Political Contingency

Studying the Unexpected, the Accidental, and the Unforeseen

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Chapter 3

Resilience as the Explanandum of Social Theory

Philip Pettit

The notion of the resilience is of the first importance, I believe, for an understanding of some of the major styles of social explanation. This is because the resilience of various social phenomena is the best candidate for the *explanandum* of much social science. Here, drawing on earlier work that I have done in the area, I attempt to underline that message. The chapter is in three sections. In the opening discussion I introduce the notion of resilience, relating it to the more general notion of contingency. In the second section I argue for the importance of resilience as an *explanandum* of rational choice and in the third for its equal importance as an *explanandum* of functionalist theory. The aims of these enterprises, and the relationship between them, make excellent sense—and perhaps only make such sense—once they are seen as seeking to explain why one or another phenomenon is resilient.

Contingency and Resilience

Think about the actual world as one among an indefinite number of possible worlds, where each possible world represents a way that things could have been, and where two possible worlds need only differ in miniscule respects. Contingent phenomena, by standard accounts, are those that materialize in the actual world but that do not figure in every possible world: they are not necessary. Contingent phenomena do actually obtain but they do not have to obtain. While they figure in the actual world, there are ways the actual world might have been—possible worlds, that is—where they do not appear.

This received way of thinking about contingency has one obvious drawback. It makes the class of contingent phenomena into a large, catch-all category that includes every actual way things are that just might not have been so, however unlikely it is that they should not have been so. It lumps together the law of gravitation with the fact that I got up late this morning with the fact that ours is a social species, casting each of these truths as equally contingent; in each case, after all, there are some possible worlds where one or the other, or more, of these truths do not hold.

This drawback suggests that we should revise our approach and think about contingency, not as a property that something has or fails to have, period—not, in particular, as actuality-combined-with-non-necessity—but as a property that events and facts and the like can have in a lower or a higher degree. And the metaphor of possible worlds—we need only treat it as a metaphor[1]—can also help us to represent what contingency in this graduated sense involves.

A way things are in the actual world will be contingent in the graduated sense to the extent to which they are not found elsewhere, non-contingent to the extent to which they are found at other locations: found, that is, in other possible worlds. The less frequent their location in non-actual worlds, the more contingent they are; the more frequent, the less contingent. The limit of contingency will be realization in the actual world but nowhere else; the limit of non-contingency will be realization in every possible world—i.e., necessity. And there will be any number of in-between grades.

The word I use for the property of figuring in the actual world and being relatively common across other possible worlds is "resilience." Phenomena are high in resilience and low in (graduated) contingency to the extent to which they are realized, not just in the actual world, but under a relatively large number of variations on the actual world: across a relatively high number of other possible worlds. Take the actual world and ask of some phenomenon within it how far it is resilient, how far contingent. The answer will be fixed by how far it will continue to be realized under different variations on the actual world: experimentally and historically vindicated variations but also variations about which we can only theorize.

The discussion so far shows how resilience comes in degrees, with the more resilient phenomenon occurring in a greater number of possible worlds, the less resilient occurring in a smaller number. But resilience may vary in quality as well as degree, and this turns out to be an important

observation from the point of view of political theory and social science. We will see why in later sections.

Suppose that two phenomena are equally resilient. Suppose that they occur in the same number of possible worlds and so have the same raw resilience score. It should be clear that they may still differ in an important aspect. The non-actual worlds in which one of them figures may be much more interesting for us as a class than the worlds in which the other figures. Let the one phenomenon be resilient across X-worlds, the other resilient across Y-worlds. It may be that X-resilience connects more deeply with our interests—say, our theoretical or practical interests—than Y-resilience, and so we will naturally attach more importance to it. X-resilience will be resilience of a different quality from Y-resilience, even when the degree of resilience is the same in each case.

How are we likely to assess possible worlds in determining the importance of resilience across those worlds? One obvious way would be by reference to the probability of the worlds: their chance of being actualized. The fact that a phenomenon is resilient across two worlds, where one is relatively more likely than another, is going to make resilience in the first world more interesting from many points of view. The greater probability of that world is going to mean, for example, that the information about the phenomenon's resilience in that world is of much greater predictive interest.

If we knew all the worlds where something was resilient, and had information on the exact probability of each of those worlds—the exact chance of its occurring—then we would know the absolute probability of that phenomenon. While it might be heuristically interesting and even indispensable, then, to approach the topic via a consideration of resilience, we could state our findings in simple probabilistic terms. But of course that information about probability will often not be available. We will have firm intuitions about the groups of possible scenarios where the phenomenon will occur—or that have such and such a probability of occurring—but no complete probability ordering of those worlds in relation to worlds where the phenomenon does not occur or is unlikely to occur. Thus we may grade the resilience of a phenomenon by reference to the probability of the worlds where it is resilient, while remaining unable to discharge the concept of resilience in favor of that of probability.

Is there any other sensible way in which we might want to grade the resilience of a phenomenon? Surprisingly, I think there is. Suppose the phenomenon involves our continuing to enjoy some good. We might take

great consolation in the fact that the good will continue to be available in worlds where we behave well, even while admitting that it is more probable we will revert to type and behave badly; after all, this will mean that whether or not we enjoy the good is up to us: it is within our own control. Or we might be delighted to find that it will continue to be available regardless of how badly certain others behave, even while admitting that they are entirely benign and very unlikely to behave badly; this will mean that whether or not we enjoy the good is not up to them: it is not within their control.

If we prioritize probability or chance in grading resilience, that will be because we are concerned with whether the worlds where the phenomenon continues to be realized are probable or not; let a world be relatively unlikely to come about, and we will have less interest in whether the phenomenon remains in place there. If we take the other route, prioritizing our own control or that of others, that will be because we are concerned with whether the worlds where the phenomenon endures are ones that are within our own power of realization or the power of realization of others. We may also mix concerns, of course, being focused, among equally probable worlds, on those that are more easily controllable by us or less easily controllable by others; or being focused, among worlds where control is equal, on those that have a higher chance of realization. But for ease of presentation I shall not discuss that possible mixing further.

In the next section I will argue for the importance of chance-graded resilience for rational-choice theory and in the third section for its importance in functionalist theorizing. Control-graded resilience is important for political philosophy, in particular for explicating ideals like that of freedom, as I have argued elsewhere.[2] But I shall concentrate in this essay on social theory.

Resilience and Rational-Choice Explanation

The Explanatory Interest of Resilience

There are three different types of *explananda* that are of particular importance in social science, as I have tried to argue elsewhere.[3] We may be interested in explaining the emergence or appearance of a phenomenon: say, the emergence of a certain regularity, or norm, or organization, or whatever. We may be interested in explaining the survival or reproduction

of the phenomenon over a certain time, perhaps through a series of crises. Or, I would say, we may be interested in explaining its resilience: explaining why it is that for a variety of possible scenarios, possible ways the world may go, it remains a fixture.

There are two deep reasons why resilience is a natural focus of social investigation. One is that we will often be unable to access the information that would tell us, or tell us with any degree of assurance, how something emerged or how it survived through this or that period or crisis. Thus the natural question will be how far we can tell resilient apart from non-resilient phenomena, how far we can distinguish fixtures on the social landscape from mere ephemera. Already in the eighteenth century, the Baron de Montesquieu[4] had made such an argument. He saw how difficult it would be to tell detailed stories about how things come about, identifying their "particular causes"—and how relatively uninteresting such very detailed stories might be. He recommended instead that we look for "general causes": that is, causes that make various phenomena more or less inevitable, establishing conditions such that the phenomena are likely to remain in place under all or most of the different scenarios that those conditions allow.

The second, perhaps deeper reason for the interest of resilience to social scientists—it surely had an influence on Montesquieu, too—is that the investigation of resilience is vital for choosing policies and designing institutions; a great deal of social science is pursed with these ends in view. Let our concern be whether we should go for this sort of institution or that other variety, this way of trying to achieve a certain result or that alternative means, and one of the main issues will be: which of those institutions is likely to prove more durable—likely to prove more durable in face of shifting fashions and uncertain levels of human commitment. The knaves principle,[5] dubious though it may be as a unique principle of institutional design,[6] was devised with precisely this sort of concern in mind. Bernard Mandeville[7] gave early expression to it when he hailed the constitution that "remains unshaken though most men should prove knaves." The principle remains in place among economists and others when they seek out ways of arranging things in the market or the polity that are "incentive-compatible": compatible with the ordinary run of human motivations, i.e., capable of surviving in the presence of such motivations.

Two major styles of explanation in social science over the past century have been rational choice, sought by economists and economically minded social scientists, and functionalist, associated with sociology, an-

thropology, and related disciplines. Rational-choice explanation seeks to make sense of various phenomena by reference, roughly, to the rational self-interest of individual agents. Functionalist explanation tries to achieve this end by displaying the phenomena as serving to promote one or another alleged social benefit.

I have argued elsewhere that each of these explanatory styles has tended, at least in the main, to be applied with a view to elucidating the resilience or the presumed resilience of various phenomena, rather than their emergence or survival. I now proceed to explain that claim, though I can do so only in a very sketchy way.[8] While I will not focus particularly on the issue, it should be obvious that resilience will be more interesting in each case to the extent that it is resilience across worlds that have a greater chance of being realized. Thus the suggestion is that chance-graded resilience is the focus of much social science.

Rational-Choice Explanation and Resilience

Economists and rational-choice theorists present human agents as relatively self-regarding creatures who act with a view to doing as well as possible by their predominantly self-regarding desires.[9] These desires are usually assumed to be desires for what is loosely described as economic advantage or gain: that is, roughly, for advantage or gain in the sorts of things that can be traded. But self-regarding desires, of course, may extend to other goods, too, and there is nothing inimical to economics in explaining patterns of behaviour by reference, say, to those non-tradable goods that consist in being well loved or well regarded.[10] The economic approach is tied to an assumption of relative self-regard but not to any particular view of the dimensions in which self-regard may operate.

But does the egocentric picture fit? Are human beings rational centres of predominantly self-regarding concern? It would seem not. Were human agents centres of this kind, then we would expect them to find their reasons for doing things predominantly in considerations that bear on their own advantage. But this isn't our common experience, or so at least I shall argue.

Consider the sorts of considerations that weigh with us, or seem to weigh with us, in a range of common, or garden, situations. We are apparently moved in our dealings with others by considerations that bear on their merits and their attractions, that highlight what is expected of us and what fair play or friendship requires, that direct attention to the good we

can achieve together or the past that we share in common, and so on through a complex variety of deliberative themes. And not only are we apparently moved in this non-egocentric way. We clearly believe of one another—and take it, indeed, to be a matter of common belief—that we are generally and reliably responsive to claims that transcend and occasionally confound the calls of self-regard. That is why we feel free to ask each other for favours, to ground our projects in the expectation that others will be faithful to their past commitments, and to seek counsel from others in confidence that they will present us with a more or less impartial rendering of how things stand.

The claim that we ordinary folk are oriented towards a non-egocentric language of self-explanation and self-justification does not establish definitively, of course, that we are actually not self-regarding. We all recognise the possibilities of rationalisation and deception that such a language leaves open. Still, it would surely be miraculous that that language succeeds as well as it does in defining a stable and smooth framework of expectation, if as a matter of fact our sensibilities do not conform to its contours: if, as a matter of fact, we fall systematically short—systematically and not just occasionally short—of what it suggests may be taken for granted about us.

We are left, then, with a problem for rational-choice theory. The mind postulated in rational-choice theory is that of a relatively self-regarding creature. But the mind that people display towards one another in most social settings, the mind that is articulated in common conceptions of how ordinary folk are moved, is saturated with concerns that dramatically transcend the boundaries of the self. So how can we invoke the workings of the economic mind to explain behaviour, when the black box at the origin of behaviour does not apparently contain an economic mind? What I suggest is that in the most unlikely social settings self-regard may still have an important presence: it may be virtually if not actually there; it may be waiting in the wings, even if it is not actually on stage.

Suppose, first, that people are generally content in non-market contexts —we can restrict our attention to these—to let their actions be dictated by the cultural framing of the situation in which they find themselves: by the habits or perhaps the whims underpinned by that framing. Suppose, in the second place, that despite the hegemony of cultural framing in people's everyday deliberations and decisions, there are certain alarm bells that make them take their own interests into consideration. People may proceed under a more or less automatic cultural pilot in most cases, but at

any point where a decision is liable to cost them dearly in self-regarding terms, the alarm bells will tend to ring and prompt them to consider personal advantage. And suppose, third, that attending to considerations of personal advantage will lead people, generally if not invariably, to act so as to secure that advantage: they become disposed to do the relatively more self-regarding thing.

Under these suppositions, self-regard will normally have no actual presence in dictating what people do; it will not be present in deliberation and will make no impact on decision. But it will always be virtually present in deliberation, for there are alarms which are ready to ring at any point where the agent's interests get to be possibly compromised, and those alarms will call up self-regard and give it a more or less controlling deliberative presence. The agent will run under cultural pilot, provided that that pilot does not carry him or her into terrain that is too dangerous from a self-interested point of view. Let such terrain come into view, and in most cases the agent will quickly return to manual; he or she will quickly begin to count the more personal losses and benefits that are at stake in the decision on hand. This reflection may not invariably lead to self-regarding action—there is such a thing as self-sacrifice, after all—but the assumption is that it will do so fairly reliably.

What will rational-choice theory explain under this hypothesis about virtual self-regard? My answer is: the relative resilience of the phenomenon or procedure or institution that is said to be in people's virtual self-interest.

Imagine a little set-up in which a ball rolls along a straight line—this, say, under Newton's laws of motion—but where there are little posts on either side that are designed to protect it from the influence of various possible but non-actualised forces that might cause it to change course; they are able to damp incoming forces, and if such forces still have an effect—or if the ball is subject to random drift—they are capable of restoring the ball to its original path. The posts on either side are virtual or standby causes of the ball's rolling on the straight line, not factors that have an actual effect. So can they serve any explanatory purpose? Well, they cannot explain the emergence or the continuation of the straight course of the rolling ball. But they can explain the fact—and, of course, it is a fact—that not only does the ball roll on a straight line in the actual set-up, it also sticks more or less to that straight line under the various possible contingencies where disturbance or drift appears. They explain the fact, in other words, that the straight rolling is not something fragile,

not something vulnerable to every turn of the wind, but rather a resilient pattern: a pattern that is robust under various contingencies and that can be relied upon to persist.

The resilience explained in this toy example may be a matter of independent experience, as when I discover by induction—and without understanding why—that the ball does keep to the straight line. But equally the resilience may only become salient on recognising the explanatory power of the posts: this, in the way in which the laws that a theory explains, may only become salient in the light of the explanatory theory itself. It does not matter which scenario obtains. In either case the simple fact is that despite their merely standby status, the posts serve to resolve an important matter of explanation. They explain, not why the pattern emerged at a certain time, nor why it continues across a certain range of times, but why it continues across a certain range of contingencies: why it is modally as distinct from temporally persistent.

As a reference to the virtually efficacious posts explains the resilience with which the ball rolls on a straight line, so I suggest that a reference to a merely virtual form of self-regard may explain the resilience with which people maintain certain patterns of behaviour. Imagine a given pattern of human behaviour whose continuation is actually explained by the cultural framing under which people view the relevant situations and by their habit of responding to that framing. Suppose that that pattern of behaviour has the modal property of being extremely robust under various contingencies: say, under the contingency that some individuals peel away and offer an example of an alternative pattern. The factors that explain its actually continuing may not explain this robustness or resilience; there may be no reason, so far as they go, why the example of mutant individuals should not display a new way of viewing the situation, for example, or should not undermine the effects of inertia. So how to explain the resilience of the pattern? Well, one possible explanation would be that were the contingencies envisaged to produce a different pattern of behaviour, the alarm bells of self-interest would ring and self-regarding deliberation would lead most of the mutants and would-be mutants back towards the original pattern.

I said earlier that in all likelihood the thresholds at which people's alarm bells ring, and they begin to think in self-regarding terms, may vary from individual to individual. This means in turn both that a pattern of behaviour may be very resilient in some individuals and less resilient in others and that the individual-level explanations of resilience may not

have the same force; they may support different predictions for different individuals. But this variation, of course, need not affect aggregate-level explanation. While allowing for individual differences in self-regard thresholds, for example, we may be confident that across the population as a whole a certain general pattern of behaviour enjoys resilience in relation to a certain degree of drift or disturbance in the producing causes; people's thresholds may generally be low enough to ensure that self-regard will kick in and stablise the pattern.

The analogy with the rolling ball serves to show how in principle the model of virtual self-regard may leave room for the economic explanation, at the level of individual or aggregate, of behaviour that is not actively generated by considerations of self-regard. But it may be useful to illustrate the lesson more concretely.

David Lewis's[11] work on convention is often taken as a first-rate example of how economic explanation can do well in making sense of a phenomenon outside the traditional economic domain of the market. He invokes the fact that conventions often serve to resolve certain problems of coordination; thus the convention of driving on the right (or the left) serves to resolve the coordination problem faced by drivers as they approach one another. But what is supposed to be explained by Lewis's narrative? He is clearly not offering a historical story about the emergence of conventions. And, equally clearly, he is not telling a story about the factors that actually keep the conventions in place; he freely admits that people may not be aware of the coordination problem solved by conventional behaviour and may stick to that behaviour for any of a variety of reasons: reasons of inertia, perhaps, or reasons of principle or ideology that may have grown up around the convention in question.

The best clue to Lewis's explanatory intentions comes in a remark from a later article when he considers the significance of the fact that actually conventional behaviour is mostly produced by blind habit. "An action may be rational, *and may be explained by the agent's beliefs and desires,* even though that action was done by habit, and the agent gave no thought to the beliefs or desires which were his reasons for action. If that habit ever ceased to serve the agent's desire's according to his beliefs, it would at once be overridden and corrected by conscious reasoning."[12] This remark gives support to the view that what Lewis is explaining about convention, by his own lights, is not emergence or continuance but resilience. He implies that the servicing of the agent's—as it happens, self-regarding—desires is not the actual cause of the conventional behaviour but a standby cause: a

cause that would take the place of a habit that failed to produce the required behaviour in circumstances where that behaviour continued to be what self-interest required. And if the servicing of self-regard is a standby cause of this kind, then what it is best designed to explain is the resilience, where there is resilience, of the conventional behaviour.

But it is not only the Lewis explanation of conventional behaviour that lends itself to this gloss. Can we explain American slave-holding by reference to economic interests,[13] when slave-holders articulated their duties, and conducted their business, in terms of a more or less religious ideology? Yes, to the extent that we can explain why slave-holding was a very resilient institution up to the time of the Civil War; we can explain why the various mutants and emancipationists never did more than cause a temporary crisis. Can we explain the failure of people to oppose most oppressive states as a product of free-rider reasoning,[14] when it is granted that they generally used other considerations to justify their acquiescence? Yes, so far as the free-riding variety of self-regarding reasoning would have been there to support non-action, to make non-action resilient, in any situation where the other, actual reasons failed to do so and alarms bells rang. Can we invoke considerations of social acceptance to explain people's abiding by certain norms, when I freely grant that it is considerations of a much less prudential kind that keep most people faithful to such norms?[15] Yes, we certainly can. Self-regarding considerations of social acceptance can ensure that normative fidelity is robust or resilient if they come into play whenever someone begins to deviate, or contemplate deviation, and if they serve in such cases to restore or reinforce compliance.

The upshot will be clear. We can make good sense of the economic explanation of culturally framed, uncalculated behaviour in terms of the model of virtual self-regard. That model shows that the assumptions which economists make about the human mind, in particular about human motivation, can be rendered consistent with the assumptions of commonplace, everyday thinking. And it shows that so interpreted, the assumptions motivate a promising and indeed developing program for economic explanation: and explanation, not just in the traditional areas of market behaviour, but across the social world more generally.

I have concentrated on the sort of explanation available in non-market contexts where there is a particular problem about ascribing explicit, rational-choice calculation. But even in areas more closely related to the market, rational-choice theory often opts for explaining resilience rather than emergence or continuance as such. Equilibrium explanation serves to

promote the explanation of resilience quite explicitly, for a stable equilibrium is precisely a point or area of resilient convergence; a region such that when individuals drift into behaving in a way that takes them away from it, then, other things being equal, they will be led to correct for this and to return to their original pattern. Not only is resilience the natural *explanandum* for rational-choice theory outside the market context, then; it also has a more general claim on that status.

Resilience and Functionalist Explanation

The problem that I used to motivate my argument about rational-choice theory was that if that theory is taken to explain the emergence or continuance of certain forms of behavior, at least outside the market context, then it faces the problem of an empty black box; the rational choice calculation that would presumably be required to explain the genesis of the behavior is not available to do the required work. It turns out that a similar problem besets the project of functionalist explanation in social choice, as is commonly alleged, and that the best way of construing the project so as to avoid that problem is also to take it to be focused on the explanation of resilience, not emergence or survival.

The biological model of functional explanation suggests that the aim of the functional approach in social science is to explain why certain social traits are to be found in this or that society or institution or whatever, as the biological analogue explains why certain traits are there to be found in this or that species or population. And the availability of a natural selection mechanism to make sense of functional explanation in biology raises the question as to what sort of mechanism underlies functional explanation in social science. The empty black box problem is that for most functional explanations in social science there is no obvious mechanism to cite and that the explanations, therefore, are apparently baseless.[16]

Why do we find religious rituals in various societies? Because they have the function of promoting social solidarity.[17] Why do we find common ideas of time and space, cause and number?[18] Because they serve to make mental contact and social life possible. Why do we find certain peacemaking ceremonies in this or that culture? Because they serve to change the feelings of the hostile parties towards one another.[19]

The problem with all of these bread-and-butter examples of functional explanation is that it is not clear why the fact that the trait in question has

the functional effect cited explains why the trait is found there: explains why we find the relevant religious rituals or peacemaking ceremonies or structures of social stratification. It is not clear what mechanism is supposed to operate in the black box that links the functionality of the trait with its existence or persistence. No one supposes that intentional design plays the linking role. The only mechanism that could do so appears to be a mechanism of selection akin to that which is invoked in biology; there may be other mechanisms possible in the abstract but they would not seem to fit these standard sorts of cases.[20] And in most cases there is no evidence of a mechanism of selection having been at work.

There are some examples, it is true, where functional explanation in social science can be backed up by a selectional story. Some economists say that the presence of certain decision-making procedures in various firms can be explained by their being functional in promoting profits, and they back up that explanation with a scenario under which the firms with such procedures, being the firms which do best in profits, are the ones that survive and prosper: they are selected for the presence and effects of those procedures in a competitive market.[21] But it is very implausible to think that such selectional mechanisms are available for social-functional explanation in general.[22] The black box which functionalist thinkers apparently have to postulate is in most cases empty.

But if we can have recourse in the rational-choice case to the notion of a virtual mechanism of self-regard—a mechanism that may not operate under actual circumstances but that would operate under relevant counterfactual conditions—then we can equally well help ourselves in the functionalist case to the notion of a virtual mechanism of selection. The idea would be this. Maybe there has not been any historical selection of a given type of institution for the fact that its instances have a certain beneficial effect. But still it might be worth noting that were the type of institution in question to be in danger of disappearing—say, under disturbance or drift—then a selectional mechanism would be activated that would preserve it against that danger. The institution is not the product of actual selection, so it may be assumed—again, this is the worst-case assumption from our point of view—but it is subject to virtual selection: it would come to be selected in any of a variety of crises that put it under pressure.

The idea here is familiar from biology and extends readily to social science. Suppose we say that a certain trait is adaptive or that the gene responsible for the trait increases the inclusive fitness of the bearer in a certain environment: roughly, it increases the propensity of the bearer to

replicate its genes. Just saying that a trait is adaptive does not amount to saying that it has actually been selected for in a historical process. After all, a trait might be adaptive or a trait might come to be adaptive due to a change in the environment, without ever having played a role in causing its bearers to be selected. What has to be true if a trait is adaptive is that were it to be put under pressure—as it will be, of course, under ordinary evolutionary conditions—then it would cause its bearers to be selected: they would stand a better chance of replicating their genes than relevant competitors. Adaptiveness goes with being virtually, if not actually, favoured by selectional processes.[23]

It is easy to imagine virtual selection at work in the social as well as the natural world. Imagine that golf clubs—that is, the institutions—have emerged purely as a matter of contingency and chance: imagine that their popularity and spread has been due entirely to the brute fact that people enjoy swinging strangely designed implements at a solid little ball and seeing how far and how accurately they can hit it. This is to suppose that golf clubs have not actually been selected for in anything like a history of competition with other institutions. Consistently with the absence of any such historical selection, however, what might well be the case is that golf clubs have certain effects—certain functional effects—such that were they to come under any of a variety of pressures, then the fact of having those effects would ensure that they survived the pressure. And if that were the case, then it would be natural to say that though not the beneficiaries of actual selection, golf clubs do enjoy the favour of a virtual process of selection.

The story is not outlandish. For golf clubs do have certain effects that are functional from the point of view of members. They are expensive to run and so generally exclusive of all but the well-to-do. They are accessible from a city base. And they enable the well-to-do in any city or town to make useful business and professional contacts. What better way to establish a business or professional relationship than in the course of a relaxed round of golf? It is plausible, then, that were golf clubs to come under various pressures—were the cost of maintaining them and the cost of membership to rise, for example—still they might be expected to survive; we might not find people leaving the clubs in the numbers that such pressures would normally predict. The members of the clubs would be forced to reconsider their membership in the event of this sort of pressure but that very act of reconsideration would make the functionality of the club visible to them and would reinforce their loyalty, not undermine it. And were some members to leave then it would become clear to them, and to others, that they lost out in doing so.

As it is reasonable to suppose that people display a virtual, if not always an actual, self-regard, so this sort of example shows that it is quite plausible to think that social life is often characterised by virtual processes of selection. Among the institutions of the society, there are many that have functional effects. And while those effects may not give us ground for thinking that the institutions were actually selected for the effects, they may well give us ground for believing that the institutions would be selected under various counterfactual conditions. The institutions are not the beneficiaries of actual selection but they do benefit from virtual selection.

In the example given, the virtual selection depends in part on virtual self-regard, and some may wonder if the two forces are really distinct; they may suggest that virtual selection is one particular pattern to which virtual self-regard gives rise. I don't think this is right, though I have no objection in principle. The causal processes underlying virtual selection may just not be the forces recognised in rational choice theory.

I have elsewhere suggested a functional explanation for the persistence of counter-productively high rates of criminal punishment, for example, that invokes decidedly non-rational forces.[24] The idea is that if legislators reduce rates of punishment, then no matter how beneficial this proves overall, it will lead sooner or later to a crime that would not have been committed without the reduction; that this will cause a hue and cry in the media, public outrage, and a demand on politicians to make some response; and that the only response that will be available to them in the sound-bite or the headline will be to call for a restoration of stiffer penalties. This pattern of interaction involves non-rational as well as rational motives—outrage is scarcely a rational force—and if it obtains, then high sentencing will be assured of virtual selection; it will be fit to survive many challenges that might have been expected to change it.

So what will functionalist theory explain under the hypothesis of virtual selection? Again, I say: resilience. The presence of a process of virtual selection enables us to explain the resilience of various behaviours and institutions by the fact that they have certain functional effects. Maybe we can't explain the historical emergence, or even the historical persistence, of golf clubs by reference to their functional effects for members; maybe there hasn't actually been any systematic selection of golf clubs for the fact of having such effects. But even in that surely unlikely case, we can explain

the resilience of golf clubs—as we may come to recognize that resilience in the first place—through identifying those functional effects. We can see that because of serving business and professional members in the way they do, golf clubs are fit to survive any of a variety of challenges; at least for the foreseeable future, they are here to stay.

What is true of golf clubs, if this analysis is right, is likely to be true also of the counter-productively high levels of criminal sentencing that prevail, arguably, in many contemporary societies. Let decisions about criminal sentencing be left in the hands of elected politicians who have an incentive to respond in kind to emotional demands among their constituents; this incentive will be particularly strong, when politicians are not bound by the discipline of the Westminster system to toe a party line. There will then be firm ground for expecting criminal sentences to be lifted to levels at which they can satisfy the public outrage that crime often occasions. When they are lifted to that level, then there will be little chance of reducing the sentences or softening them in any way—even if criminological evidence suggests that such penalties serve no purpose and may even worsen the overall prospect of reducing crime.

The sort of role that I am holding out for functionalist theory is no mere invention of my own. It fits well with the tradition of functionalism in social science. Under the salvation offered to functionalists, the explanation they seek is the sort that would identify and put aside the features that may be expected to come and go in social life and that would catalogue the more or less necessary features that the society or culture displays: those that are resilient and may be expected to survive a variety of contingencies and crises. The tradition of thinking associated with the likes of Durkheim in the last century and Parsons in this is shot through with the desire to separate out in this way the necessary from the contingent, the reliable from the ephemeral. The idea in every case is to look for the core features of a society and to distinguish them from the marginal and peripheral. Functionalist method is cast throughout the tradition as a means of providing "a basis—albeit an assumptive basis—for sorting out 'important' from unimportant social processes."[25]

Conclusion

We have seen that both rational-choice theory and functionalist theory make good sense if they are each presented as focused on the explanation

of the resilience of certain social phenomena, rather than the explanation of their emergence or even survival. The upshot is a way of viewing each enterprise that makes it inherently attractive, and attractive even to those who are adherents of the other, or adherents of neither. We could hardly have asked for more.

NOTES

1. Pace Lewis, *Plurality of Worlds.*
2. Pettit, *Republicanism.*
3. Pettit, *Common Mind.*
4. Montesquieu, *Considerations.*
5. Brennan and Buchanan, "Normative Purpose."
6. Pettit, *Republicanism,* ch.7.
7. Mandeville, *Free Thoughts,* p. 332
8. For more see Pettit, *Common Mind,* Part 3; *Rules,* Part 2.
9. Pettit, *Rules,* Part 2
10. Brennan and Pettit, *Economy of Esteem.*
11. Lewis, *Convention.*
12. Lewis, *Philosophical Papers,* p. 181, my emphasis.
13. Fogel and Engermann, *Time on the Cross,* p. 4.
14. North, *Structure and Change,* pp. 31–32.
15. Brennan and Pettit, *Economy of Esteem,* Part 3.
16. Elster, *Ulysses.*
17. Durkheim, *Elementary Forms.*
18. Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*; Lukes, *Durkheim,* p. 442.
19. Radcliffe-Brown, *Andaman Islanders,* pp. 238–39.
20. Van Parijs, *Evolutionary Explanation.*
21. Alchian "Uncertainty"; Nelson and Winter, *Evolutionary Theory.*
22. Pettit, *Common Mind,* pp. 155–63.
23. Cf. Bigelow and Pargetter, "Functions."
24. Pettit, "Criminal Justice."
25. Turner and Maryanski, *Functionalism,* p. 135

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Part II

Contingency's Challenge