

**Should Sociologists Plod Along and Establish Descriptive  
Regularities or Seek a Grand Explanation of Them?\***

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The latest offering of John Goldthorpe, *On Sociology*, is a path-breaking book that may transform rational action scholarship from its present status as a niche operation into something far more substantial.<sup>1</sup> Although Goldthorpe has previously led the research community by example, this book is a more explicitly programmatic piece that, unlike most such pieces, may in fact have real impact. Pitched in Goldthorpe's usual combative style, the book seeks to address the current malaise in sociology, with the core argument being that a marriage of rational action theory to quantitative analysis would serve to unify theory and research by providing micro-level causal accounts of fundamental social regularities. This program may ultimately lure a great many quantitative scholars into the rational action fold and thereby exploit a constituency that has been less oppositional to rational action theory than most. As we see it, Goldthorpe's project has all the scope and reach of the postwar functionalist program of Parsons (1951) and Merton (1957), but it is likely to be more successful precisely because it allows a substantial role for empirical scholarship and can therefore contain and encompass the ongoing quantitative revolution.

We are tempted to leave our review at that. However, to do so would of course be seen as intellectual shirking on our part, and we are accordingly obliged (by virtue of norms?) to produce additional commentary, all the more so because programmatic pieces are especially complex to evaluate. Unlike the typical review, our task here is not simply that of characterizing and evaluating the research of Goldthorpe himself, but additionally we must evaluate his programmatic claims by asking whether other scholars, should they heed the Goldthorpean call, would produce research that is better than the foregone alternative. We shall suggest below that Goldthorpe's project probably stands up to this rigorous test. As always, there are nonetheless possible costs that can be identified, with perhaps the most obvious of these being the potential for participants to become mired in causal questions and

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<sup>1</sup> We will follow the lead of Goldthorpe and opt throughout this essay for the term "rational action" as against the more common designation "rational choice."

dilemmas that are intrinsically irresolvable. Arguably, the greatest achievements to date within sociology have involved the discovery of basic descriptive regularities (i.e., “social facts”), and the present-day malaise within sociology might accordingly be attributed to (a) the ongoing devaluation of this largely successful descriptive agenda, (b) the increasing emphasis placed on developing causal accounts of descriptive results, and (c) the tendency for such debates over causal mechanisms to become protracted rather than reaching some form of resolution. If the foregoing diagnosis of present-day malaise is accepted (and of course it is a highly speculative one), the question that then arises is whether further debate over causal mechanisms of the sort that Goldthorpe advocates might in fact exacerbate rather than resolve current problems in sociology. We lay out our (minor) concerns on this point below.

### **Goldthorpe’s Diagnosis and Prescription**

It is useful to begin by rehearsing the rather different story that Goldthorpe offers as to the sources of current disarray in the field of sociology. As the subtitle to his book suggests, much rides here on the argument that such disarray arises from “a manifest lack of integration of research and theory” (p. 2), a condition which he has elsewhere labeled as the “scandal of sociology” (Goldthorpe 1997). By this, Goldthorpe means that so-called general theorists are no longer involved in developing explanations of empirical phenomena, preferring instead to provide “conceptualizations” of social activity or to characterize the “background assumptions” of competing schools of sociology. For their part, empirical researchers have reacted by forming “strongly negative views of general theory” (p. 4), dismissing it as a “Chinese menu of ‘schools,’ ‘approaches,’ and ‘buzzwords’” (Davis 1994, p. 184) that is irrelevant to the everyday conduct of research. Among empirical researchers, it is thus presumed that empirical findings can “largely ‘speak for themselves’ without need of theoretical explanation, and that ... causal relationships can in any event be determined directly from statistical analysis” (p. 4). The

current disarray should therefore be understood as arising from the separation of research and theory into largely distinct pursuits.

As for prescription, Goldthorpe suggests that quantitative analyses can profitably continue, but the descriptive regularities that are empirically established in such analyses should then be explained through a more deeply causal “narrative of action.” In the ideal-typical research sequence that Goldthorpe lays out, one begins by “establishing the phenomena that form the *explananda*” (p. 151), a task that involves applying quantitative analysis to uncover descriptive regularities of various kinds (e.g., cross-national invariance in social fluidity, over-time invariance in the class-by-schooling association). For Goldthorpe, the crucial task of sociology is to explain how these regularities are generated, and researchers must therefore turn secondarily to specifying and testing alternative accounts of the causal mechanisms involved. This will typically involve some form of competition between rational action and norm-based accounts (p. 154), with the former emphasizing how subjectively rational individuals attempt to secure their objectives by taking particular courses of action, and the latter emphasizing how descriptive regularities are instead generated through adherence to norms (even when such norms prescribe action that is inconsistent with individual objectives). Under this formulation, much research effort would presumably be directed toward devising critical tests of the causal mechanisms involved; and the task of sociology would therefore increasingly revolve around adjudicating between competing causal accounts of the empirical regularities that quantitative analysts uncover. Although Goldthorpe does not represent it as such, the resulting debate might be seen as a micro-level replacement for the once-popular contest between functionalist and conflict approaches.

The core of the book amounts to an application of this approach to various empirical regularities that scholars in the fields of inequality and stratification have uncovered. Most notably, Goldthorpe attempts to explain why class differentials in educational attainment have remained unchanged from the early decades of the twentieth century onward, even as tertiary education came increasingly to be state-

subsidized and secondary education came to be universal, compulsory, and free. It is here of course that rational action theory comes into play; namely, Goldthorpe argues that class differentials have proven stable because the micro-level calculus underlying educational investments has likewise remained unchanged, with working-class children being consistently more likely than their middle-class counterparts to insist on a “high assurance of success” in the university before opting to enroll (p. 176). In this sense, the working class is especially risk averse on matters of schooling, but of course this orientation arises not from the operation of working-class norms but from the realities of a more precarious social and economic situation. That is, when a working-class experiment with higher education ends in failure (i.e., dropping-out), there may not be reserves available to finance a fallback investment in vocational education or to otherwise salvage the situation; and the risk of substantial downward mobility into the underclass is accordingly a real one. By contrast, middle-class parents can afford to expose their children to the possibility of educational failure, since they have the economic and social resources to “bail them out” should the need arise.

It bears emphasizing that Goldthorpe well appreciates the difficulty involved in testing rational action claims of this sort. In the foregoing example, one might attempt such a test by estimating the net effects of class after holding constant the resources (e.g., family income) that class typically implies, since presumably a rational working-class child will be risk-averse in educational decision-making only insofar as family resources are truly limited. If it is found, however, that even rich working-class children are risk-averse, then something other than a purely rational calculus would appear to be at work; and we might speak of “*over-adaptation* of parents and children to the realities of their differing class situations” (p. 178; italics added). In fact, Gambetta (1987) reports evidence of residual effects of precisely this sort, but Goldthorpe (p. 178) is quick to point out, quite properly, that “*ex-post* interpretations” of such effects must be treated with due caution, given that differently-specified models might raise or lower the size of the residual. Among most sociologists, the reflexive action at

this point would be to devise a better quantitative test, perhaps one that measures norms directly or introduces further controls for resources. Moreover, Goldthorpe argues that ethnographic research might provide additional evidence of interest, as it allows researchers to penetrate the “processes of situated social action and interaction that alone can be the source of the empirical regularities that it describes” (p. 92). The presumption, then, is that scholars should simply redouble all efforts in the face of ambiguities of this sort. Although Goldthorpe appreciates that serious methodological challenges may emerge in evaluating rational action accounts, these are not seen as so troubling as to question whether evaluation is worth attempting on a large scale. These challenges must simply be accepted insofar as empirical research is to “become effectively allied with the development of theory that has real explanatory power” (p. 178; also, p. 160).

We appreciate as much as anyone the temptations of the heroic effort. As we argue below, it nonetheless gives pause that debates about putative causal effects tend not to be readily resolved, at least not in sociology. While the rational action program clearly has much potential, we think that some restraint in pursuing it may therefore be warranted, as outlined below.

### **An Alternative Diagnosis and Prescription**

At this point, it must again be stressed that a programmatic piece, if taken seriously, should be assessed by asking whether the proposed change in research commitments will yield higher payoff than what is foregone. The question at hand, then, is not whether the analyses of Goldthorpe are fascinating, insightful, or path-breaking (and clearly they are all that), but rather whether the multitudes should indeed follow his lead. In making the argument that they should, Goldthorpe rests heavily on a particular diagnosis of the sources of disarray in sociology; and it is therefore relevant to revisit his diagnosis and its implications for the state of sociology.

We begin by asking whether empirical researchers have indeed eschewed “theory” to the extent that Goldthorpe implies. To be sure, the general theorists to whom Goldthorpe refers (e.g., Alexander, Giddens) may frequently be seen as irrelevant, but at the same time quantitative analysts *are* relying on middle-range theory of their own making and doing so with increasing aggressiveness, at least if the growing length of front matter in the typical journal article is any indication. We are referring here to two quite distinct types of theorizing:

(1) Firstly, we might characterize as “descriptive theorizing” all commentary that takes the form of motivating the descriptive study at hand, rehearsing the relevant positions on offer, and otherwise setting the stage for the empirical analysis that follows. The two main objectives of such theorizing are to show why sociologists should care about the phenomena under study and to elaborate various predictions as to the pattern of results that will likely be found. There is, then, no pretense of allowing data to “speak for themselves” (p. 4) or to otherwise downplay the role of interpretation. Within this tradition, the front matter of *The Constant Flux* (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992) might well be seen as paradigmatic, as it elegantly lays out how prior commentators have weighed in on such classic descriptive issues as (a) the direction of mobility trends, (b) the extent of cross-national variability in mobility, and (c) the structure of gender differences in mobility.

(2) Secondly, “causal theorizing” is oriented toward identifying the variables that (putatively) cause an outcome of interest, with such theorizing typically involving some story about the mechanism through which the posited effect is generated. The characteristic approach here is to identify a variable that has been omitted from prior models and that might provide (a) a fuller account of the phenomenon in question, and (b) some revision in our understanding of the (causal) effects of other variables that are typically seen as relevant.

It would be misleading, we think, to subsume these two types of theory under the same label, if only because they are so differently evaluated in the discipline. Although descriptive research (and the theorizing that accompanies it) remains an important part of sociology, it is surely less prestigious than causal research and appears to be declining in popularity, despite the occasional call for reinvestment or reinvigoration (e.g., Abbott 2000; 1998; Lieberman 1985, pp. 212-13).

For our purposes, what should be stressed is that empirical researchers are not at all dismissive of theory construction or “theory in general” (p. 4), even if they are dismissive of secondary commentary on theory. Indeed, insofar as a real disciplinary malaise has emerged, it is perhaps not because theory is seen as irrelevant and disconnected from research but because the field is increasingly oriented toward a particular type of causal theorizing that cannot be easily put to empirical test and that therefore leads to irresolvable debate. With the rise of advanced quantitative methods, scholars have been drawn irresistibly to the possibility of teasing out true (causal) effects, and our theorizing has accordingly stressed the critical test between competing causal accounts. However, because of the potential for omitted variable bias in its many forms, this form of adjudication is of course elusive; and we are thus left to endless debates about intrinsically unanswerable questions. The journals are littered, for example, with disputes about whether divorce harms children, incarceration lowers earnings, private schooling raises test scores, marriage improves life chances, ethnic enclaves increase socioeconomic achievement, and occupational sex-typing affects wages. If sociologists have become weary of late, it is possibly because they have overinvested in questions that are so fundamentally unanswerable. By contrast, the research associated with descriptive theorizing can more nearly stand the test of time, and such debates as occur revolve around the relatively tractable issues of methods and measurement.

We are accordingly concerned that Goldthorpe’s program would commit us more deeply to the formidable task of adjudicating between competing stories about underlying causes. For Goldthorpe, scholars seeking to describe social phenomena still have an important role to play in “establishing the



explananda” (p. 151), but inevitably such scholars would be devalued, becoming the academic counterparts of the biblical “hewers of wood and drawers of water.” If this shift in the payoff schedule leads to a decrease in the amount of descriptive work that is completed, then the program that Goldthorpe advocates is not without cost, for all its attractiveness in other respects. Indeed, Goldthorpe’s program could in this sense become overly successful, as multitudes of rational action “causalists” chase after the few remaining regularities that descriptive analysts have uncovered. It is of course a measure of our respect for the influence of Goldthorpe that we are obliged to take so seriously the possibility of such success.

### **Special Difficulties in Adjudication**

The foregoing concerns apply generically to all forms of nonexperimental causal analysis. In the present case, the usual ambiguities that arise in nonexperimental causal research are joined to additional problems of adjudication that arise because a consensual definition of rational action is, given the present state of the field, unlikely to emerge in the near future. The specter that then arises is that of a field carrying out (indirect) tests of rational action approaches without agreement as to the conditions under which those tests might be regarded as disconfirming.

Although Goldthorpe does not attempt to define rational action “in any definitive way” (p. 128), he proposes “holding onto the idea of rational action as being outcome-oriented ... in the sense that it derives from some kind of cost-benefit evaluation made by actors of the different courses of action available to them relative to their goals” (p. 128). As the analysis unfolds, it becomes apparent that Goldthorpe would relegate norm-based action largely to the camp of the non-rational, even when one adopts the fallback formula that actors comply with norms merely out of concern for the sanctions, both positive and negative, that are involved. In understanding this proviso, recall that Goldthorpe is troubled that the characteristic “risk aversion” of working-class children is detectable after controls for

family income are applied, as this suggests that working-class norms are in operation regardless of whether they serve the function of protecting against unduly risky investment. If norms are indeed working in this fashion, then Goldthorpe would clearly be disinclined to salvage rational action accounts by claiming that working-class children are simply factoring in the cost of violating norms about appropriate levels of investment in schooling (i.e., costs in the form of ridicule, loss of friends, and so forth). It is instead a matter of some satisfaction for Goldthorpe that rational action accounts can proceed parsimoniously without invoking such concepts (see, esp., pp. 202-3).

This understanding of rational action will naturally generate some controversy (see, e.g., Ellickson 1998; Nee 1998; Macy 1997). As suggested above, norm-adherence can be easily reconciled with rational action approaches by emphasizing either (a) the negative sanctions that norm-violators experience, or (b) the internal psychic costs of violating a norm-abiding “self-image.” In both cases, the crucial point is that calculative cost-benefit evaluations have been carried out, even if in the end these calculations suggest that norm-compliance is warranted. At the other end of the continuum, one might downplay all such concerns with the underlying *process* of decision-making, focusing instead on the extent to which optimizing *outcomes* are in evidence. For example, behavior that is guided by deeply internalized norms may well be highly adaptive, either because (a) the operative norms distill effective solutions to commonly encountered problems and thereby yield individually-optimizing outcomes (i.e., norms as “recipes” for rational action), or because (b) the operative norms sanction those forms of opportunism that involve short-term individual gain and would undermine collective welfare in the long run (i.e., “backward-looking rationality”). For the most part, Goldthorpe regards these more encompassing formulations as misguided, although he does allow that norms might sometimes serve as “guides to rational action that ... substitute for detailed calculation” (p. 203).

The foregoing is simply to suggest that the boundary between “subjectively rational” and non-rational action is not easily drawn and will inevitably be widely debated. To be sure, it would be unfair

to make too much of such disagreements, as virtually all social scientific research is completed without the benefit of well-specified boundaries between competing theories. However, the boundaries are especially contested in this case, and it is hardly helpful that the task of establishing some minimal level of agreement will have to be completed in the affect-charged context of present-day debates about rational action. This is not to suggest that the boundary between rational action and its residual is intrinsically difficult to define (although it may well be). Rather, our claim is simply that the realpolitik of the current research environment has to be taken into account, at least insofar as the objective is to assess the likely payoff of Goldthorpe's program as opposed to an ideal-typical payoff in some fully sanitized research context.

These difficulties mainly arise because Goldthorpe is deeply committed to making rational action approaches testable, thus requiring that a "line in the sand" between rational and non-rational action be drawn. The main alternative here, as represented most obviously by Becker (e.g., 1976), is to formulate the rational action approach as wholly general and thus salvageable at all costs, even in the presence of (apparently) anomalous results that might tempt the faint-hearted to fall back on the concepts of norms, values, or even irrationality. Given such anomalies, Becker is of course disinclined to simply reject utility theory, preferring instead to reanalyze the situation and locate those aspects of it that were initially misappreciated and that might lead us to recalculate the costs and benefits of particular courses of action. It is accordingly always possible to bring reason into alignment with action. As against this extreme view, Goldthorpe is committed to converting rational action theory into a testable (and potentially rejectable) set of claims, thereby setting up an empirical research agenda that could occupy sociologists for a great many decades.

This commitment may be understood as a reaction against postmodernists who would regard rational action scholarship as simply another sociological "school" or "approach" that is just as untestable as all others. As Goldthorpe characterizes it, the postmodernist position is that "different

'standpoints' have simply to 'confront' each other, and which prevails will be determined not on rational grounds but by the exercise in some way or other of socio-political power" (pp. 8-9). The ongoing diffusion of such postmodernism is viewed by Goldthorpe as a wholly destructive force in the discipline; and, consequently, he is at pains to reconstruct rational action scholarship in ways that allow for some manner of empirical disconfirmation. In this context, one can then understand why Goldthorpe seeks to distinguish so sharply between norm-based and rational action, whereas other scholars within the rational action tradition have been more imperialist and have accordingly sought to understand norms and norm-compliance in rational action terms (e.g., Ellickson 1998; Nee 1998; Nee and Ingram 1998; Macy 1997). Understandable though it is, the resulting approach does nonetheless have the potential to embroil the discipline in debates that, in the end, may deflect attention from the power of rational action language to characterize action of all types, even that involving norms (see Heckathorn 1997 for related comments). If veracity trumps parsimony, then there is at least some attraction in building an approach that accommodates the (likely) reality of norms rather than seeks to push as far as possible without them.

### **Will Goldthorpe's Program Prevail?**

The foregoing commentary addresses the intellectual costs and benefits of Goldthorpe's program rather than the likelihood that it will achieve some popularity. Although some minimum payoff is probably necessary to keep a research program going, no one would ever suppose that programs rise or fall solely in response to changing calculations about their scientific costs and benefits. It is, then, an altogether different question to ask whether a program of the sort that Goldthorpe envisages will come to be dominant, whatever the scientific payoff to such a program might be.

This type of question cannot be answered without attending to the cultural and intellectual commitments of the discipline and their consistency with Goldthorpe's project. In his concluding

chapter, Goldthorpe takes on this question indirectly by asking why a research-based rational action program never rose to prominence in the past, even though there were moments in the intellectual history of sociology that seemingly laid the foundation for such a program. This line of analysis is intended to address those detractors who might argue that “inherent problems have faced and will continue to face” (p. 260) any sociology that seeks to achieve Goldthorpe’s proposed synthesis between quantitative analysis and rational action models. Although Goldthorpe concedes in this chapter that formidable intellectual barriers have in the past worked against the acceptance of rational action research (e.g., a fear of psychologism, a commitment to biological analogies), these were not so formidable as to have altogether precluded the emergence of some early-20<sup>th</sup> century variant of the program he envisages. The delayed development of this program must instead be understood as arising from a “conjunction of particularities” (p. 294); and Goldthorpe further concludes, if just a bit conveniently, that nothing precludes the continuing spread of his program now, save again the operation of historical contingencies that cannot be easily predicted.

This intellectual history is a tour de force and compelling in its terms, but in the end it only suggests that there are no “inherent” intellectual obstacles to a rational action research program, at least none that are so strong as to rule out all possibility of success. Although the seeds of a rational action research program can therefore be found in our intellectual past, it bears emphasizing that the sociological legacy is more commonly interpreted as inconsistent with rational action approaches, as “alien and threatening to the very nature of the sociological enterprise” (p. 21). This sentiment has a reality no matter how misguided Goldthorpe regards it. Insofar, then, as a rational action research program indeed spreads, this would be best regarded as occurring *despite* somewhat hostile intellectual conditions.

The main basis for optimism in these circumstances is not so much our intellectual heritage as the changing facts of our social world. That is, while the oppositional culture of sociology obviously works

against a rational action program, an important countervailing force is that the social world has, over the long history of sociology, become arguably more consistent with rational action accounts. This consistency is achieved because (a) rapid social change renders norms outmoded and less reliable guides for rational action (i.e., “cultural lag”), and (b) ongoing structural differentiation produces “contexts of action” that are increasingly idiosyncratic and less amenable to the generic recipes for action that norms provide. If simple norm-adherence thus becomes a less reliable means to achieving ends, one should find increasing cultural support for individual cost-benefit calculation as a preferred strategy for choosing among different courses of action; and rational action theory would in turn provide a more realistic and compelling narrative of action. To be sure, this (partly) standard account of rationalization and the transition to modernity only implies that *some* form of rational action theory will become increasingly attractive over time, and it leaves open whether Goldthorpe’s particular program will in the end be the winning hand.<sup>2</sup>

On the latter point, it is encouraging that Goldthorpe has laid out a research program that provides an especially important role for quantitative analysts, thereby linking rational action theory to a powerful constituency that, unlike most others in sociology, is not burdened with a pre-existing antipathy to the project. This alliance may well generate the critical mass that has long been needed to jump-start the rational action program. Indeed, insofar as quantitative analysts find a rewarding role within the program, their support and involvement should push rational action theory more fully into the sociological mainstream. It is not, then, altogether implausible that the publication of *On Sociology* will come to be seen as a turning point in the history of the discipline.

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<sup>2</sup> Contrary to this line of argumentation, Goldthorpe not only makes reference to the “intellectual unity of mankind” (Popper 1966), but also suggests that the idea of rationality “provides the *passe partout*” (p. 136) to this unity. Although the grand narrative of rationalization has of course become less popular of late, we have not seen much in the way of compelling evidence to support this change in fashion.

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