

Andrew Abbott

# ”Mechanisms and Relations”: A Response to the Comments

(doi: 10.2383/24754)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, settembre-ottobre 2007

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.  
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

## **Licenza d'uso**

L'articolo è messo a disposizione dell'utente in licenza per uso esclusivamente privato e personale, senza scopo di lucro e senza fini direttamente o indirettamente commerciali. Salvo quanto espressamente previsto dalla licenza d'uso Rivisteweb, è fatto divieto di riprodurre, trasmettere, distribuire o altrimenti utilizzare l'articolo, per qualsiasi scopo o fine. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

## “Mechanisms and Relations”: A Response to the Comments

*by* Andrew Abbott

doi: 10.2383/24754

I thank the colleagues who have taken the time to read this old piece of mine and to respond to it. I will be brief in replying, for the issues of both paper and comments are perennial. They have no answer. They are, rather, “good to think with.”

Let me first of all say a few words about the mechanistal perspective. When I wrote the original paper, the mechanisms approach was a coalescing idea, as was relationalism. In the years since, both have become broadly successful programs and household words. The relational approach got enshrined in network analysis and became a little mechanical in the process. Certainly the enthronement of the social capital concept did little for the sociological imagination. The mechanisms program flourished also. As Manzo’s comment shows (and Hedstrom’s work shows more broadly), the mechanisms position has become loosely allied with agent-based modeling. This gives the mechanisms position that most important of things – a routine way to write a (mechanistal) dissertation. Like most ideas attached to a technology, the mechanisms position too will face the danger of becoming hostage to the internal assumptions of its chief methodology. But for the moment the flow is emancipatory; mechanistal work is opening up new truths and reminding us of old ones we have forgotten.

Let me begin with Baldassari’s comments. I think she has seen the radicality of what I was proposing. She is quite correct that making acts and scenes the primitives of our social theory means something drastically different from starting with actors and their purposes. It is not just a matter of “making the move back to macro.” It is a matter of scuttling the Coleman Boat altogether (I first heard it called the Coleman

Bathtub – I don't know where – and have never gotten that more apposite metaphor out of my mind.) Moreover, she sees that the Coleman Boat presupposes a whole model of levels that it is the task of my own version of social theory to destroy. There are no levels. The levels concept is incoherent, an uncriticized inheritance from liberal political theory. Baldassarri is also right that the relational view needs to get serious about how to do empirical work. But I feel the call is premature. There has been a great deal of talk about relationalism and many declarations (mine among them) about what a great thing it is. But we simply do not have a serious relational social theory. The pragmatists gave us the foundations of relational thinking, but however sophisticated their social psychology, their sociology is pretty simple-minded. The Chicago School, as I have said many times, made context and location in time and space central in their empirical work. But they never assembled their thinking into comprehensive social theory; it remained a simple stance of investigation and thus was easily shunted aside by Parsons's grandiosities. So I agree with Baldassarri's desire for us to get empirical. But we have to write serious theory first. And that is damnably difficult; years of living in a world of liberal political theory have bred the other ontology into us so seriously that we continuously slide back into it. I shall return to this issue in discussing Vitale's comments.

Manzo's comments seem to me to give a mechanismalist's reading of a relational argument. That is, he lists all the ways in which the mechanisms school does in fact take account of context, which for him – the comments inevitably slide toward this – means the macro. His summaries of my position take for granted the existence of things like actors that I have been at considerable pains to deny. His framework of levels assumes something I am trying to avoid. And my paper explicitly discusses (and shows the shortcomings of) the endowment and contrast mechanisms precisely because they aim to be "relational" in the sense that term is understood within the mechanist position. Also, the drawing of lines sometimes seems odd to me: Who says Analytic Sociology owns the vacancy chain model, obviously one of the original foundations of the modern relational position and, incidentally, a model I myself used in two long-ago articles?

But overall Manzo's comments do a good job of translating relational thinking into the mechanist world, which is fine thing to do, although not what I am interested in doing. The mechanisms school needs to pay attention to context and (what it calls) "higher level" constraint. Although Harrison White [1971] said this pretty clearly almost forty years ago in *Chains of Opportunity*, it's still an idea worth recalling and underscoring. With that aspect of Manzo's comments I strongly agree. But Manzo does not see outside the world as construed by the mechanisms school. We see this quality in the discussion of simulation with which he closes. He ar-

gues that “With the technical distinction between writing, compilation, and execution it becomes clear that a process is nothing more than the dynamic aspect of one (or several) mechanism(s): it is what the mechanism can trigger.” That position is wrong in two ways. The first, narrow flaw is one I noted in a paper in 1990, later collected in *Time Matters* [Abbott 2001, 5] To conceive of histories simply as realizations of stochastic processes, however complex they may be, will inevitably ignore structural constraints that are created by those realizations, but that we haven’t foreseen in our models. The second, broader argument against Manzo’s position involves a much deeper point, one about computing itself. Manzo’s comment presupposes what is called von Neumann computing: computing that consists of executable code, in a MAIN program, with subsidiary trunks which are linked by consistent variables and various forms of argument passing, and which is executed sequentially by a single processor. But von Neumann computing is not the only form of computing. Neural net computing doesn’t involve any of these things – specified code, a given (MAIN) program architecture, consistent variable definitions, or sequential execution (although it does involve the idea of distinguishable processors). It is clear that under the assumption of von Neumann computing, any process is just the realization of the commands put in. That’s true by definition. If von Neumann computing is your model of how to think about the world, sure enough that’s the only kind of “process” you will see. But that doesn’t have anything to do with the situation in which we don’t take von Neumann computing from the start as our model of the social world. So Manzo is exactly correct that “an AS that accepts and uses MAS will teach that ‘mechanisms’ always logically precede ‘processes.’” It does indeed teach that, in fact because it assumes that. It certainly doesn’t show it.

Which brings me to Vitale. Vitale also slides occasionally into the micro-reduction position, since he accepts “the impossibility of casting an explanation without recurring to some form of causality enacted by interactions at a micro level.” I am not at all sure that I want to accept that as an impossibility. I rather thought that by problematizing the very existence of micro things I was escaping from that particular *cul de sac*. On the other hand, Vitale is quite correct in noting, re: my relation to Bourdieu, that I have not worked out a theory of power. To this I would add that I have not yet published a satisfactory account of the existence of stable social life at all [see the discussion in the “Epilogue” of Abbott 2001]. These are important topics, and my work on them is not yet available. I cannot speak to the immense Boltanski and Chiapello [2005] book, for I have only glanced at it. But on first glance, I think the book accepts a view of the world that strikes me as, yet again, liberal political theory dressed up in fancy clothes. There are “persons” and

"tests," the latter defined [*ibidem*, 32] as, among other things, "the selection process governing the differential distribution of persons between positions of unequal value (...)"

But I'm not sure I believe in persons, at least in other than a biological sense (and even then, what really are the biological continuities of an individual? In what sense am I still me now that my cancerous prostate is decorating some pathologist's office?) Vitale's comments on legitimacy seem to me sometimes to follow the Boltanski and Chiapello lead, drifting into the language of persons. But at other times he remains with relationalism and asks – quite appositely – what legitimacy (or justice or order, I would add) could mean in a processual theory of the world. This is indeed an important question, and one I have begun writing on [Abbott 2006]. But connected to it is another thorny problem, the analogue of justice for persons. What exactly do we mean when we think about what people get out of life, by "outcome?" There is, in the last analysis, only one outcome variable, and it has no variance. But before death comes, how do we want to think about just outcomes? When exactly in the life course is this differential distribution (say of Boltanski and Chiapello's persons into positions) thought to take place? What if I do badly for many years then inherit wealth? What if society lets me live like a lord but I flame out at forty-three? When exactly is (or was) the outcome of my ninety-five-year-old father's life? All of these questions are largely ignored by a language of persons and tests, as if there were only one test and only one time of outcome. People move endlessly through the life course. They become different people and strangely enough, they now often live so long – as has my father – that they have outlived old regimes of inequality, only to inhabit new ones. What sense can it possibly make to pose the question within a simple language of tests and fairness, as if – as is or was the pretense in the French educational system – one's entire life's outcome could somehow be dictated by a few examinations early in life?

The question of outcome for persons [I have written extensively on: see Abbott 2005] is thus linked to the broader one of order in the social process as a whole. To assume that there is a fixed relationship of some kind between these two things is the liberal dream. But it doesn't seem a helpful way to think about a world that – perhaps we should face it – is not gradually progressing towards some emancipatory future but is perhaps just wandering along.

Deep waters these, and although I – like all of these commenters – am thinking about them, perhaps it is best to leave it at that. Let me again thank my colleagues both for their kindness in resurrecting an old paper of mine and for their engagement in dialogue with it. This is a great pleasure indeed.

## References

Abbott, A.

2001 *Time Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

2005 "The Idea of Outcome." Pp. 393-426 in *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences*, edited by G. Steinmetz. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

2006 "The Concept of Order in Processual Sociology." *Cahiers Parisiens 2*: 315-345.

Boltanski, L., and Chiapello, E.

2005 *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Verso.

White, H. C.

1970 *Chains of Opportunity*. Cambridge MA: Harvard.

## Mechanisms and Relations

---

Abstract: Reacting to the original papers outlining the importance of “social mechanisms,” this paper contrasts two views of the social process, the mechanistic and the relational. In the sources here analyzed, the mechanistic perspective is largely based on methodological individualism and generally presupposes rational, or at least intentional, action. A fundamental assumption of this approach is that the meaning of an action is given in itself. The relational view by contrast holds that the meaning of an action arises only from its relation to other actions, both temporally and structurally. The relational view takes not actors but interaction as primitive and focuses on the scene (context) of action rather than the intentions of actors. The paper investigates these differences by examining the Elsterian mechanisms of “endowment” and “contrast,” both theoretically and through the example of application of students to institutions of higher education in America.

---

*Keywords: mechanisms, relations, order, outcome.*

---

**Andrew Abbott** is the Gustavus F. and Ann M. Swift Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of Sociology and the College at the University of Chicago. Abbott took his BA (in history and literature) at Harvard in 1970 and his PhD (in sociology) from the University of Chicago in 1982. Prior to his return to Chicago in 1991, he taught for thirteen years at Rutgers University. Known for his ecological theories of occupations, Abbott has also pioneered algorithmic analysis of social sequence data. He has written on the foundations of social science methodology and on the evolution of the social sciences and the academic system. He has also written on heuristics and general theory.