

Filippo Barbera

**Angelo Panebianco, L'automa e lo spirito. Azioni individuali, istituzioni, imprese collettive. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009, 264 pp.**

(doi: 10.2383/31387)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2-3, maggio-dicembre 2009

**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**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

## Book reviews

**Angelo Panebianco, *L'automa e lo spirito. Azioni individuali, istituzioni, imprese collettive*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009, 264 pp.**

Also available on Darwin at the page:

<http://www.darwinbooks.it/doi/10.978.8815/142917>

doi: 10.2383/31387

The micro foundation of collective phenomena is a key issue in the social sciences. Scholars such as Raymond Boudon, James Coleman, Jon Elster and Thomas Schelling provided the theoretical foundations to explain macro-level phenomena through micro-level interactions. The recent development of the so-called “analytical sociology” brought together their insights along with the technicalities of agent-based simulation in order to closely integrate theory and empirical research. The book of Angelo Panebianco explicitly sustains an “analytical turn” in the field of political science. Panebianco’s call will hopefully have important consequences for Italian political sciences and not just because the author is one of the most influential Italian political scientists, but also because the book is an important step towards an analytical turn in sociology and political science. In reviewing the book I will illustrate why it is so.

The book is organized in six chapters. The first one outlines the general perspective of a mechanisms-based explanation in the social sciences; the second, third and fourth chapters spell out the cogs and wheel of a mechanisms-based explanation: on the one hand actors, interaction and intra-individual elements such as interests, emotions and reasons, on the other hand supra-individual components like institutional contexts and social networks. The fifth chapter applies these elements to a fresh interpretation of the micro-macro link, while the final chapter reviews some recent contributions about the explanation of political actions, processes and institutions. Every chapter includes a review of the key theme to which Panebianco adds original arguments which enrich the field of an analytically oriented socio-political science. I will now examine each chapter in turn pointing to the most innovative aspects of the book; in the conclusion I will underscore some critical points of it.

The concept of “mechanism” has been defined not only in the social sciences but also in philosophy of science, particularly philosophy of biology. Though there is no consensus on what is to be meant by a “mechanism,” Panebianco excellently isolates the key element of the definition [p. 18], namely that an explanation through mechanisms is always *events-based*. Events are causally connected and bring about social change both at the *explanans* and *explanandum* level: indeed an effect is something that was not there before and therefore what is brought about must be a change or an event. Likewise change is brought about by another change, which implies that causes are events too. The causal connections of events, moreover, have three characteristics [p. 19]: *i*) causal chains may have different lengths, ranging from long path-dependent chains to short ones such as the change of attitude brought by cognitive dissonance; *ii*) mechanisms are both social (e.g. interactions) and psychological (e.g. mental events); *iii*) most often a mechanisms-based explanation involves a plurality of mechanisms acting at the same time and in a

complex way. The chapter goes on with the examination of the main debates about the concept of mechanism and here Panebianco makes clear that mechanisms apply not only to regular phenomena but also to singular ones: “a singular phenomena will be explained, in this perspective, as *the unique combination of customary mechanisms*” [p. 20]. This is indeed an informative argument which should be the final word about “nomothetic vs. idiographic” mechanisms-based explanation. The chapter continues with the illustration of other key elements of a mechanisms-based perspective, isolating three key polarities: laws and mechanisms [pp. 20-24], prediction vs. explanation [pp. 24-27]; micro-foundation and macro-foundation [pp. 27-34]. Panebianco’s inclination is clearly for a political science oriented towards a micro-level explanation of macro-level phenomena, filling the gap between a nomological explanation and a mechanisms-based one [see p. 22].

From an analytical social science perspective, actors and their properties, actions, social relations and institutional elements are what explain social change. Chapter two and three deal with one side of the coin, namely individual and intra-individual elements, while chapter four explicitly addresses a key issue from a mechanisms-based explanation viewpoint: the role of *organizations* and of *institutional* context. With regard to ch. two (actors and actions), Panebianco proposes a typology of theories of action based upon two dimensions: the degree of abstraction (high-low) and the situation-actor emphasis and four ideal-types are thereof generated [p. 43]. This is again an original contribution and a brave one as well, for we already have two typologies proposed by two masters of sociology (Boudon and Goldthorpe) which Panebianco nevertheless judges unsatisfactory [p. 41]. Although at a deeper scrutiny one could say that Panebianco’s typology is mainly a combination of Goldthorpe and Boudon’s typological dimensions, the final result is quite useful and it allows to classify different theories and authors (Weber, Popper, Lindenberg, Elster, Simon, rational-choice, evolutionary theories) in the space of attributes thus produced. In the illustration of the argument that follows, the author supports the idea of the rational-choice as the simplest model to start with and he shows the main intellectual pathways which originated from this same position (in a nutshell: method of decreasing abstraction). The contributions of Simon, Boudon, Elster, Lindenberg, Goldthorpe and Ostrom are then carefully examined and the opposition between self-interest and norm-following behaviour is outlined [pp. 51-62]. Here comes perhaps the most important idea of the chapter: we can best understand why people follow social norm if we introduce a backward-looking model, where actors use information about the past to decide what to do in the future. Vanberg and von Hayek’s oeuvres offer the foundation for his argument. As I said, the idea is stimulating, though it’s not completely clear to me how it allows to discriminate between norm-following and rule-following action or, in other words, between *norms* and *conventions*.

Ch. three may offer an answer to this question: while conventions and routines should be understood as “institutionalised” habits, scripts and schemata for problem-solving purposes [pp. 71-74], norm-following actions are grounded both in passions and social identity [pp. 74-91]. The issue of social identity and recognition vs. interest and rationality is discussed at length by Panebianco [pp. 78-96]. The point is well-known: individual interests depend upon the temporal stability of groups which identify our aims as valuable and create the very possibility of inter-temporal choice accordingly. However two points needs to be considered, and here Panebianco directly calls into question

Alessandro Pizzorno's work: first of all, social identity does not always imply stability of preferences, as for example different groups may generate different criteria and even conflict among these. Second, it seems to be better to keep a dialectical relationship between a "social" and a "psychological" conception of identity, instead of assuming – as Pizzorno seems to do – that individual minds and their components such as aims and beliefs do not exist *apart from* social relations. Be true as it may, from a social science perspective these issues need to be considered – as the author aptly does – not with ontological arguments (e.g. is the "real" relational? Who knows...), but first and foremost *on empirical* and *analytical* grounds.

What is the noteworthy added value of an analytical approach coming from a political scientist scholar? While the chapters so far examined were mainly, although not exclusively, dealing with sociological literature, chapters fourth, five and six illustrate what analytically oriented political scientists can teach to (analytical) sociologists: institutions, organizations, power-related mechanisms, authority and hierarchy are the key issues of these last three chapters. Institutions are thus defined as sets of norm/rules formally and/or informally defined, which regularly shape social action through different kinds of sanctions [ch. four, p. 97]. The word "sanctions" should not be intended only as formal controls: Panebianco makes key distinctions between institutions as *regulative rules*, or in other words, as sets of intentionally established incentives targeted towards the resolution of problems related to economic efficiency and institutions as *normative* and *constitutive* rules, where social actors perform according to specific social norms and conceptions of appropriate behaviour in the given circumstances [p. 100-103]. Here the author challenges the separation between institutions as rules of the game and organizations as corporate actors proposed by North: "organizations (...) can become institutions" [p. 103]. To explain how this happens the old institutionalism – and the concept of institutionalisation *à la* Selznick – is more useful than new institutionalism. The really useful insight of new institutionalism, Panebianco continues [pp. 105-107], has been to shift the attention from the single organization to the institutional environment – that is the configurations of organizations and their relationship. Both old and new institutionalism have nevertheless a common weak point [p. 107]: they adopt too much of a *unilateral* theory of action (only instrumental rationality for rational choice institutionalism; just pragmatic rationality for sociological institutionalism) and they tend to give black-box accounts of institutional origins and change. Instead, the challenge is to *integrate* the institutional elements with an explanation in terms of individuals, their properties, actions, social relations and institutions. Here Panebianco proposes to merge familiar concepts of institutional approaches such as path-dependency and punctuated equilibrium with Boudon's ideas about social change. The result is a convincing picture where institutional and individual-level dimensions are coherently integrated [pp. 111-126].

To account for institutional change properly, however, the crucial problem of the micro-macro link needs to be addressed [chapter five]. This is for sure the most interesting chapter of the book, as the author concentrates here on the micro-macro link inside formal organizations or "functional systems" where *roles are interdependent*, an issue poorly considered in contemporary analytical sociology. Panebianco focuses on the interplay between properties of formal hierarchies and properties of social networks [p. 134]; rules of the game (institutions), social networks and associated informal power

relations are the three elements the dealings of which help to understand different micro-to-macro links in functional systems. For instance, occupying a central position in a “star” network or being located in a structural hole means being able to gather information that would otherwise be decentralized, or to make gains by connecting opportunities that would otherwise be separated. Consequently, differences in the degree of centrality generate asymmetries and unequal distributions of information and resources. In this way, however, differences in the degrees of centrality in a network also create favorable conditions for setting up hierarchies and hence for establishing command and subordinate positions. Inside functional systems informal power, formal authority and structural holes are key in explaining the micro-to-macro transition [p. 142]. First of all, a quantitative bottleneck effect is generated, as the number of actors whose actions bear consequences for the macro outcome is reduced. This is a major point, as it allows to include political entrepreneurs, brokers and informal leaders in the micro-to-macro model. Second, the role of leadership must be understood also in a qualitative way [p. 145], because different styles of leadership (charisma; formal leadership) matter a lot for the macro-outcome.

Can we, however, consider organizations as unitary actors? In other words, can we treat organizations for certain explanatory purposes as micro-level unitary actors? As it is well-known, there is no consensus on this issue: Boudon and Coleman suggested that we can, while Elster recommended that a proper micro-foundation applies only to physical persons and not to supra-individual actors. In this case also, Panebianco’s position is quite original and worth mentioning at length [pp. 147-153]. For certain explanatory purposes it is certainly possible not to dissect the organizations into their individual members, but this should always be a preliminary stage. Here the author challenges the Boudon-Coleman views that a collective decision system (e.g. collective and corporate actors) mechanically implies a unitary decision-maker. On the contrary, this should always be an *empirical matter*: for instance, after the second world war the Italian communist party was much more a unitary actor than the Christian democrat one, which was divided into sub-coalitions. To get these differences the organization’s *interna corporis* [p. 151] and its relationship with the external environment must be seriously considered. Intra and inter-organizational relationships, along with their formal and informal properties, are key in this case [pp. 158-170]. Finally, chapter six reviews a number of research issues in contemporary political science and frames them in the light of the analytical apparatus examined in the previous chapters. Collective movements and nationalism [pp. 173-178], government and formal politics [pp. 178-197], representative systems [pp. 197-202], processes of democratization [pp. 202-207] and nested games in constituencies [pp.207-210] are examined.

The last chapter is perhaps the weakest part of the book, as it is not always clear how the issues were selected and why some were included at all: for instance the review of Rokkan and Linz’s work does not appear to be really linked to the whole argument of the book. Perhaps it would have been better to select those political science contributions that explicitly use a mechanisms-based approach and show the added value of their approach. A second weak point is that the book deals mainly with theoretical and analytical problems and does not offer methodological and empirical considerations: does the analytical approach in political science fit both with quantitative and qualitative

approaches? What is the role of agent-based simulation in political science? In reading the book it seems like it is somehow a work-in-progress and that the author left out some key dimensions. Despite these critical aspects, this book should be a must read for anyone seriously interested in the explanation of political phenomena and, to repeat, it surely offers many original insights in the field of analytical sociology/political science. We can also say that sociology and political science are now much closer thanks to this book.

*Filippo Barbera*  
University of Turin