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Entanglement in Concrete Interactions

Herbert Gintis's *Individuality and Entanglement* is an impressive, humbling book. The depth and the breadth of the knowledge of the behavioural sciences that went into it is truly remarkable. The contrast to the narrow (sub-)disciplinary fragmentation characteristic of so much research today could not be larger. A stimulating and much-needed invitation to interdisciplinary debates about the possibility to develop a unifying core of the social sciences! While I highly appreciate the invitation to have such debates, *Individuality and Entanglement* at times reads as if its goal was to settle them. This would be an exaggeration, but it certainly is an important step.

It is a rich and somewhat eclectic book. Its central claims include that people behave rationally. Not in the sense of a narrow instrumental rationality, but one in which self-regarding, other-regarding, and broader moral preferences are traded off. Underlying this argument is an evolutionary theory that provides a relational account of human behaviour. Methodological individualism, in fact, is one of villains in this story. Moreover, Gintis stresses social norms and roles as crucial for understanding social behaviour. This is because roles and norms are enforced through social sanctions or because people have internalised them so that compliance becomes emotionally rewarding. These are,

of course, themes and arguments that are rather familiar (and, on a general level, broadly acceptable) for sociologists. My hunch is that many sociologists would also be inclined to say that one could go further than that. For instance, instead of saying that preferences are context-dependent, one could theorise in a general manner the mechanisms through which specific properties of situations influence preferences. Or, instead of saying that self-interest and moral values are traded off, one could specify the social forces that underlie either motivation. Social theorists have done this on a fairly general level.

An example will follow below, but before this, a quick comment on the rational actor model. Gintis's extremely flexible version might be less controversial than he expects. The problem is not, as Gintis seems to believe, that sociologists would reject the model as inaccurate. Rather, many probably simply do not find it helpful. 'It is important to understand', he writes, 'that the rational actor model says *nothing* about how individuals form their subjective priors, or in other words, their *beliefs*'. (p. 91) But often the goal of our research is to explain preferences or beliefs. Measuring preferences can be incredibly difficult, so that a purely empirical approach is not viable. Hence, even if we would all agree on the rational choice model as the best way to express preferences, we still would be forced to eclectically draw on middle-range theories to explain these preferences. I do not see how that would overcome the problems of fragmentation described in the book. So, while I am convinced by Gintis's trenchant critique of 'disciplinary provincialism', again, I think something more is needed to provide the unifying framework he is hoping for. In his words, 'Understanding the content of preferences requires rather deep forays into the psychology of goal-directed and intentional behavior ...' (p. 88). I believe these 'deep forays' is what we should focus our energy on.

Against this background, it is regrettable that Gintis does not engage with those parts of sociological theory that share his ambitions. Examples are the works of Randall Collins [2004] or Jonathan Turner [2010a, 2010b, 2012]. Indeed, one would think that for Gintis there is much to like in them. Collins's [2004] *Interaction Ritual Chains* actually seems to offer exactly what Gintis asks from sociology—and more. It is a parsimonious but general theory with the ambition to explain the motivational force of any cognitive or material factor at any point in time. It is a radically relational theory that, unlike Gintis himself, spells out the physiological mechanisms through which human bodies and minds are 'entangled'. It is a theory that transcends disciplinary boundaries and one might even call it a sociobiological theory. Finally, with its core principle of emotional-energy maximisation, it is compatible with the wide version of rational choice that Gintis advocates. With so much in common, it would have been fascinating to read what Gintis thinks about it. Particularly, because Collins might provide the substantive theory of human motivation that is missing in Gintis's approach.

To illustrate these general concerns, I will zoom in on one of the empirical phenomena that Gintis chooses to illustrate his approach: voting (Chapter 3). Let me briefly recapitulate Gintis's argument about why people vote. Following his commitment to the rational actor model, people vote only if benefits exceed costs. This is an extremely flexible statement, because costs 'may include moral as well as self-interest motives, such as citizens' duty to vote, signaling one's status as a good citizen and garnering the good will of social network members' (p. 56).. And benefits 'may be affected by altruistic or spiteful attitudes towards others, as well as by purely ethical considerations' (p. 56). Generally, voting reflects 'a moral, materially costly but personally rewarding commitment to collec-

tive action' (47). This is certainly the case, but such statements only become interesting if we complement them with testable theories of how the different sources of costs and benefits emerge and—more importantly—how people compare and decide between the various cognitions that make up the utility function.

Gintis does not write much on these questions. He claims that voters behave, for evolutionary reasons, as if they were part of a small electorate. This matters for electoral participation, because we overcome the paradox of voting. People now can behave rationally in elections (e.g. they vote strategically), but participation is not disincentivised by the irrationality of accepting costs for something that is inconsequential.

'The character of our species as *Homo ludens* emerged from an extended evolutionary dynamic during which, until very recently, humans lived in small hunter-gatherer bands in which all political activity was doubtless consequential ...' (p. 63).

This is an original argument, but it remains too abstract and therefore only takes us so far. It is quite plausible that the evolutionary history of our species produced general dispositions to engage in politics. However, we still lack a theory connecting general dispositions to concrete motivations in the here and now. For instance, we would still have to know why people show variable moral commitment to voting, what exactly makes voting 'personally rewarding', and which metric people use to compare, say, the benefit of signalling character virtues to the costs of reading party manifestos or cueing in front of the voting booth.

I will return to these questions, but first I would like to emphasise that there is much to agree with in Gintis's arguments. Most political scientists would accept that voters have a preference order influencing whom they vote for, that variable costs (e.g.

through voter registration procedures) influence participation, and that most voters do not accurately factor in the true utility of voting. Again, what makes the model particularly uncontroversial is that all kinds of social or ethical considerations are included as costs and benefits.

The discussion becomes, unfortunately, a bit thin when Gintis tries to demonstrate the value-added of the model compared to other explanations. For instance, he dismisses the argument that voters seek approval from their social network by simply stating that ‘people do not generally much care whether or not their colleagues, relatives, or neighbors vote’. (p. 65) That irritated me, because I would experience considerable shaming from my colleagues and relatives if I did not vote (he is probably right about some of my neighbours, though). Gintis is also not entirely fair to what he calls ‘expressive theory’. In his very brief critique, he states that expressive models ‘do not explain why people consider participating a prosocial act and feel guilty having failed to participate. They also fail to explain why people are rewarded with social approval when they participate. Finally, they explain none of the [previously described] rational behavior ...’ (p. 66). To begin with, I would maintain that Gintis also does not really elaborate a theory of prosociality, guilt, and social reward. Moreover, I think there are rather prominent expressive models grounded in Social Identity Theory or Self-Categorization Theory that actually do help us to understand these phenomena [e.g. Huddy et al. 2015]. If people are motivated to participate in politics through an affectively charged group membership (Party Identity), then non-voting should indeed come with the guilt of having ‘let down’ the team. They would be particularly motivated in close elections, because the identity is made salient in the campaign. There is also nothing in expressive models that contradicts strategic voting. To the contrary, a party identity makes people care strongly

about *winning* per se (just as much as they want their football team to win) and so it makes a good deal of sense to vote strategically, say, for a potential coalition partner close to the electoral threshold. The problem that expressive models share with Gintis’s account, in my opinion, is that they are based on a rather vague theory of how identities emerge and of how they become active in concrete situations.

In sum, we can question how original Gintis’s explanation is, but he certainly provides an elegant model with which to summarise many explanations put forth by political scientists. More importantly, we should think about whether we can go beyond Gintis’s rather abstract claims about humans’ predispositions and instead theorize the concrete social mechanisms translating such predispositions into motivations. In fact, echoing what was written above, I would claim that a Durkheimian-Collinsian theory of voting can go further by specifying how Gintis’s ‘social rationality’ works (see Marx, 2019, for an elaboration).

Political life, for most people, is subjectively experienced primarily in mundane conversations about politics. We might regard these conversations as rituals with the potential to create what Durkheim [1995/1912] in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* called ‘collective effervescence’. This captures, for instance, the paradoxically pleasant feeling we experience in situations of *shared* indignation about politics. Some readers will recognise the situation in which left-wing intellectuals engage in lively lunch talk about some form of social inequality they emphatically (and collectively) dislike—without any disagreement or real exchange of information. Although the topic should, on the face of it, invoke negative emotions, people actually seem to enjoy talking about it. Something is happening in our bodies that makes certain ways of talking about something negative enjoyable. The short answer to this puzzle is that shared indignation is

pleasant because it is a bonding experience. For Collins [2004], it has this quality, as much political interaction does, because it provides a cognitive object for the shared focus of attention. This shared focus, which is also crucial in Tomasello's [2019] account of emotion sharing, helps human bodies to coordinate rhythmically. Many fascinating studies from psychology and biology have confirmed that such rhythmic coordination (a) is ubiquitous in social life and (b) that it facilitates bonding—for instance, through mechanisms related to the endogenous opioid system [Mogan et al. 2017]. An example is a laboratory experiment by Tarr, Launay and Dunbar [2016]. They equipped co-present participants with headphones (playing pop music) and let them perform dance moves in different conditions. Performing the dance moves in synchrony significantly raised participants' pain thresholds, a good indicator for elevated endorphin levels.

Importantly, rhythmic coordination can also take the form of smoothly flowing conversations, although it is probably more intense in large gatherings involving synchronisation, such as demonstrations. Now, if the question is why people are motivated to acquire political opinions or why they vote, the answer might be that these are 'entry tickets' to emotionally rewarding rituals. At the same time, political opinions are *outcomes* of rituals. As Durkheim observed already, ritual communities tend to charge the physical or cognitive symbols that serve as a focus of attention with positive emotion. These are, as it were, the social mechanisms underlying Damasio's [1994] somatic markers or Haidt's [2012] moral intuitions. In this way, a political party, candidate, or even attitude can turn into a group symbol that carries a positive emotion from past physical encounters. Depending on one's history of interaction rituals, actual voting—as well as thinking or talking about it—invokes these positive emotions. This, I believe, could be the basis for an argument about

the social and physiological reasons *why* voting feels good for some people. To develop it and to assess its empirical usefulness would indeed require the dialogue of, inter alia, political scientists, social theorists, and biologists. If *Individuality and Entanglement* encourages such dialogues, it would be a major achievement.

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