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## FOREWORD

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The book that you hold in your hands is presumably about sex and sexuality. However, to read this book as one that is exclusively about sex, narrowly conceived as a subject matter of social-scientific investigation, would be a grave mistake. For, in many ways this book is about sexuality only insofar as the social organization of sexual desire provides a strategic microcosm within which to address some of the most fundamental questions in social theory. In the parlance of “ethnomethodology,” in what follows sexuality and sexual desire are not only a *topic for* analysis but also a *resource through which* the various contributors attempt to address (and maybe provide a resolution) to some of the central problems in the theory of action today. Therefore, yes, this *is* a book about the “social organization of sexual fields” precisely because the social organization of sexual fields allows us to begin to conceptualize in the most fruitful way possible the organization of action and motivation across all fields of action. This statement acquires more significance when we remind ourselves that if we are to develop a coherent approach to the explanation of social action, that approach must perforce take the form of a *field theory*.<sup>1</sup> If social theory is to make progress in explaining why persons are *motivated* to do what they then we must come to term with *desire*. Sexual fields are the sites where we can find the non-random organization of desire.

There are some eerie parallels between theoretical developments in sexuality studies and the theory of action since the 1970s. The key challenge has always been to provide a coherent explanation to what is an obdurate observation: sexual desire and even sexual “behavior” is patterned and regular; the issue is to attempt to account for the origins of this regularity. We may call this “the problem of sexual order” (or maybe even more accurately, the *sexual* problem of order). Social learning models attempted to shed light on the problem of sexual order by proposing the (fantastic) hypothesis that this order could be explained by building this model *into* the actor. Via a massive learning process, actors could be molded into desiring subjects; sexual styles and modes of self-presentation acquire regularity via processes of identification with and imitation of available, culturally sanctioned role models. This approach domesticates desire by making it a pliable product of institutionalized cultural scripts. This contrasts with the decided non-domestication of desire in the body of scholarship that came to be known as “Queer Theory.”<sup>2</sup> Here, rather than being a product of social conditioning desire (especially non-heteronormative desire) is that which destabilizes any attempt to create order via the imposition of a set of authoritative discourses. Yet, precisely because of the fact that desire is recovered as a subversive, de-stabilizing force, we lose the capacity to properly theorize it (because it becomes a veritable *deus ex-machina*). If in standard

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<sup>1</sup> John Levi Martin, *The Explanation of Social Action*, Princeton University Press, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Isaiah Green, “Queer Theory and Sociology: Locating the Subject and the Self in Sexuality Studies,” *Sociological Theory* 25(1): 26-45, 2007.

approaches in the sociology and psychology of sexuality desire is the *caused* by some sort of social process, the deconstructive penchant of Queer Theory questions the very capacity to engage in this sort of explanatory in the first place, without reifying the very same categories that are supposedly doing the explanation.

At the level of epistemological challenges in the explanation of social action, this impasse feels a lot like *déjà vu*. In fact, it seems to recapitulate a rather familiar story. This is the story of how social scientists, after more than a hundred years of trying to produce “scientific” accounts of human action, have instead left in their wake accounts that, when they sound “scientific” fail miserably at explaining anybody’s action (and fail in equal fashion at convincing any “real” person that that’s an account of their own or *anyone’s* action), and when they actually succeed in explaining action do not end up sounding very “scientific” (they essentially reproduce the very explanations that people give for why they do the things that they do). This story, while apparently unrelated to the contents of the book that you are about to read, is actually a prelude to my main point. Namely, that a field theory is our best bet at developing an account of action that actually *explains* why people do the things they do (or why they want the things they want, which in some cases—the successful ones—amounts to the same thing) in a way that does not ultimately amount to a paraphrase of their own explanations with long Latinate words, and one that is actually recognizable as an account of somebody’s action for everybody expert or layperson alike.

The contours of the problem are now well known, but solutions continue to be elusive. In their attempt to explain why people (or, “the folk” as distinct from the “expert” scientist) do the things that they do, social scientists rely on a fairly well established model of how beliefs and wants combine to produce action. It has long been noted—sometimes with glee, at other times with embarrassment and chagrin—that there is nothing particularly special (or even “scientific”) about this particular account of action, for it happens to be indistinguishable from that which “the folk” (whose action the social scientist is putatively trying to make sense of) use to account for their *own* and *each other’s* actions.<sup>3</sup> The recipe goes like this: if you want to explain why people do what they do, all you have to do is link what people *want* to what they *believe* in order to derive some sort of plausible story (for instance, one that preserves the “rationality” of the actions that “follow”) for why persons *do* one thing and *not* the other in some sort of setting or situation (generic or specific).<sup>4</sup>

In this respect, the fundamental model of the explanation of action that continues to dominate the social sciences is, as our colleagues in the Philosophy of Mind and the Philosophy of Action would be quick to point out, a form of “belief-*desire* psychology.” Here the desires provide the motivation or the “force” that *impels* actors to act, and the “norms” provide the grooves that canalize that action and make it regular and predictable. It is a rather unremarked fact in the philosophy of action that *desire* stands at the center of any coherent attempt to explain social action, but so little has been done to theorize the nature and provenance of this desire.

Just like our friends in philosophy, there have been various (failed) attempts in the social and

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<sup>3</sup> John Heritage, *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology*, Polity Press, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, The Free Press, 1937.

human sciences to wiggle out of the strictures of belief-desire talk. The desire (pun intended) on the part of social scientists and philosophers to find an explanatory vocabulary of action that is *not* shared by the folk is actually perfectly understandable; for if the language that we (as social scientists) use to explain action is the same as that used by the very people whose action we want to “explain” when they account for their own activity, then it seems like the job of the social scientist (as an expert endowed with some sort of specific explanatory authority) in this whole thing is quite superfluous. In fact, taking this insight to its ultimate conclusion leads to a dissolution of (or the imposition of a symmetry between) the “social scientist/folk” distinction, so that social science discourse merges into folk discourse as just another, not more “scientific” and certainly not more authoritative, way of “making sense” of one another’s actions. Note that this “ethnomethodological” (or “populist”) diagnosis of traditional action theory functions as a “deconstruction” of the very explanatory project of establishment sociology.

In between the epistemological bumbling of those who think that action is an effect of (sociological?) causes and the enlightened deconstructionism of those who revel in controverting the experts and joining the folk as just another producer of accounts about action without claiming any special epistemological or authoritative validity, there lies field theory. Like the standard explanatory model, field theory keeps all of the folk vocabulary around, including talk of beliefs and desires, norms and valuations. Unlike the folk however, who can do very well in accounting for their action by pointing to the unproblematic (“taken for granted”) qualities of those beliefs and wants, a field theory is not content with remaining at the level of phenomenology. Instead, acknowledging the unquestionably local validity of the “felt” qualities of both objects and situations as sufficient for the “motivation” of action, a field theory attempts to disaggregate qualitative judgments predicated on objects as “glosses” that point to bundle of *relations* within a “space” of position-takings. This space is never exhausted by the local phenomenology of any one actor; instead, all actors experience the qualitative impact of objects *from* their position without making this judgment necessarily invalid (each judgment is perspectival but the global organization of perspectives can be reconstructed by the analyst).

A field emerges when the qualities imputed to a given set of objects by the relevant set of actors align themselves non-randomly along some intuitively graspable dimension of valuation and evaluation. These qualities thus come to be dually constituted by the bundle of relations that specify the positions that each actor occupies in that arena. Fields unite the relevant qualities, which are retrieved from *objects*, by *actors*, endowed with the relevant *capacities*, whom, because of their sensitivity to these qualities, come to be organized in a *positional space*. The act of quality retrieval and perception (“that’s ugly”; “that’s sexy”) is a *judgment*.

As shown in the various contributions that follow, qualities specify the relation that an actor, endowed with a set of a capacities, built via a specific history of acquisition, has in relation to a given object the qualities of which she is sensitive to; in retrieving a quality *the actor directly perceives her relation to the object*. Through this mechanism, actors, qualities, objects, and judgments come to be mutually specified: thus, the positions of the various actors are specified by their distribution of judgments across the relevant objects; the position of the objects in the field is specified in the same way (an object’s position is given by the distribution of judgments across the

actors). Fields can develop across a very diverse set of judgments all tied to some sort of defining quality. Here the “desire” for the object is endogenously organized via routine experience in the field, one that results in the honing and refining of an “erotic habitus.”<sup>5</sup> No longer do we need to presuppose that desire is some amorphous energy waiting for exogenous cultural scripts to give it organization. In fields desire is endogenously organized an action is immanently ordered.

A field theory is thus *primarily* a theory of *desire*; what people want. In that respect, it reverses the perennial concern (in action theory) with beliefs and the relegation of wants to some sort of exogenous process. Because fields are essentially constituted by the non-random organization of desire, and the desire are directed at persons who are *simultaneously objects of desire and desirers of other person/objects* then sexual fields are (to borrow a phrase from the French literary theorist Roland Barthes), are *the field degree zero*, and thus the privileged case from which to empirically investigate how action is ordered within fields.

This is important because a lot of the empirical development of field theory has been done in settings in which desire for objects (paintings, books, scientific articles) or products mediate between actors. In Sexual Fields, no such external objects are required to mediate between persons. Sexual Fields represent the limiting case in which persons encounter one another in their dual role as both contributors to the organization of the field via their own classifying judgments and as objects of classification open and vulnerable to the judgments of desire and quality of the other players. Sexual fields thus induce a purely endogenous dual ordering of persons and objects in which the persons (and the person’s qualities) are the objects. Objects are arranged in an order according to the rank of the persons that choose them, and persons are arranged in an order according to the rank of the objects that they choose. Sexual field are unlike other fields in that we encounter persons on both sides of the ledger.

In this respect, it is important to not underestimate one important feature of Sexual Fields: the fact that their foundation in *desire* is impossible to ignore. All fields, are of course founded in desire; insofar as to desire an object is to *recognize* in that object the qualities that allow us to enter into an appropriate relation with it (and by implication with other persons who also align their desire towards the object in similar or opposed ways), this cannot be any other way. However, in most other fields these fundamentally erotic foundations of “social integration” are euphemized away even “sublimated” so what was initially desire is “misrecognized” as something else. In Sexual Fields, desire is “out in the open” for all to see, as is the “negative” of desire: rejection. It is precisely because the pattern of acceptances and refusals is so apparent and the ordering of actors within these set of relations so stark, that sexual fields reveal the fundamental dynamics of fields in such a strategic way.

It is no wonder that, when trying to characterize that which energizes actors to engage in action within a field by competing for that “which is at stake,” Bourdieu resorts to the Freudian term “libido.”<sup>6</sup> The contributions that follow show how, in mutually constituting one another as both subjects and objects of desire in mundane settings, effectively *investing themselves* (and their bodies)

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<sup>5</sup> Adam Isaiah Green, “Erotic Habitus: Towards a Sociology of Desire,” *Theory & Society* 37(6): 597-626, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, Polity Press, p. 167.

in “games” of mutual cognition and recognition, the deepest foundations of social order are revealed in seemingly mundane acts of erotic judgment.

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