounts of behavior and decision making in positive contributions to understanding bounded rationality (Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982), economic decisions as games (Camerer 1997), emotions (Loewenstein 2000), mental accounting (Thaler 1992), and the behavioral life cycle (Shefrin and Thaler 1988). I would not go as far as Fine (2001), who argues that these developments are less collaboration than appropriation of the psychological by an imperialistic economics, but I would say that the collaboration is only on certain terms. What has proved most fruitful in interdisciplinary writing between economics and psychology is the application of cognitive principles to anomalies in economic theories. In contrast, social psychological theories and findings are largely ignored (Lunt 1995, 1996), and this may be partly because although cognitive psychologists are critical of economics, particularly of the rationality assumptions of economic analysis of consumer behavior, they nevertheless have many things in common with economists in the focus on choice and decision making, in the focus on individual cognitive processes, and in the assumption that abstract principles of decision theory are the best explanation of economic behavior.

In contrast, social psychological analysis of economic behavior (Lunt and Livingstone 1992; Dittmar 1992) has also developed in recent years but has not so directly addressed the agendas of economic theory and analysis. However, there is an approach within economics that engages with sociological and social psychological themes: the social economic theory propounded by Gary Becker (1991, 1993, 1996; Becker and Murphy 2000). In this essay I will juxtapose Becker's social economics with the social psychology of social influence and economic sociology as represented by Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1990, 1993).

In their long and distinguished careers both Becker and Bourdieu have worked on questions of taste, analyzed the family as a productive unit in the economy, have had an enduring and

fruitful interest in education, have an interest in discrimination and social class, and have developed concepts of social capital. There are clear overlaps in the substantive research agendas of these two brilliant scholars, motivated by the inadequacy of treating the family and education as black boxes irrelevant to understanding the economy and a focus on the difficulties of drawing the distinction between social and economic policy in contemporary pluralized societies. However, there are also important differences in approach to theory, empirical research programs, and normative projects between Becker and Bourdieu. Having checked most of both of these authors' work, I could not find any direct references to each other despite the fact that they both worked on the same topics and were exact contemporaries. This has partly to do with the unfortunate consequences of disciplinary horizons, but I do think it extraordinary that these positions proceed in glorious isolation from each other. However, there is an indirect connection between their work in that Becker has often acknowledged the influence of Coleman's work, particularly *Foundations of Social Theory* (Coleman 1990), in which Coleman refers briefly to Bourdieu. Coleman also co-edited a collection with Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Coleman 1991). However, even that collaboration was work in parallel rather than an attempt at integration or cross-fertilization (Coleman wrote the introduction and Bourdieu the epilogue, and neither refers to the other's work).

Becker takes inspiration from Coleman's (1990) social theory, but his main focus is on developing an economic perspective that incorporates the interaction between agents and their social environment. In contrast, Bourdieu, rather exceptionally, combines an extended corpus of work on social theory with an interest in substantive sociological questions related to consumption. It is important, in this context, to be careful when comparing Becker and Bourdieu. It would be wrong to take Becker's work as primarily a contribution to social theory, whereas much of Bourdieu's work is precisely that. My approach, therefore, is to compare the social theories of Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1990, 1993) and Coleman (1990), followed by a critical examination of the social psychological and social theoretical assumptions of Becker's work. In all this I owe a debt to Fine's (2001) juxtaposition of Becker's and Bourdieu's accounts of social capital as a way of challenging what he sees as the intellectual imperialism of economics, and also to his more general critique of the concept of "social capital."

THE SOCIAL THEORY BACKGROUND

In this section I will outline some of the main features of Coleman's and Bourdieu's work and place them in their intellectual context (rational choice theory and the sociology of culture, respectively). Both of these writers are original, and both respond to the changing nature of societies (increasing complexity, pluralism, and more open systems) in order to overcome what they see as the manifest limitations of the traditions in which their work is located. As Abell (1996) suggests, Coleman (1990) is an important part of a movement to rejuvenate rational choice theory within sociology in the face of widespread critique. Bourdieu, for his part, was part of a generation attempting to rejuvenate historical materialism in the context of rapidly changing social, economic, and political conditions.

Weber's Social Theory

In their interest in the relation between economy and society and in the central role that each gives to the analysis of agency, both Coleman and Bourdieu trace their social theory heritage back to Weber (1930, 1968). Weber reflected on the methodological issues that emerged in his substan-

tive historical and sociological writings. Ritzer (1996) locates these methodological reflections in the background debates in Germany over the status of historical theory and knowledge (see also Burke 1992). The debate was polarized between the positivists, who argued for a scientific history oriented toward developing general laws of history, and those who proposed an idiographic approach focusing on concrete actions and events. Weber aimed to overcome this polarization through the development of ideal types, which are abstract characterizations of social processes, grounded in the study of concrete cases such as bureaucracy. The resulting arsenal of ideal-typical concepts forms an analytic framework that can be used to interpret empirical historical data in order to rank social factors in terms of their causal significance. However, Weber understood this application of sociological concepts to historical data as a process of interpretation. He was trying to take the best of both nomothetic and idiographic methods and to combine them in a historical sociology that included both interpretation and causal analysis. To Weber, interpretation was just as systematic and no more subjective than causal analysis. *Verstehen* is an attempt to grasp the meaning of action in a social context, not an intuitive grasp of the meaning of a specific action or event. This is important because it means that the interpretive activities of sociology are not an attempt to do psychology, to understand the motives and thoughts of social actors, but rather an attempt to interpret action by understanding its meaning in a given social context. Action is understood to make visible the categories and processes of culture, not the motives for behavior.

Both Coleman and Bourdieu would agree with much of this perspective. Both are interested in social action in relation to economic life, and both seek to relate subjectivist and objectivist accounts of economic behavior, but they take different views on the depth of analysis that explanation requires at the level of action. Coleman takes the view, common in rational choice theory, that social analysis, although grounded in the analysis of individual action, should follow the principle of adopting the simplest possible model of human action. In contrast, the cultural sociology of Bourdieu aims for a rich, contextual interpretation of human action. Another continuity between Coleman and Bourdieu is the requirement that causal explanation should focus on understanding the interrelations among a multiplicity of factors in the interaction between complex systems. However, they take fundamentally different positions on the relationship between agency and social environment. Coleman adopts the view that there are determinable relations between the environment, the characteristics of the agent, decisions, and outcomes. His focus is on the constraints on and conditions for personal choice and the unintended consequences of these choices in the constitution of the social environment. In contrast, Bourdieu adopts a different view of the relation between structure and agency. He sees the social environment as cultural, offering guidelines for action rather than constraints on resources for action.

The Social Theory of Action

To some extent these differences reflect the indeterminacies in Weber's formulation of action. Cohen (1996) suggests that we understand Weber's account of action as three interconnected assumptions. The first is to concentrate on actions that are oriented toward others (social action). Now, as Cohen (1996) and others have pointed out, this is a very general commitment in Weber's account of action and does not pin down the range of social phenomena that are included in this definition of action. Is action oriented toward other individuals, groups, communities, institutions, or ancestors? A critical difference between Bourdieu and Coleman is that the former takes an inclusive notion of the social environment and the latter a narrower position. Coleman regards the social environment as aggregated behavior or complex forms of exchange, whereas Bourdieu interprets it as a complex intersection between rules, roles, and dispositions.

The second assumption in Weber's analysis of action is that actors orient their actions to one another's understanding. Here again an apparently simple definition disguises a great deal of variation that can be interpreted as consensus or aggregate or as a more contingent negotiation of positions. Rational choice theorists adopt aggregated or consensual models, whereas cultural theorists such as Bourdieu emphasize the contingent and strategic aspects of action.

The third assumption that Weber makes is that action can be oriented toward large-scale institutional orders. This formulation has many advantages in that it stays within the purview of self-interpreting action but allows for the specification of institutional rationality and relatively stable, macro structures as strong orienting features of social action. Weber attempted to keep these considerations of stable social structures within a theory that includes an account of agency. There has been considerable controversy over this final assumption in Weber's theory, but for our purposes again the statement of this principle can be interpreted in divergent ways, as exemplified by Coleman and Bourdieu. These differences are expressed as different positions on rationality and on the character of the social environment. Coleman takes the view that rationality should be defined exclusively in terms of means/end calculations expressed through individuals' choices as part of utility maximization. In contrast, Bourdieu falls into the tradition of the analysis of praxis, which recognizes different forms of rationality, distinguishing between means/end rationality, orientation toward others (social group membership), and rationality oriented toward macro social structures (positions on religious codes, bureaucratic or legal constraints, and social norms).

Parsons's Structural Functionalism

One of the reasons why more recent rational choice theorists have pushed the principle of adopting minimal presuppositions about individuals and social action was the relative failure of Parsons's (1951) systematic sociology. In Parsons's early work (1937) he offered a systematic analysis of the action system, and in his later work he attempted to develop a similar systematic account of the social system. He is regarded as having achieved much in his account of action, but his later work on social systems is seen as deeply problematic. The insight of contemporary rational choice theorists is that these two things are related: developing a rich account of social action is inimical to developing a powerful, formal theory of the social system. Abell (1996) contrasts the difficulties Parsons was having in the 1950s developing and gaining acceptance for a systematic account of the social system at a time when neoclassical economics was rapidly developing an account of the economic system based on the thinnest of assumptions concerning rational economic actors. Rational choice theorists take the view that the success of the macroeconomist can be reproduced in social theory by a similar device of adopting minimal assumptions about agency and social action. Linking rich descriptions of action with systematic descriptions of social and economic systems is regarded as too difficult, leading to ad hoc elaboration and a lack of elegance at both levels. These are among the reasons why rational choice theorists adopt minimal presuppositions about action, but this squarely puts the theory in conflict with approaches that focus on the complexity, contingency, and richness of action, here represented by Bourdieu.

BOURDIEU'S SOCIAL THEORY

Theory of Practice

As a social theorist, Bourdieu is in many ways the antithesis of rational choice theory. From his earliest published works, he has been concerned with the problems that accrue in attempts to sepa-

rate out issues of culture and economy. In his earliest work, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu (1977) presents the fruits of a social anthropological study of the Kabyle of Algeria. His ethnography is broad-ranging and attempts to depict the various kinds of ways that social practices are organized among the Kabyle. His theoretical orientation was against the prevailing trends of Marxist analysis of political economy, with its tendency to separate out culture and economy, and structural anthropology, with its reduced conception of human agency that looked to explain social behavior as the expression of rigidly structured codes and symbolic rules (Connor 1996, 359).

In contrast, Bourdieu offers a dynamic conception of the structuring of practice using two central concepts: habitus and cultural capital. By habitus, Bourdieu means the dispositions or propensities of a given social group that organize rather than govern practice. Social influence is not imposed on the individual from above but is enculturated in the individual through socialization and education and expressed through cultural practices such as consumption. Bourdieu complemented this conception of social influence with an emphasis on nonmaterial forms of value. Cultural capital is the expression of social position through cultural practice, and social capital refers to social contacts and relations available to the individual. Access to these forms of capital is an expression of symbolic power. Bourdieu does not reduce cultural value to economic value, but he accepts that nonmaterial forms of capital are organized as a system of exchange. In his excellent empirical study of taste, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), Bourdieu offers a detailed examination of the tastes, preferences, and cultural judgments of French society in the late 1960s. Bourdieu sought to demonstrate the fusion of economic and symbolic value through the way that practice fuses the forms of rationality related to economic and social value (or use value and cultural value). Bourdieu linked this analysis of the culture of consumption to social structure and power, arguing that taste is not some abstracted criterion of aesthetic judgment but is an expression of cultural capital that plays a central role in legitimating social difference. Cultural capital is understood as constitutive of social class and power rather than as reducible to economic resources. Bourdieu exploits the indeterminacies in the relations between different forms of capital. The relationship between social position and nonmaterial forms of capital is indeterminate because it is mediated by social reproduction (socialization and education) and because expressions of taste take the form of practices rather than judgments (as in rational choice theory). Two ideas are important here. First, the meaning of expressions of taste in consumption is their ability to symbolize social background through cultural practice, educational qualifications, and social contacts. Second, acts of consumption are inserted into appropriate contexts to enroll social capital to realize material advantages.

Cultural Theory and Social Structure

Bourdieu links this account of the culture of consumption to social class. He argues that the dominant social class appropriates the cultural field as a sphere for the symbolic expression of difference that simultaneously constitutes and justifies social and material inequality. Bourdieu developed these themes in his analysis of the cultural reception of modern art in *The Field of Cultural Production*. In this work, Bourdieu adopts a classic Marxist mode of ideology critique. He analyzes the production and reception of cultural production as a series of interlinked ideologies. In modern culture industries the creative genius of the artist is constructed as the fount of production, and a naturalistic account of reception as critical judgment is developed. This pairing of production and consumption is “masked” by the marketing of cultural objects as appealing to a natural preference. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) documents fine-grained cultural distinctions between social class fragments, for example, between the petit bourgeoisie and those with

“old money.” He then links these distinctions to different expressive orders. *Petit bourgeois* culture takes the form of rigid self-discipline, in contrast to the preference for imaginative disorder among those with higher cultural capital (Fowler 1997, 45). The relaxed attitude of the cultural elite is played out subconsciously as practice in the context of everyday culture. This focus on embodied performance in a social context is in direct contrast to the cognitive orientation of the ideology of production as the output of creative imagination and consumption as aesthetic judgment. Central to this is the way that socialization and education encode these different attitudes toward the culture of consumption. Bourgeois culture is exemplified by the application of apparently abstract, idealized, and individual judgments of taste to everyday consumption decisions in a way that reproduces and legitimates social class differences. Taste is a public practice that functions to display and legitimate social class distinctions, and this is an important component of the symbolic value of consuming a given good or service. As Slater (1997) points out, the resulting taste systems (as opposed to the hierarchy of emulation implied by Becker) are threefold: those belonging to legitimate culture, those that can potentially be legitimized, and the remainder, which by default fall into the sphere of personal choice. In contrast, Becker empties goods of their meaning in his focus on personal choice.

Habitus and Field

There is much more to say about Bourdieu, but I will conclude this exposition with a schematic account of his theory of practice. Bourdieu valorizes social structure, but he is conscious of the need to contextualize this in an account of the cognitive and practical knowledge of social actors, which he does not reduce to either social determinism or rule following (Thompson 1991). He hoped to achieve this through adopting a specific account of action as practice, for which he used the concept of habitus. By this, Bourdieu refers to the disposition to act, understand, and orient toward the world in relatively stable, regular ways, but not according to conscious control or by following rules. Bourdieu understood these dispositions to be cultivated through a process of socialization that reflects a particular social milieu. This is a mutually reinforcing cycle because people share a habitus and their nonreflective actions create the conditions under which their actions make practical sense and fit with their corporeal orientation to the world. The link between the habitus and the concepts of capital in Bourdieu’s work result from his view of the interaction between habitus and context, which he articulates through the concept of “field” or “game,” reflecting Wittgenstein’s (1958) notion of “language games.” Such games depend upon the pragmatic agreement of agents, and Bourdieu concentrates on commitment to the rules of the game and an agreement as to what is at stake or of value in the game. The field is a site of struggle over the appropriate form of capital for the game being played. As we have seen, Bourdieu uses the language of exchange to understand the field. Although most fields are social or cultural rather than economic, they are similar to markets in the sense that they are oriented toward some form of capital or profit. Agents enroll (invest) their resources in their actions in social contexts in order to gain a return in terms of sequences of actions or outcomes that result in augmentation of capital or profitable “exchange.”

The critical move here is the way that fields act as contexts for the exchange of different forms of capital, including economic capital, so that social, cultural, and symbolic capital can (in the appropriate context) be cashed in provided the right actions are taken or qualifications obtained. Thompson (1991) gives the example of buying extra oxen for the purposes of increasing symbolic capital so as to enhance marriage prospects. Economic capital is used in an appropriate way (which re-

quires cultural capital or “know-how”) so as to enhance symbolic power (in this case the ritual expression of economic capital) in order to enhance the prospects of increased social capital by making a good marriage, which potentially creates the conditions for both economic rewards and social reproduction. We can see that in this trajectory there are complicated transfers of value across different forms of capital in a particular field (the marriage market). As a sociologist interested in social inequality, Bourdieu relates this cultural analysis to the background of social class differences. Social situations on this reading are a creative interaction between three different sources of value: cultural expression, accumulated capital (material and nonmaterial), and social context (field). It is the task of analysis to separate out these different sources of value for a given practice.

We can see that the underlying social theories of Coleman and Bourdieu have some intriguing continuities and discontinuities. First, both are grounded in traditional debates in sociology and political economy. Both are also attempting to develop theories of social action. Both offer homage to Weber, and both challenge the structural functionalism of Parsons. They are both aware of the problem for social theory of specifying the relation between micro and macro levels of social analysis. Methodologically, Coleman seeks to resuscitate agent-based approaches on the assumption that what matters are behaviors with structural consequences. He accepts the limitations of methodological individualism but moderates this by considering objective social conditions. In contrast, Bourdieu cautiously adopts a structuralist position moderated by accounting for the practices of everyday life.

BECKER'S SOCIAL ECONOMICS

Background Assumptions

I will now make a comparison between Becker's social economics and Bourdieu's work. I will use Becker's recent summary of his interests in *Social Economics* (Becker and Murphy 2000) as my focal text, and I will work through some of the arguments and presuppositions in this book and criticize it from the point of view of cultural studies of consumption, as exemplified by Bourdieu's work. I will also make a variety of criticisms from the point of view of the social psychology of social influence, which is the practical context within which Becker develops his account of social economics.

In the spirit of Coleman's (1990) *Foundations of Social Theory*, Becker seeks to extend economic analysis to include social phenomena. Becker acknowledges that his project is radical, since economists typically make the assumption that individual behavior is not influenced by the actions of others. Becker claims that economic analysis can be flexible enough to include social influences on behavior, and he seeks to extend the scope of economic analysis while retaining the advantages of abstraction and explanatory power that he claims are the exclusive domain of economic analysis within the social sciences. Becker does not offer a scholarly critique of the relevant sociological and anthropological literature; instead he waves a dismissive hand in the direction of the other social sciences. Nor does he blame economists for ignoring social science research on social influence “because these other fields have not developed powerful techniques for analyzing social influences on behavior” (Becker and Murphy 2000, 3).

It is important to be clear about these claims because they set the style and the substance of Becker's engagement with the other social sciences. Essentially Becker means that social scientists have not delivered variables with the appropriate specification for economic modeling. Although Becker is radical in economic terms because of his engagement with social variables, he takes a normative stance on the nature of economic theory and modeling and makes no attempt to

meet social scientists halfway or to challenge the broad approach of economics. Becker is offering not a rapprochement with other social sciences but rather a way of managing a formal characterization of social influence that might be useful to the economic analysis of social behavior.

Becker places so strong an emphasis on the formal character of economic theory that he does not consider the scope of explanation of his social economics. He fails to appreciate that social scientists give analytic priority to the validity and the scope of their theories. Put simply, there is a trade-off between formal specification and scope in explaining complex social phenomena. The potential problems for Becker are evident when he gives examples of the kinds of social behavior that he seeks to explain. He acknowledges that a wide range of social processes must be included (culture, norms, and social structure) and that these are implicated in a wide variety of social phenomena:

Popular restaurants and books are determined in good part by what is considered “in”; a teenager’s propensity to take drugs and to smoke is very much affected by whether his peers do; a person’s preference for political candidates is affected by polls stating who is more popular; whether an unmarried mother applies for welfare is influenced by whether many women in her neighborhood are collecting welfare; the popularity of particular types of clothing, designer watches, painting and architectural styles. (Becker and Murphy 2000, 3–4)

An economic theory is a theory of choice, and Becker gives examples of the choices that are influenced by the level of adoption among the relevant social group (the social environment), which thereby creates peer pressure:

drinking in bars, smoking and eating at parties, playing tennis and other sports, attending the theater . . . attending school, praying and socializing at churches, visiting museums, working in teams or groups . . . searching for marriage mates at social gatherings, caring for lawns visible to neighbors . . . driving on one or the other side of roads. (Becker and Murphy 2000, 4)

This conceptual level in Becker’s theory refers to agents and outcomes, which are the proximal cause and consequences of rational choice. In sympathy with rational choice theory, therefore, Becker conceptualizes social influence as underlying processes (culture, norms, and social structure), wide-ranging features of the social environment (expressed as the degree of aggregation of particular social behaviors), and choices (agent and consequences).

THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE

Conformity

Social psychologists and other social scientists draw different conceptual distinctions from those implied by the separation into abstract social processes, features of the social environment and choices (agent plus outcome). I will focus on Bourdieu as an exemplar of a social scientist with a very different approach to these phenomena, but first I want to draw a comparison between Becker and the standard treatment of social influence within social psychology. One only has to look at any textbook of social psychology to see that a wide range of social influences is theorized and subject to empirical research (e.g., Hogg and Vaughan 2005). Social psychologists identify various forms of social influence, such as conformity, obedience, compliance, imitation, conversion

(minority influence), and persuasion. There are important differences among these different types of social influence. Some are explicit and others implicit; they vary depending on whether the source of influence is present or diffuse and in the mode of address (e.g., command, request). Some of these social influence processes affect public behaviors, whereas others influence private beliefs and behaviors.

Becker's formulation of social influence as peer pressure quantifiable in terms of the proportion of the reference group adopting the target behavior picks out particular values on each of these dimensions. Social pressure is implicit, based on visible normative behaviors; it affects public behaviors, and the underlying process is one of conformity. Becker is careful in his anecdotal choice of illustrative behaviors, but there are others that are better explained in terms of the operations of institutions, authority, or obedience, as well as those primarily concerned with private behaviors.

Another feature of the social psychology of social influence is that although a particular process may be the focus of the research (conformity, obedience, compliance, etc.), much of the empirical work explores the mediating influence of social context on such processes. Variables such as the visibility and proximity of the source of social influence are typically examined. What is interesting is that most studies record relatively low levels of conformity, and the experiments demonstrate how fragile conformity processes are when other contextual variables are in operation. For example, in Asch's (1952) classic studies of conformity to a group norm in a social judgment task (the social influence paradigm closest to Becker's characterization), conformity affects only 37 percent of judgments. Many subjects displayed very low levels of conformity, and when the consensus of the reference group was softened, conformity levels dropped dramatically, to around 9 percent of judgments. None of the studies of conformity in social psychology provides evidence that implicit social influence is a strong phenomenon even in laboratory settings with relatively carefully controlled experimental procedures. Becker does not refer to the literature on social influence, but it may be that he has in mind experiments such as the famous electric shock studies of obedience by Milgram (1974), where most of the subjects showed high levels of obedience. However, obedience to authority is a form of social influence very different from implicit conformity to group norms based on the kinds of social comparison processes that Becker seems to have in mind. What this suggests is that the kinds of effect imagined by Becker would require an institutionalized form of explicit social influence that operates on psychological processes such as norm conflict (the explanation suggested by Milgram). Becker, therefore, makes questionable assumptions about the power and simplicity of social influence processes. Relating this back to the formulation of rational choice theory as being opposed to social or cultural explanations of social behavior, Becker takes the side of simple assumptions about environments and agents. Yet the social psychology of social influence suggests a more complex relation between agent and context if the kinds of effect assumed by Becker are to operate.

Minority Influence

Within social psychology, the debate about levels of and conditions of social influence has broadened to include questions related to the differences between majority and minority social influence (Moscovici 1976). Working within the area of conformity, Moscovici understood that social psychologists had assumed that all social influence processes involve a majority influencing a minority. This is also one of Becker's assumptions because he focuses on the impact of group norms as a feature of the social environment that influences individual decision making. Moscovici, Lage, and Naffrechoux (1969) conducted a fascinating experiment, reversing the conditions of

the Asch experiment, in which a minority group of confederates influence the judgments of a larger group. The results demonstrate that minority influence is a low-power effect that takes time and operates by converting the private beliefs of individuals provided that they attribute competence to the minority. Moscovici interprets this kind of social influence as akin to conversion, in contrast to the combination of public compliance and private resistance that typifies conformity to group norms. The importance of these findings is that social influence can operate, if the conditions are appropriate, in a manner opposite to that suggested by Becker, and these processes are likely to be important in producing social innovation. It does not necessarily work through emulation, with the individual fitting her public behavior to group norms. Minority influence operates strategically through the attribution of competence or expertise when presented with a consistent manner but with a flexible negotiating or presentation style.

Fashion

Becker also suggests that the influence of fashion can be understood as conformity to group norms. However, in cultural analysis of fashion (e.g., McRobbie 1999) fashion is analyzed as a trickle-down of emulated styles, which are refreshed from innovations in everyday clothing styles, formalized in haute couture, and then marketed, first as fashion, then as high street style. It is difficult to see how Becker could accommodate the dynamic qualities of either the powerful minority or the circulation of styles in the production of fashion because neither operates simply through the aggregation of public behaviors. Similar difficulties occur in accounting for the role of advertising in social economics resulting from Becker's formalization of influence as conformity to peer pressure and the treatment of sources of social influence as aggregates of individuals.

Becker's Analysis of Social Economic Behavior

So far we have been testing the foundational assumptions of Becker's social economics against social and psychological theories of influence. But Becker goes beyond discussing the theoretical foundations of his subject to offer economic models of social behavior. With great creative insight, Becker expresses the normative influence of aggregate normative behavior as a term in the utility function, which he expresses as stocks of social capital. For a given choice an important determinant of utility is how much the target behavior is spread among the relevant reference group. This concept of social capital is the most important moment in the translation of the theoretical background that we have considered thus far into a formulation that potentially has a role in the utility function. It is here that Becker's focus on conformity becomes important because the notion of social capital as a force can be equated with the commonality of a given choice within the relevant reference group. The more people make a particular choice within the relevant social group, the more social capital accrues in making that choice. Consuming a particular good or service that has high social capital gets an added value in consumption by conferring the benefits of group membership.

Becker addresses the apparent conceptual contradiction inherent in an analysis of choice in behaviors where conformity pressures are strong. His argument is that conformity is not a contradiction of the principle of choice, since choosing to follow the norm can increase utility. This involves the assumption that the sanctions for nonconformity are always equivalent to the loss of utility gained through conformity. In contrast, social psychologists have been careful to separate social influence from sanctions.

Another kind of social influence comes into play when Becker discusses strong

complementarities between behavior and social capital such as driving on the right-hand side of the road. Becker treats such examples as cases in which strong complementarity between behavior and social capital are necessary conditions for utility (how else could we enjoy the pleasures of driving?). He does not deny that social interaction can lead to information gain, nor that similarities in behavior can result from the influence of particular technological constraints. His point is that these mechanisms cannot account for some of the market effects of social forces that go beyond information exchange and technical bias. The problem I have with this is that it seems important to distinguish between conformity and compliance in explaining these different cases of social influence. As a social psychological phenomenon, driving on the right-hand side of the road is a case of compliance rather than conformity. When the mechanism of social influence takes the form of a request (or, in this case, a rule backed by law), then the issue is not one of how many people are behaving in a particular way. Going against conformity involves breaking a norm, whereas not complying means breaking a rule, and each receives a different sanction—social disapprobation in the first case, compared with getting a ticket for traffic violation.

The Social Economics of Demand

Becker takes forward his assumptions into his formal economic analysis, beginning with an analysis of the relations between social interactions and demand. His demand analysis is exemplified by the case of selective exposure resulting in differential neighborhood characteristics. Agents choose which social pressure to succumb to (since presumably they have to succumb to some social pressures), choosing the social pressure with positive effects on the choices that reflect their preferences. Becker uses this account of choices as responses to social pressure as a way of replying to criticisms that the logic of normative social influence (whether institutional or interpersonal) works as a social logic with no relation to choice within markets. He is particularly keen to assert that the social influence process works through the incentives provided by the impact of conformity on utility in the context of the choices that individuals make. He is precisely arguing against the idea that there is always a clear boundary between the logic of markets and the logic of social integration. Here he aligns himself with the neo-Durkheimian work of Mary Douglas (Douglas and Isherwood 1978), quoting her insistence that in making their consumption choices people choose their associates and ways of living.

There is a very important slippage here in Becker's argument. Douglas conceives of the social environment as being structured along the twin dimensions of rule following and social affiliation such that social environments vary in how closely they constrain social behavior and how much they bind people through association. Becker locates choice at the center (as perhaps an economist should), but Douglas, by contrast, works with an important distinction from Durkheimian sociology, that between ritual as a mechanism that produces social solidarity because it reflects institutional structures and power relations in society, and the forms of association that emerge through cultural practice. Bourdieu is equally against the dominance of social structure and wants to avoid giving too much power to the agent (he therefore wants to include social influence but not social determinism). Although the agent provides the link between the social and the economic, Bourdieu has a quite different view of the mechanisms involved. For Bourdieu, the mechanisms are socialization and education, along with social status and connections in the habitus. In contrast to Becker, Bourdieu conceives of social forces not in a mechanical way but as rules (guiding principles) operating in a taste system (a system of cultural capital) mediated by social contacts (social capital).

The Social Economics of Supply

Becker complements this analysis of social influences on demand with an analysis of the interaction with supply, for which he uses a basic framework of social emulation based on a social hierarchy encoded as better neighborhoods, more attractive partners, or friendship with the rich and famous—the very things that produce positive effects on utility for the person who “chooses” to conform. Becker assumes that there is similarity of preferences across a heterogeneity of agents, this being the source of competition for socially valued goods and services. For Bourdieu, in contrast, the social environment is divided into different cultural fields that offer a context within which social groups of different kinds can play the different games of life. In Bourdieu’s formulation the link between consumption behavior and social hierarchy is complex and indirect because the habitus affords a context for the expression of difference, articulated as naturalistic “taste,” resulting in the consolidation of social position in both material and cultural benefits. The field also creates the potential for the exchange of different capitals, with culture (in the shape of the habitus and fields) mediating economic exchange. For Becker social hierarchy has economic effects because it affords an enhancement of utility. There is no equivalent of Bourdieu’s cultural capital, habitus, and field in this account.

CONCLUSION

We can see that Becker’s social economics is grounded in a series of assumptions, of which some are social theoretical, some relate to the empirical phenomena of social influence, and some relate to conceptual and methodological issues concerning the interface between economics and the other social sciences. The social theoretical assumptions are derived largely from Coleman’s revival of rational choice theory, and these were compared to the social theory of Bourdieu. This comparison helps to clarify a range of assumptions in the background of Becker’s work. Comparisons were also drawn between the social psychology of social influence and Becker’s assumptions, leading to a question of the scope of his explanations: he focuses on conformity (although at various points Becker considers compliance); he conceives of the social environment as aggregate behavior (as opposed to institutional forces and other kinds of collective social forces); and his analysis focuses on the environment, agent, and outcomes of choices as opposed to Bourdieu’s focus on socialization, cultural capital, collective processes, ritual, and practice.

Becker also makes a variety of assumptions about reference groups but does not consider the complexities of the role of such groups in social influence. Proximity (in time and space), abstraction (taxonomic versus collective groups), and institutional status (friendship groups/locale/institution/social collective) all mediate the impact of reference group conformity. Becker implicitly engages with a range of theoretical distinctions through the examples he considers, but these are not clearly specified in his analysis, and he adopts a very generalized conception of aspiration linked to shared preferences. In contrast, Bourdieu allows for a consideration of a wider range of social distinctions. Becker and Bourdieu also have different notions of social capital. For Becker social capital is something that is realized within the idealized economic agent (as part of the utility function) as a consequence of aligning with normative behavior under social pressure. In Bourdieu, social capital is understood by contrast to economic, symbolic, and cultural capital (with the focus on cultural capital) as part of a social process through which value is realized.

On a more abstract level, Becker and Bourdieu offer different accounts of the relation between economy and society and have different conceptions of agency. However, it is what they see as constituting the social that most clearly distinguishes their approaches. For Becker, the social

environment is an emergent property of mass group behavior, not consensus, public opinion, ritual, or the formation of collective or institutional processes. In contrast, Bourdieu sees in the practices of agents a reflection of their past (socialization and education), which in turn reflects social position and is constituted as cultural practice. Social environments are represented as fields of cultural practice with a variety of sources of nonmaterial value.

There are some other important differences in the specification of agency in Becker and Bourdieu. Becker focuses on decision making in the context of social emulation, whereas Bourdieu is more concerned with broader processes of socialization and enculturation, and so his account of agency is focused on practice, not choice. There are also differences in their concepts of value—the value of belonging to a group, living in a nice neighborhood, and mixing with beautiful and rich people are immanent for Becker. Value is understood to result from widely shared preferences, but for Bourdieu value takes the form of a variety of nonmaterial capitals that are potentially exchanged through the cultural practices of consumption.

The social psychology of social influence and Bourdieu's cultural theory of consumption clearly highlight a variety of issues in Becker's social economics. One temptation is to assert the radical incommensurability of economic and social science approaches to consumption. However, perhaps the features of the social environment, social influence, and agency identified in social and cultural theory could, in principle, be handled within economic theory. In Becker's work, these aspects of social influence, considered so important in the work of sociologists, anthropologists, and social psychologists, are repudiated because they do not conform to the assumptions of rational choice theory, not because they cannot in principle be specified for economic analysis. But that would be to challenge the assumptions of rational choice theory and the normative project of economics.

Finally, these theoretical issues have a particular purchase at the moment because of the increasing attention given to social capital in analyses of civic participation (Putnam 2000), analyses of economic policy (Dasgupta and Serageldin 1999), and recent analyses of related social phenomena in economic decision making such as trust (Glaeser, Laibson, and Scheinkman 2000; Sobel 2002). The theoretical differences between Becker and Bourdieu and the implicit debate over how to relate social and cultural phenomena to economics reflect some of the issues in rationalizing the rich but multifaceted concept of social capital. Although profoundly different in their approaches, both Becker and Bourdieu have shown a strong commitment to the importance of as well as the complexities involved in relating social to economic life.

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