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# Analytical Sociology and the Rest of Sociology

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# Analytical Sociology and The Rest of Sociology

by Daniel Little

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## The Premises of Analytical Sociology

The past dozen years or so have witnessed the emergence of a distinctive approach to the social sciences that its practitioners refer to as “analytical sociology.”<sup>1</sup> Peter Hedström describes the analytical sociology approach in these terms:

Although the term analytical sociology is not commonly used, the type of sociology designated by the term has an important history that can be traced back to the works of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sociologists such as Max Weber and Alexis de Tocqueville, and to prominent mid-twentieth-century sociologists such as the early Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton. Among contemporary social scientists, four in particular have profoundly influenced the analytical approach. They are Jon Elster, Raymond Boudon, Thomas Schelling and James Coleman [Hedström 2005, 113].

<sup>1</sup> Peter Hedström's *Dissecting the Social: On the Principles of Analytical Sociology* [Hedström 2005] serves as a manifesto for the approach, and Pierre Demeulenaere, ed., *Analytical Sociology and Social Mechanisms* [Demeulenaere 2011] and Peter Hedström and Peter Bearman, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology* [Hedström and Bearman 2009] provide substantive foundations for several areas of research within this approach. Filippo Barbera [2004] and Michael Schmid [2006] have introduced these ideas to Italian and German audiences. Renate Mayntz's work is also relevant [Mayntz 2004; Mayntz 2009]. Gianluca Manzo's contribution is highly illuminating on the intellectual origins of the approach [Manzo 2010]. The European Network of Analytical Sociologists provides an institutional framework within which research approaches and findings can be shared.

And here is how Hedström and Bearman describe the approach in the *Handbook*:

Analytical sociology is concerned first and foremost with explaining important social facts such as network structures, patterns of residential segregation, typical beliefs, cultural tastes, common ways of acting, and so forth. It explains such facts not merely by relating them to other social facts – an exercise that does not provide an explanation – but by detailing in clear and precise ways the mechanisms through which the social facts under consideration are brought about. In short, analytical sociology is a strategy for understanding the social world [Hedström and Bearman 2009, 3-4].

Peter Demeulenaere makes several important points to further specify analytical sociology (henceforth AS) that will be mentioned below. Here it is essential to note that he holds that AS is not just another new paradigm for sociology. Instead, it is a reconstruction of what valid explanations on sociology must look like, once we properly understand the logic of the social world. He believes that much existing sociology conforms to this set of standards – but not all. And the non-conformers are evidently judged non-explanatory. For example, he writes, “Analytical sociology should not therefore be seen as a manifesto for one particular way of doing sociology as compared with others, but as an effort to clarify (“analytically”) theoretical and epistemological principles which underlie any satisfactory way of doing sociology (and, in fact, any social science)” [Demeulenaere 2011, 1]. So this sets a claim of a very high level of authority over the whole field, implying that other decisions about explanation, ontology, and method are less than fully scientific.

Here I will briefly sketch the central axioms of analytical sociology, and then consider how this framework holds up in relationship to some very strong examples of sociological research. Does the reductionist strategy advocated by AS support this wider range of research? Are these other theories based on a theory of the purposive actor? Do they provide explanations that depend on identifying causal mechanisms? Are they compatible with the over-arching requirement of providing microfoundations for macro-level social claim?

In my assessment, AS rests on three central ideas.

First, there is the idea that social outcomes need to be explained on the basis of the actions of individuals. Hedstrom, Demeulenaere, and their colleagues refer to this position as methodological individualism. It is often illustrated by reference to “Coleman’s Boat” in James Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* [Coleman 1990, 8] describing the relationship that ought to exist between macro and micro social phenomena:



FIG. 1. Macro- and micro-level proposition: effects of religious doctrine on economic organization.

Source: Coleman [1990, 8].

The diagram indicates the relationship between macro-factors (Protestant religious doctrine, capitalism) and the micro factors that underlie their causal relation (values, economic behavior). Here are a few of Hedström's formulations of this ontological position:

In sociological inquiries, however, the core entity always tends to be the actors in the social system being analyzed, and the core activity tends to be the actions of these actors. [Hedström 2005, 106]

To be explanatory a theory must specify the set of causal mechanisms that are likely to have brought about the change, and this requires one to demonstrate how macro states at one point in time influence individuals' actions, and how these actions bring about new macro states at a later point in time. [*ibidem*, 143]

In other words: a good explanation of a given social outcome is a demonstration of how this outcome is the aggregate result of structured individual actions. In particular, an explanation should not make reference to meso or macro level factors.

Demeulenaere provides a detailed and helpful analysis of the doctrine of methodological individualism and its current status. He believes that criticisms of MI have usually rested on a small number of misunderstandings, which he attempts to resolve. For example, MI is not "atomistic," "egoistic," "non-social," or exclusively tied to rational choice theory. He prefers a refinement that he describes as structural individualism, but essentially he argues that MI is a universal requirement on social science. Demeulenaere specifically disputes the idea that MI implies a separation between society and non-social individuals. That said, Demeulenaere fully endorses the idea that AS depends upon and presupposes MI: "Does analytical sociology differ significantly from the initial project of MI? I do not really think so. But by introducing the notion of analytical sociology we are able to make a fresh start and avoid the

various misunderstandings now commonly attached to MI” [Demeulenaere 2011, 10].

A theory based on the individual needs to have a theory of the actor. Hedström and others in the AS field are drawn to a broad version of rational-choice theory – what Hedström calls the “Desire-Belief-Opportunity theory.” This is a variant of rational choice theory, because the actor’s choice is interpreted along these lines: given the desires the actor possesses, given the beliefs he/she has about the environment of choice, and given the opportunities he/she confronts, action A is a sensible way of satisfying the desires. It is worth pointing out that it is possible to be microfoundationalist about macro outcomes while not assuming that individual actions are driven by rational calculations. Microfoundationalism is distinct from the assumption of individual rationality.

Second is the idea that social actors are socially situated; the values, perceptions, emotions, and modes of reasoning of the actor are influenced by social institutions, and their current behavior is constrained and incentivized by existing institutions [this position has a lot in common with the [methodological localism](#) that I have defended; see Little 2006; Little 2009]. Practitioners of analytical sociology are not atomistic about social behavior, at least in the way that economists tend to be; they want to leave room conceptually for the observation that social structures and norms influence individual behavior and that individuals are not unadorned utility maximizers. (Gary Becker’s effort to explain much of social life on the basis of the premise of maximizing utility is an example of the reductionist tendency of purist rational choice theory [Becker 1976]). In the Hedström-Bearman introduction to the *Handbook* they refer to their position as “structural individualism”: “Structural individualism is a methodological doctrine according to which social facts should be explained as the intended or unintended outcomes of individuals’ actions. Structural individualism differs from traditional methodological individualism in attributing substantial explanatory importance to the social structures in which individuals are embedded” [Hedström and Bearman 2009, 4]. Demeulenaere explicates the term by referring to Homans’ distinction between individualistic sociology and structural sociology; the latter “is concerned with the effects these structures, once created and maintained, have on the behaviour of individuals or categories of individuals” [Demeulenaere 2011, introduction, quoting Homans 1984]. So “structural individualism” seems to amount to this: the behavior and motivations of individuals are influenced by the social arrangements in which they find themselves.

This is a direction of thought that is not well advanced within analytical sociology, but would repay further research. There is no reason why a methodological-individualist approach should not take seriously the causal dynamics of identity

formation and the formation of the individual's cognitive, practical, and emotional frameworks. These are relevant to behavior, and they are plainly driven by concrete social processes and institutions.

Third, and most distinctive, is the idea that social explanations need to be grounded in hypotheses about the concrete social causal mechanisms that constitute the causal connection between one event and another [Hedström and Swedberg 1998; Hedström and Ylikoski 2010]. Mechanisms rather than regularities or necessary/sufficient conditions provide the fundamental grounding of causal relations and need to be at the center of causal research. This approach has several intellectual foundations, but one is the tradition of critical realism and some of the ideas developed by Roy Bhaskar [1975].

Hedström advocates for a theory of causal explanation that is grounded in the idea of a causal mechanism:

The position taken here, rather, is that mechanism-based explanations are the most appropriate type of explanations for the social sciences. The core idea behind the mechanism approach is that we explain a social phenomenon by referring to a constellation of entities and activities, typically actors and their actions, that are linked to one another in such a way that they regularly bring about the type of phenomenon we seek to explain [Hedström 2005, 65].

A social mechanism, as defined here, is a constellation of entities and activities that are linked to one another in such a way that they regularly bring about a particular type of outcome [*ibidem*, 181].

Demeulenaere also emphasizes that AS depends closely on the methodology of social causal mechanisms. The “analytical” part of the phrase involves identifying separate things, and the social mechanisms idea says how these things are related. Causal mechanisms are expected to be the components of the linkages between events or processes hypothesized to bear a causal relation to each other. And, more specifically to the AS approach, the mechanisms are supposed to occur solely at the level of the actors – not at the meso or macro levels. So this means that AS would not countenance a meso-level mechanism like this: “the organizational form of the supervision structure at the Bopal chemical plant caused a high rate of maintenance lapses that caused the accidental release of chemicals.” The organizational form is a meso-level factor, and it would appear that AS would require that its causal properties be unpacked onto individual actors' behavior. (I, on the other hand, will argue below that this is a perfectly legitimate social mechanism because we can readily supply its microfoundations at the behavioral level. So this suggests that we can legitimately refer to meso-level mechanisms as long as we are mindful of the microfoundations

requirement. And this corresponds as well to the tangible fact that institutions have causal force with respect to individuals. I will return to this in the concluding section).

In addition to these three orienting frameworks for analytical sociology, there is a fourth characteristic that should be mentioned. This is the idea that the tools of computer-based simulation of the aggregate consequences of individual behavior can be a very powerful tool for sociological research and explanation. So the tools of agent-based modeling and other simulations of complex systems have a very natural place within the *armoire* of analytical sociology. These techniques offer tractable methods for aggregating the effects of lower-level features of social life onto higher-level outcomes. If we represent actors as possessing characteristics of action X, Y, Z, and we represent their relations as U, V, W – how do these actors in social settings aggregate to mid- and higher-level social patterns? This is the key methodological challenge that drives the Santa Fe Institute, and it produces very interesting results [Helbing and Balmelli 2002; Axelrod 1997; Lane *et al.* 2009].

This brief summary of the central doctrines of AS provides one reason why AS theorists are so concerned to have adequate and tractable models of the actor – often rational actor models. Thomas Schelling’s work provides a particularly key example for the AS research community; in field after field he demonstrates how micro motives aggregate onto macro outcomes [Schelling 1978; Schelling 1984]. And Elster’s work is also key, in that he provides some theoretical machinery for analyzing the actor at a “thicker” level – imperfect rationality, self-deception, emotion, commitment, and impulse [Elster 1979; Elster 1983; Elster 2007].

In short, analytical sociology is a compact, clear approach to the problem of understanding social outcomes. It lays the ground for the productive body of research questions associated with the “aggregation dynamics” research program. There is active, innovative research being done within this framework of ideas, especially in Germany, Sweden, and Great Britain [Greshoff, Huinink, and Schimank 2011]. And its clarity permits, in turn, the formulation of rather specific critiques from researchers in other sociological traditions who reject one or another of the key components. (This is the thrust of Andrew Abbott’s [article](#) on mechanisms and analytic sociology [Abbott 2007]).

There is quite a bit of the framework of AS that I find appealing and constructive. Moreover, several of the core premises line up well with assumptions I’ve argued for in my own philosophy of social science – microfoundations, causal mechanisms, and agent-centered ontology, for example. Where there appear to be a few inches of separation between the views is on the subject of reductionism and explanatory autonomy. I will return to this question in the final section of the paper.

## Criticisms

There certainly is intellectual power in the AS approach – actors in social relations and the aggregation of their actions. But it is not the whole of sociology. So let's quickly consider a few examples of sociological research that seem fairly distant from AS and consider how they might relate.

One interesting data point on this question of the relationship between AS and other approaches to social explanation can be examined in Kathleen Thelen's contribution to Renate Mayntz's *Akteure – Mechanismen – Zur Theoriefähigkeit makrosozialer Analysen* [Mayntz 2002]. Thelen is a brilliant scholar within the new historical institutionalism perspective [Thelen 2004], and her contribution to the Mayntz volume ("The Explanatory Power of Historical Institutionalism") implicitly aims at tracing out some of the points of contrast between AS and historical institutionalism. She highlights several key methodological and theoretical assumptions underlying current research in historical institutionalism: attention to the formation of collective interests [Thelen 2002, 92], attention to context [*ibidem*, 93], attention to meso- and macro-causal analysis [*ibidem*, 95], and sensitivity to the temporal dimension of social processes [*ibidem*, 96]. She suggests, further, that these features are somewhat dissonant with the AS programme.

My interpretation of Thelen's observations here and elsewhere is that there is a significant methodological divide between her way of thinking about social processes and that of AS. She highlights a handful of characteristics of HI research. Historical institutionalists are inclined to focus on the meso level – the settings of rules, norms, and processes through which social life is mediated; and they are sensitive to the crucial variations across time and place that these arrangements illustrate. Nothing in this construction is antithetical to the requirement of microfoundations and the recognition that socially situated actors constitute the social world; but the emphasis of the research is not on the discovery of the aggregation dynamics from the level of the individual actor.

## How Sociologists Reason About Causes and Levels

How might we do a more general job of assessing the fit between AS and the range of sociological research today? We might consider a handful of fertile social scientists with respect to questions like these:

- To what extent do their theories rely on "mechanisms" as a foundation for social explanations?



- Are their theories compatible with the requirement of microfoundations at a local actor level?
- Do they have a theory of the actor?
- And do they make use of social ontologies that presuppose large social causes and macro causal relationships?

Here I will spend time reviewing several interesting and complicated instances of recent sociological reasoning about causes and levels of analysis. These are Michael Mann's analysis of European fascism [Mann 2004], George Steinmetz's comparative sociology of German colonial powers [Steinmetz 2007], Robert Brenner's explanation of the occurrence of agricultural revolution in early modern Europe [Brenner 1976; Brenner 1982], the ethnomethodology of Harold Garfinkel [Garfinkel 1967] and Erving Goffman [Goffman 1974; Goffman 1980], Immanuel Wallerstein's causal narrative of the development of the modern world [Wallerstein 1974], Andrew Abbott's treatment of the professions [Abbott 1988], and Andreas Wimmer's analysis of "methodological nationalism" [Wimmer and Schiller 2002]. Short selective descriptions of their research programmes are included in the appendix. Here is a table summarizing several important features of each of these sociologists and historians.

None of these authors fulfills all the desiderata of the AS programme; and yet they are strong examples of contemporary sociological research. These authors have made important and innovative contributions to sociology in the past few decades. All are empirically grounded in careful study of available evidence. All offer interesting and rigorous interpretations of the phenomena they study. Crucially, they represent a wide range of methods of inquiry and explanation, with commonalities and differences interweaving among them.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The research framework of the new institutionalism, by contrast, is highly consistent with the premises and approaches of analytical sociology. Here the precise research objective is to discover features of the local institutional and regulative framework that produce behaviors that result in macro effects – a strategy that exactly reproduces the arrows in Coleman's boat. Here I am thinking of works such as these: Brinton and Nee [1998]; Powell and DiMaggio [1991]; North [1990]; Ensminger [1992]; Knight [1992]; Mantzavinos [2001].

Author	Research question	Factors	Mechanism	Method	Macro/meso/micro causal factors?	Actor-centered?	Vertical / lateral?	Atm to context?	Micro foundations?
Mann 2004	Why did fascist movements arise?	Economic crisis, demilitarization, ideology, modernization	Actor-based account of culturalization and mobilization	Comparative; case studies	Micro and meso	Yes	Vertical	Yes	Yes
Mann 2004	Why did fascist movements succeed in seizing power?	Conservative, anti-democratic states lacked the strength to resist; economic and military crises	Structural / institutional account of state response; structural causes of rise of fascist movements	Comparative; case studies	Meso and macro	Yes	Lateral	Yes	Yes
Steinmetz 2007	Why did German colonial regimes take different forms in 3 countries?	Level of violence; economic dynamics in home country; international political pressures	"Field" of competition; pre-colonial discourses; psychoanalytic mechanisms; local resistance	Comparative; case studies	Micro and meso	Yes	Lateral	Yes	Yes
Wallerstein 1974	What factors caused the development of the absolute monarchy in France?	Social disorder; need for revenue; climate change; emerging trade system	Actors at several levels pursue interests within historical constraints	Historical; process tracing	Micro meso macro	Yes	Both	No	Yes
Brenner 1976, 1982	Why did agricultural revolution occur in 17th century England but not France?	Social-property system; price and population changes	Actors with specific interests; powers, and resources; social property system shapes behavior	Comparative; theoretical	Micro and meso	Yes	Both	No	Yes
Abbott 1988	What factors influenced the development of the "professions" in the 19th and 20th centuries?	Division of labor; organizations in society; knowledge systems	Not mechanistic	Historical; ethnographic	Micro	Yes	Neither	Yes	Yes
Wimmer & Schiller 2002	What level of analysis works best today for complex global issues such as immigration or culture change?	Immigration; conceptual schemes	Not mechanistic	Theoretical / conceptual; empirical	Micro meso macro	No	Both	No	??
Goffman 1980 Garfinkel 1967	What are the varieties and consequences of scripts of ordinary social behavior?	Scripts; "syntax" of behavior; concrete social organizations and settings	Local transmission of norms of behavior in workplace, village, or hospital	Ethnographic	Micro	Yes	Neither	Yes	Yes

The table picks out a small handful of characteristics that are relevant to the topic of the relationship between AS and contemporary sociology: the method of inquiry and inference the researcher uses; does the researcher attempt to identify social mechanisms; the level of factors to which the researcher assigns causal powers; whether the researcher employs an actor-centered approach to social explanation; whether his/her explanations are largely vertical or largely horizontal; whether the researcher pays substantial attention to social and historical context; and whether the analysis is largely compatible with the requirement of providing microfoundations for causal and structural claims.

## **Analysis**

There is a range of methods at work in these seven cases: comparative research, historical research; case study analysis; process tracing; ethnographic research; and theoretically guided reconstruction of social processes. Sometimes an author uses several of these approaches for different aspects of his/her research questions. The majority of these cases assign causal powers to meso- and macro-level social structures and causes. Almost all possess a recognizable theory of the actor, and most assign explanatory importance to understanding the processes through which the actor is historically constituted. Almost all these researchers use a mix of vertical (*explanation of the higher level in terms of the characteristics of the lower level*) and lateral (*explanation including same-level or higher-level factors*) explanatory strategies. The explanatory logic that these authors provide is rarely “aggregative”; they are not primarily interested in showing how a macro phenomenon is the aggregate result of local actors’ choices. The majority pay substantial attention to the context of social and historical processes. And almost all are compatible with the requirement of providing microfoundations for meso- and macro-level claims. So there is not an easy translational relationship between AS and a number of other important and productive research traditions in sociology today.

There are several important points of difference between this group of sociologists and the precepts of analytical sociology. First, the model of explanation at work in these cases is significantly different from the paradigm examples of explanations offered by AS. Rather than conforming to the structure of Coleman’s boat – rather than providing reductions of social patterns to individual interactions – these authors offer explanations that often explain one set of social circumstances in terms of the characteristics of other social circumstances at the same level. These authors generally

do not provide vertical explanations or aggregative explanation; instead, they provide horizontal explanations and meso-causal explanations.

This implies a second major difference between these examples and the AS programme – the issue of the validity of meso-level causal mechanisms. These sociologists are fully prepared to explain social processes by referring to structures and mechanisms that are embodied at a level of organization higher than individual actors – organizations, ideologies, legislative systems, training regimes, wars. I will return to this issue below.

Third, most of these researchers give much higher priority to the importance of investigating the nuances of difference that exist in specific historical cases. They insist that we need to understand the actor in greater detail, and we need to understand the institutional and contextual arrangements of action in greater detail, before we can provide confident interpretations of causation. Context and detail are more important for these researchers than for the AS framework. This is the contribution offered by Goffman and Garfinkel, who rely on the importance of providing a more nuanced account of the actor than is offered by theories of the actor based on a narrow conception of rationality. Goffman, Garfinkel, Steinmetz, Mann, and Thelen all demonstrate that historical actors have greater nuance and complexity than simple rational decision-makers.

A fourth important difference comes in at the stage of methodology. We can find quite a bit of support for a wide degree of methodological pluralism in the social sciences that goes against the grain of a “master” doctrine of analytical sociology. Mann’s analysis of fascism provides a good example. He engages in a handful of styles of reasoning: comparison of large cases, careful study of the historical circumstances of single cases, causal reasoning similar to Mill’s methods of similarity and difference, and theoretical development of abstract hypotheses. Several of the sociologists considered here pursue a comparative method that identifies meso-level causes using a method of pairwise comparison, process-tracing, or single-case analysis. This contrasts with the recommendation that emerges from AS in favor of aggregative construction of outcomes on the basis of hypotheses about the actors and their interactions.

A final important difference is ontological. This point is illustrated in Abbott’s treatment of the professions, and also in his polemic against the mechanisms approach [Abbott 2007]. Abbott (and some other sociologists) is uncomfortable with the idea of fixed events and causes; Abbott argues for a more fluid understanding of processes, context, and change. Abbott makes a strong case for the idea that this more fluid representation of the social world can be pursued in an equally rigorous

and empirically specific fashion. (Recall his critique of the “variables paradigm” in the social sciences; [Abbott 1998]).

So let us collect some of the ways in which these examples deviate in some important respect from the perspectives of AS.

- Emphasis on context
- Emphasis on thick description of the actor and institutions
- Analytical attention to causal factors at the meso and macro levels – structural circumstances influencing other large outcomes
- Lateral, meso-level causation rather than vertical reductionist causation
- Generally not inclined to a reductionist or aggregative explanatory strategy
- Emphasis on heterogeneity (Mann, Steinmetz, Thelen)
- Emphasis on relationality (Abbott, Tilly)

Are there points of commonality among these examples and AS? There certainly are. All are compatible with the requirement of microfoundations. Most of these examples are sympathetic to the causal-mechanisms approach to social explanation. All are actor-centered and generally have a theory of the actor centrally embedded within their work. So several central tenets of the AS approach are embodied – albeit with different emphasis – in these strong examples of sociological research as well.

I am inclined to judge two things: first, that the methodological requirement of microfoundations is indeed a universal requirement on valid sociological research; but second, that the program of aggregation from micro to macro is only one way of conducting sociological research and explanation. So we shouldn't expect other areas of sociological thinking and research to simply fold into the framework of analytical sociology – any more than a common commitment to natural selection as the causal mechanism underlying species change dictates the content and methods of the various areas of biology.

This is a place where the ontological framework of social structures that Dave Elder-Vass provides in *The Causal Power of Social Structures* [Elder-Vass 2010] seems methodologically useful. It provides a rigorous basis for conceding the point that context, institutions, moral ideas, and value systems have a causal role to play in social explanation. In E-V's view, these social structures supervene upon facts about individual actors; but their causal properties do not need to be reduced to features of the actors.

## **Reductionism?**

A key issue raised by this discussion is the validity of causal claims about meso entities. Does social causation need to be traced back to aggregate patterns of individual behavior? Or are there legitimate causal discoveries at the meso-level in the social world? Do we need to reduce social causation to facts about individuals, or is there a legitimate level of social causation and structure that does not require reduction to a lower level?

Woven throughout this discussion are the ideas of reduction and emergence. An area of knowledge is reducible to a lower level if it is possible to derive the statements of the higher-level science from the properties of the lower level. A level of organization is emergent if it has properties that cannot be derived from features of its components. The strong sense of emergence holds that a composite entity sometimes possesses properties that are wholly independent from the properties of the units that compose it. Vitalism and mind-body dualism were strong forms of emergentism: life and mind were thought to possess characteristics that do not derive from the properties of inanimate molecules. Physicalism maintains that all phenomena – including living systems – depend ultimately upon physical entities and structures, so strong emergentism is rejected. But physicalism does not entail reductionism, so it is scientifically acceptable to provide explanations that presuppose relative explanatory autonomy.

As we have observed many times above, all social explanations need to conform to the requirement of microfoundations: any social-causal claim (or claim of persistent social structure) must be accompanied by a sketch of the mechanisms at the level of individual actors that sustain these causal and structural facts. This is a point of agreement with the thrust of analytical sociology: actors in social situations constitute the ground of all social process, structure, and change. However, much turns on what precisely we mean to require of a satisfactory explanation: a full specification of the microfoundations in every case, or a sketch of the way that a given social-level process might readily be embodied in individual-level activities. If we go with the second version, we are licensing a fair amount of autonomy for the social-level explanation; whereas if we go with the first version, we are tending towards a requirement of reductionism from higher to lower levels in every case. I am inclined to interpret the requirement in the second way; it doesn't seem necessary to disaggregate every claim like "organizational deficiencies at the Bhopal chemical plant caused the devastating chemical spill" onto specific individual-level activities. We understand pretty well, in a generic way, what the microfoundations of organizations are, and it isn't necessary to provide a detailed account in order to have a satisfactory explanation.

In other words, we can make careful statements about macro-macro and macro-meso causal relations without proceeding according to the logic of Coleman’s boat – up and down the struts. Ronald Jepperson and John Meyer make this point in a recent article on methodological individualism [Jepperson and Meyer 2011], and they offer an alternative to Coleman’s macro-micro boat that incorporates explanations referring to meso-level causes [Jepperson and Meyer 2011, 66].

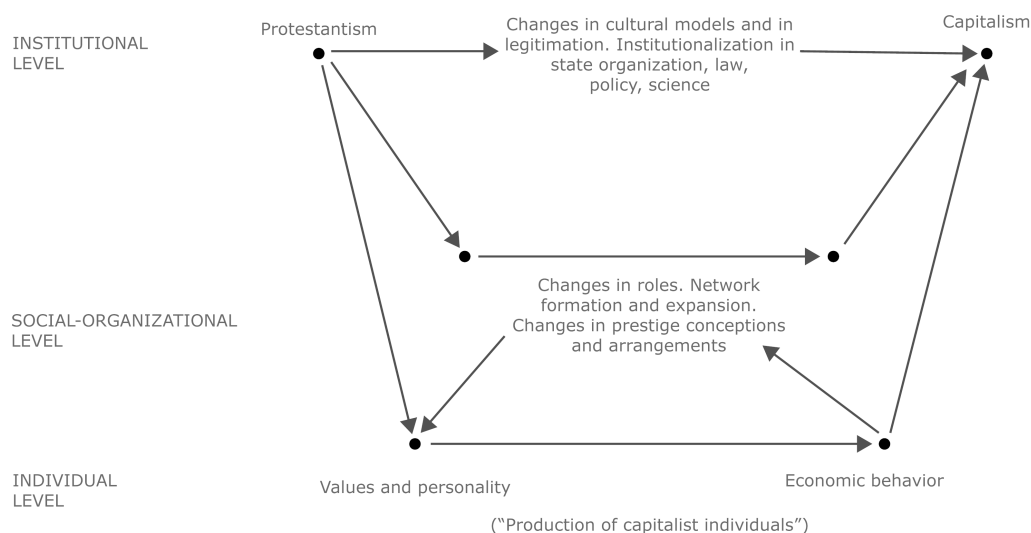


FIG. 2. Possible pathways linking Protestantism and capitalism at different levels of analysis. *Source:* Jepperson and Meyer [2011, 66].

These points leave room for a meta-theory of relative explanatory autonomy for social explanations. The key insight here is that there are good epistemic and pragmatic reasons to countenance explanations at a meso-level of organization, without needing to reduce these explanations to the level of individual actors. Here is a statement of the idea of relative explanatory autonomy, provided by a distinguished philosopher of science, Lawrence Sklar, with respect to areas of the physical sciences: “Everybody agrees that there are a multitude of scientific theories that are conceptually and explanatorily autonomous with respect to the fundamental concepts and fundamental explanations of foundational physical theories” [Sklar 2006].

The idea of relative explanatory autonomy has been invoked by cognitive scientists against the reductionist claims of neuro-scientists. Of course cognitive mechanisms must be grounded in neurophysiological processes. But this doesn’t entail that cognitive theories need to be reduced to neurophysiological statements.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Sacha Bem reviews these arguments in “The Explanatory Autonomy of Psychology: Why a Mind is Not a Brain” [Bem 2011]. Michael Strevens summarizes some of these issues in “Explanatory

These arguments are directly relevant to the social sciences, subject to several important caveats. First is the valid requirement of microfoundations: we need always to be able to plausibly connect the social constructs we hypothesize to the actions and mentalities of situated agents. And second is the requirement of ontological and causal stability: if we want to explain a meso-level phenomenon on the basis of the causal properties of other meso-level structures, we need to have confidence that the latter properties are reasonably stable over different instantiations. For example, if we believe that a certain organizational structure for tax collection is prone to corruption of the ground-level tax agents and want to use that feature as a cause of something else – we need to have empirical evidence supporting the assertion of the corruption tendencies of this organizational form.

Explanatory autonomy is consistent with our principle requiring microfoundations at a lower ontological level. Here we have the sanction of the theory of supervenience to allow us to say that composition and explanation can be separated [Zahle 2003; Zahle 2007; Kim 1993]. We can settle on a level of meso or macro explanation without dropping down to the level of the actor. We need to be confident there are microfoundations, and the meso properties need to be causally robust. But if this is satisfied, we don't need to extend the explanation down to the actors.

Once we have reason to accept something like the idea of relative explanatory autonomy in the social sciences, we also have a strong basis for rejecting the exclusive validity of one particular approach to social explanation, the reductionist approach associated with methodological individualism, analytical sociology, and Coleman's boat. Rather, social scientists can legitimately use explanations that call upon meso-level causal linkages without needing to reduce these to derivations from facts about individuals. And this implies the legitimacy of a fairly broad conception of methodological pluralism in the social sciences, constrained always by the requirement of microfoundations.

### **Methodological Localism**

Analytical sociology encourages us to direct our attention to the units that make up social phenomena; this is the point of the "dissecting" metaphor. The units to which AS directs our attention are individuals, which leads fairly naturally to the idea of methodological individualism. I prefer an approach that explicitly preserves social

Autonomy and Explanatory Irreducibility" [Strevens 2011]. And Geoffrey Hellman addresses the issues of reductionism and emergence in the special sciences in "Reductionism, Determination, Explanation" [Hellman 2011].



embeddedness of social actors all the way down, which I refer to as *methodological localism* (henceforth ML) [Little 2006]. (The AS community may regard this as an alternative specification of the idea of “structural individualism” discussed above).

Methodological localism affirms that there are large social structures and facts that influence social outcomes. But it insists that these structures are only possible insofar as they are embodied in the actions and states of socially constructed individuals. The “molecule” of all social life is the socially constructed and socially situated individual, who lives, acts, and develops within a set of local social relationships, institutions, norms, and rules. With methodological individualism, this position embraces the point that individuals are the bearers of social structures and causes. There is no such thing as an autonomous social force; rather, all social properties and effects are conveyed through the individuals who constitute a population at a time. Against individualism, however, methodological localism affirms the “social-ness” of social actors. Methodological localism denies the possibility or desirability of characterizing the individual extra-socially. Instead, the individual is understood as a socially constituted actor, affected by large current social facts such as value systems, social structures, extended social networks, and the like. In other words, ML denies the possibility of reductionism from the level of the social to the level of a population of non-social individuals. Rather, the individual is formed by locally embodied social facts, and the social facts are in turn constituted by the current characteristics of the persons who make them up.

This account begins with the socially constituted person. Human beings are subjective, intentional, and relational agents. They interact with other persons in ways that involve competition and cooperation. They form relationships, enmities, alliances, and networks; they compose institutions and organizations. They create material embodiments that reflect and affect human intentionality. They acquire beliefs, norms, practices, and worldviews, and they socialize their children, their friends, and others with whom they interact. Some of the products of human social interaction are short-lived and local (indigenous fishing practices); others are long-duration but local (oral traditions, stories, and jokes); and yet others are built up into social organizations of great geographical scope and extended duration (states, trade routes, knowledge systems). But always we have individual agents interacting with other agents, making use of resources (material and social), and pursuing their goals, desires, and impulses.

At the level of the socially constituted individual we need to ask two sorts of questions: First, what makes individual agents behave as they do? Here we need accounts of the mechanisms of deliberation and action at the level of the individual. What are the main features of individual choice, motivation, reasoning, and preference? How do these differ across social groups? How do emotions, rational deliber-

ation, practical commitments, and other forms of agency influence the individual's deliberations and actions? This area of research is purposively eclectic, including performative action, rational action, impulse, theories of the emotions, theories of the self, or theories of identity.

Second, how are individuals formed and constituted? Methodological localism gives great importance to learning more about how individuals are formed and constituted – the concrete study of the social process of the development of the self. Here we need better accounts of social development, the acquisition of worldview, preferences, and moral frameworks, among the many other determinants of individual agency and action. What are the social institutions and influences through which individuals acquire norms, preferences, and ways of thinking? How do individuals develop cognitively, affectively, and socially? So methodological localism points up the importance of discovering the microfoundations and local variations of identity formation and the construction of the historically situated self.

So far we have emphasized the socially situated individual. But social action takes place within spaces that are themselves socially structured by the actions and purposes of others – by property, by prejudice, by law and custom, and by systems of knowledge. So our account needs to identify the local social environments through which action is structured and projected: the inter-personal networks, the systems of rules, the social institutions. The social thus has to do with the behaviorally, cognitively, and materially embodied reality of *social institutions*. An institution, we might say, is an embodied set of rules, incentives, and opportunities that have the potential of influencing agents' choices and behavior.<sup>4</sup> An institution is a complex of socially embodied powers, limitations, and opportunities within which individuals pursue their lives and goals. A property system, a legal system, and a professional baseball league all represent examples of institutions.<sup>5</sup> Institutions have effects that are in varying degrees independent from the individual or “larger” than the individual. Each of these social entities is embodied in the social states of a number of actors – their beliefs, intentions, reasoning, dispositions, and histories. Actors perform their actions within the context of social frameworks represented as rules, institutions, and organizations, and their actions and dispositions embody the causal effectiveness of those frameworks. And institutions influence individuals by offering incentives and

<sup>4</sup> “Institutions are the humanly devised constraints that structure human interaction. They are made up of formal constraints (for example, rules, laws, constitutions), informal constraints (for example, norms of behavior, conventions, self-imposed codes of conduct), and their enforcement characteristics. Together they define the incentive structure of societies and, specifically, economies” [North 1998, 247].

<sup>5</sup> See, North [1990], Ensminger [1992], Knight [1992] and Brinton and Nee [1998] for recent expositions of the new institutionalism in the social sciences.

constraints on their actions, by framing the knowledge and information on the basis of which they choose, and by conveying sets of normative commitments (ethical, religious, interpersonal) that influence individual action.

It is important to emphasize that ML affirms the existence of social constructs beyond the purview of the individual actor or group. Political institutions exist – and they are embodied in the actions and states of officials, citizens, criminals, and opportunistic others. These institutions have real effects on individual behavior and on social processes and outcomes –but always mediated through the structured circumstances of agency of the myriad participants in these institutions and the affected society. This perspective emphasizes the contingency of social processes, the mutability of social structures over space and time, and the variability of human social systems (norms, urban arrangements, social practices, and so on).

Methodological localism has numerous intellectual advantages. It avoids the reification of the social that is characteristic of holism and structuralism, it abjures social “action at a distance,” and it establishes the intellectual basis for understanding the non-availability of strong laws of nature among social phenomena. It is possible to offer numerous examples of social research underway today that illustrate the perspective of methodological localism; in fact, almost all rigorous social theorizing and research can be accommodated to the assumptions of methodological localism.

### **Do Organizations Have Causal Powers?**

This argument offered above for relative explanatory autonomy at the meso level is fairly abstract. Is it possible to validate the idea that meso-level structures have causal powers? Above I argued that it is reasonable to maintain that they do on philosophical grounds. Here I’d like to consider how meso-level factors might work. I will focus on organizations here because we all have direct experience of this kind of social structure.

Examples of organizations include things like these:

- the Atlanta police department;
- a collective farm in Sichuan in 1965;
- the maintenance and operations staff of a nuclear power plant;
- a large investment bank on Wall Street;
- Certus Corporation (discoverer of the PCR process);
- the land value assessment process in late Imperial China.

The organization consists of a number of things:

- a set of procedures for how to handle specific kinds of tasks;

- a set of people with skills and specific roles;
- a set of incentives and rewards to induce participants to carry out their roles effectively and diligently;
- a set of accountability processes permitting supervision and assessment of performance by individuals within the organization;
- an “executive” function with the power to refine/revise/improve the rules so as to bring about overall better performance.

The most obvious causal property of an organization is bound up in the function of the organization. An organization is developed in order to bring about certain social effects: reduce pollution or crime, distribute goods throughout a population, provide services to individuals, seize and hold territory, disseminate information. These effects occur as a result of the coordinated activities of people within the organization, and the workings of the institution are normally subject to oversight, management, and deliberate processes of adjustment. When organizations work correctly they bring about one set of effects; when they break down they bring about another set of effects. Here we can think about organizations in analogy with technology components like amplifiers, thermostats, stabilizers, or surge protectors. This analogy suggests we think about the causal powers of an organization at two levels: what they do (their meso-level effects) and how they do it (their micro-level sub-mechanisms).

So how does an organization exert causal influence in the social world? To answer this question we need to disaggregate the organization’s activities onto subvening circumstances, including especially patterns of individual and group activity.

- *First, the rules and procedures of the organization themselves have behavioral consequences that lead consistently to a certain kind of outcome.* How do rules and procedures causally affect the behavior of the actors who participate in them? (a) Through training and inculcation. The new participant is exposed to training processes designed to lead him/her to internalize the procedures and norms governing his/her function. (b) Through formal enforcement. Supervisors are institutionally charged to enforce the rules through direct observation and feedback. (c) Through the normative example of other participants, including informal sanctions by non-supervisors for “wrong” behavior. (d) Through positive incentives administered by supervisors and mid-level functionaries. Each of these avenues for influencing the behavior of an actor within an organization depends on the actions and motivations of other actors within the organization. So we have the recursive question, what factors influence the behavior of those actors? And the answer seems to be: all actors find themselves within a dynamic system of behavior by other actors, frequently maintaining an equilibrium of reproduction of the rules and roles.

- *Second, different organizational forms may be more or less efficient at performing their tasks, leading to consequences for the people and higher-level organizations that are depending on them.* Institutions designed to do similar work may differ in their functioning because of specific differences in the implementation of roles and processes within the organization. This is a system characteristic of the particular features and interactions of the rules and processes of the organization, along with the expected behaviors of the participants. It is also a causal characteristic: implementing system A results in greater efficiency at X than implementing B. The underlying causal reality that needs explanation is how it comes to pass that participants carry out their roles as prescribed – which takes us back to the first thesis.
- *Third, the discrepancy between what the rules require of participants and what the participants actually do may have consequences for the outputs of the organization.* This causal claim highlights the difference between formal and informal procedures and practices within an organization. Informal practices can be highly regular and reproducible. In order to incorporate their implications into our analysis of the workings of the organization we need to accurately understand them; so we need to do some organizational ethnography to identify the practices of the organization. But in principle, the logic of explanation we provide on the basis of informal practices is exactly the same as those offered on the basis of the formal rules of the organization.
- *Fourth, the specific ways in which incentives, sanctions, and supervision are implemented differentiate across organizations.* This is one of the key insights of the “new institutionalism.” The specific design of the institution in terms of opportunities and incentives presented to participants makes a large difference in actors’ behavior, and consequently a large difference to the system-level performance of the institution. Tweaking the variable of the level in the organization’s hierarchy that needs to sign off on expenditures at a given level has significant effects on behavior and system properties. On the one hand, higher-level sign-off may serve to restrain spending. On the other hand, it may make the organization more unwieldy in responding to opportunities and threats.
- *Fifth, the organization has causal powers with respect to the behavior of the individuals involved in the organization.* This factor parallels thesis 1 but is meant to refer to longterm effects on behavior and personality. The idea here is that immersion in a particular organization and its culture creates a distinctive social psychology in the people who experience it. They may acquire habits of thought, ways of responding to new circumstances, higher or lower

levels of trust of others, and so forth, in ways that influence their behavior in the broader society. The idea of an “organization man” falls in this category of influence. The organization influences the individual’s behavior, not just through the immediate system of rewards and punishments, but through its ability to shape his/her more permanent social psychology.

There are only two fundamental causal pathways identified here. The causal properties of the organization are embodied in the patterns of coordinated actions undertaken by the actors who are involved; and these orderly patterns create system effects for the organization as a whole that can be analyzed in abstraction from the individuals whose actions constitute the micro-level of the social entity.

## **Conclusion**

What, then, have we learned about the framework of analytical sociology as a research methodology for sociology?

First, AS is on solid ground when it comes to social ontology. Social entities, processes, and causal powers always depend on the actions and thoughts of individual actors. Therefore we need to always be able to “cash out” a claim about causal relations and powers in terms of the features of individual agency that constitute those relations and powers. This is what I refer to as “microfoundationalism,” and it is a valid requirement on social theorizing.

Less convincing is the reductionist impulse that AS offers to the social sciences. I don’t mean to suggest that AS wants to perform a full reduction from the social to the individual; but rather that it advocates an explanatory strategy that recommends explaining higher-level social patterns in terms of individual-level circumstances. This is what I refer to above as “vertical” explanation. We have seen powerful examples of sociological research that make use of “lateral” strategies; they explain one set of factors in terms of another set of factors at the same level.

For this reason and others as well, the idea that AS represents a uniquely best research strategy for sociology should be questioned as well. We have seen a variety of research approaches in Mann, Steinmetz, Abbott, and others, and they are all legitimate. This provides support for a confident pluralism when it comes to social science methodology and research orientation. The requirement of microfoundationalism continues to be valid; but there are alternative ways of fulfilling this requirement. The survey of several sociologists documents this fact; virtually all of these investigators demonstrate an intellectual commitment to understanding how meso and macro processes supervene upon actors.

Another potential deficiency of AS that emerges from this discussion is a lack of priority to the task of identifying context and detail. AS is an abstractive approach to social analysis: breaking complex things down into simpler and more abstract things. (This is the thrust of Hedstrom's title, *Dissecting the Social*.) There is a sense of methodological impatience expressed in this strategy: let's get down to the serious work of discovering the ways the observed outcome emerges from the individuals. But this also leads to inattention to the details of context and of actor's inner life that often turn out to be critically important. We need to understand historical institutions and historical mentalities in some detail if we are going to be able to explain things like the emergence of fascism or the occurrence of witch crazes. So Goffman, Steinmetz, and Abbott in different ways bring our attention back to the historically and situationally important details of the context of the phenomenon of interest. It is not impossible to be attentive to context from the point of view of AS; but nothing in the framework encourages this kind of attention.

AS theorists acknowledge that their framework depends on the conceptual of a purposive, rational actor; but they deny that this means that rational choice theory is the only way of explaining social outcomes. That is good; but in fact, the orientation towards reduction makes the substitution of simple theories of the actor hard to resist. So there is a gravitational pull towards a sparse theory of the rational actor that makes it more difficult to introduce the complexities of action, cognition, and deliberation that we find in the real social world. Goffman and Garfinkel provide "theories of the actor"; but these theories are substantially more complex and substantially more open to the fact of heterogeneity across social groups, than the DBO theory suggests. Going a bit ethnographic is possible within the AS framework; but there is nothing in the framework that encourages this move.

These comments should not be understood to discredit AS as an important contribution to our thinking about social research. Instead, they are meant to cast doubt on the idea of methodological monism: the idea that there is one best framework for conducting social research, and it is one that proceeds by disaggregating social structures onto understandable patterns of individual social behavior. This is one illuminating approach to social explanation, but there are others as well.

## **Appendix: Cases**

### *Michael Mann on Fascism*

Fascist governments in Spain, Italy, and Germany commonly came to power by long mass-based mobilization by right-wing nationalist parties rather than by seizure

of power by a strategically located minority. How was it possible for parties based on hatred and violence to be able to gain support from large parts of the populations of these countries? And how should the social sciences proceed in efforts to diagnose and explain these processes? In *Fascists* [Mann 2004] Michael Mann offers a thorough and nuanced account of the rise of fascist movements in many countries in Europe in the early part of the twentieth century. It is particularly interesting to examine Mann's research strategy – the empirical research he brings to bear to his research questions and the assumptions he makes about what is needed in order to arrive at an explanation of various aspects of fascism.

Mann asks two different kinds of causal questions: Why did fascist movements arise in part of Europe in the 1920s and 1930s? And why did they succeed in seizing power in some countries but not other countries? His analysis of the fascisms of Europe attempts to assess each of them in terms of the four sources of power he theorized in earlier books: ideological, economic, military, and political power. This analysis also plays into his account of the failure of fascism in countries such as France or Sweden. Mann makes an important point when he observes that fascism never prevailed in countries where parliamentary democracy had developed a secure base. There were fascist parties and leaders in France, Great Britain, and Sweden; but democratic institutions held, and fascism did not prevail in these countries.

A key dimension of Mann's research strategy is an "actor-centered" approach to understanding fascist mobilization. Actors create movements; and so we need to understand their motivations at the individual level. Ideologies, arguments, and values are causal factors in the rise of a movement. What makes a population of people receptive to the arguments of a particular political movement? We need to understand their frustrations, their ideas, and their recent experiences; then we can explain their readiness to join a movement.

In order to understand actors we need an understanding a set of contextual and formative influences that shaped the actors. Here Mann refers to experiences like defeat and demobilization in World War I; economic crisis and insecurity; and intellectual currents concerning the interpretation of the processes of modernization that Europe was undergoing, which Mann describes as "interwar crises of European modernity" [*ibidem*, 23], along the lines of those described by Fritz Stern in *The Politics of Cultural Despair* [Stern 1961]. So the micro-instantiation of higher-level factors play a key role in this causal explanation; we need to know how the experience of infantry combat, defeat, and demobilization influenced the psychology of this generation of young German, Austrian, and Italian men. Mann makes plain his recognition that mentality and its social development at the individual level is key.



The second major aspect of Mann's strategy is situational and structural. Mann has spent a lot of his career analyzing social power, and his framework highlights four separate areas of social and political life: economic, military, political, and ideological. Each of these spheres is embodied in concrete organizations, institutions, and mentalities; and we are able to trace out how these organizations work. In *Fascists* Mann argues that crises occurred in each of these areas in Europe in the 1930s, and these crises were necessary causal conditions for the rise of fascism: "Fascism was strongest where we find distinctive combinations of all four.... These crises seem to have been necessary causes of fascism. Without them, no fascism. But none seems to have been an individually sufficient cause. Most countries coped with crisis without turning to organic nation-statism, let alone fascism" [Mann 2004, 23-24].

Here is where Mann's comparative causal reasoning comes in. He wants to know: "Why did Italians, Germans, Austrians, Hungarians, and Romanians embrace fascism in such large numbers when most of their neighbors stopped at milder movements?" [*ibidem*, 25]. And his method for answering this question is to examine the positive and negative cases in detail, to attempt to discover factors that differentiate them. (This is essentially Mill's method of difference.) His finding comes down to this: the countries where fascist movements came to power had three social characteristics among the segments of society potentially mobilized by fascism. They had constituencies favoring paramilitarism, transcendence, and nation-statism [*ibidem*, 26-27]. Each of these is a sub-population with a particular set of experiences and ideologies; in sum, they constituted a powerful source of support for fascist organizations.

Mann is very attentive to the actual social mechanisms through which a state organization exercises its power. He understands the "microfoundations" of infrastructural power very well. And he finds that the conditions of modernity created a general tendency towards more effective state organizations – a modern state. This process was abruptly accelerated by war:

Mann explains the differentiated pattern of fascist success in seizing power across Europe by analyzing the characteristics of the pre-fascist states that fell to the fascists. Essentially his finding is that the states where "institutionalized liberal democracies" existed, fascist movements failed; whereas those states that had only reached a hybrid status were much more vulnerable to fascist challenge. The microfoundations of this claim are made fairly clear: stable constitutional parliamentary systems had worked out an ideology, a set of organizations, and a set of social compacts that made them highly resistant to the challenge of fascist mobilization.

To summarize: Mann seeks to explain meso- and macro-level facts: the success of fascist mobilization and the success in some European countries but not others of fascist movements to seize power from the state. His account pays close attention to

the situation of the actors and the factors that led some to be receptive to the call from fascism. It pays attention to the macro-level crises – economic, military, and political – that struck Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. And it pays attention to the details of the meso-level institutions of political organization in various countries. His analysis is multi-country, multi-level, multi-causal, and microfoundational.

### *George Steinmetz on German Colonial Regimes*

George Steinmetz offers a comparative sociology of colonialism in *The Devil's Handwriting* [Steinmetz 2007]. He wants to explain differences in the implementation of “native policy” within German colonial regimes around the turn of the twentieth century. He finds that there are significant differences across three major instances of German colonialism (Samoa, Qingdao, Southwest Africa), and he wants to know why. (For example, the Namibia regime was much more violent than the Samoa or Qingdao examples.) This is a causal question, and Steinmetz is one of the most talented sociologists of his cohort in American sociology. So it is worth looking at his reasoning in detail. Here are the guiding research goals for Steinmetz's study.

What I try to account for in this book – my “explanandum” – is colonial native policy. Four determining structures or causal mechanisms were especially important in each of these colonies: (1) precolonial ethnographic discourses or representations, (2) symbolic competition among colonial officials for recognition of their superior ethnographic acuity, (3) colonizers' cross-identification with imagos of the colonized, and (4) responses by the colonized, including resistance, collaboration, and everything in between. Two other mechanisms influenced colonial native policy to varying degrees: (5) “economic” dynamics related to capitalist profit seeking (plantation agriculture, mining, trade, and smaller-scale forms of business) and (6) the “political pressures generated by the international system of states [*ibidem*, 2].

Note that Steinmetz proceeds here in a clearly comparativist fashion (three cases with salient similarities and differences); and he proceeds with the language of causal mechanism in view. The comparativist orientation implies a desire to identify causal differences across the cases that would account for the differences in outcomes in the cases. He suggests later in the analysis that all six factors mentioned here are causally relevant, but that the general structural causes (5 and 6) do not account for the variation in the cases. These structural factors perhaps account for the similarities rather than the differences across the cases. But Steinmetz emphasizes repeatedly that general theories of colonialism cannot account for the wide variation that is found across these three cases. “The patterns of variation among these three colonies are as puzzling as is the sheer degree of heterogeneity” [*ibidem*, 19].

So what kind of account does Steinmetz offer for the four key mechanisms he cites? Consider first factor (2) above, the idea that the specifics of colonial rule depended a great deal on the circumstances of the professional and ideological “field” within which colonial administrators were recruited and served. “Social fields are organized around differences – differences of perception and practice. It is difficult to imagine what sorts of materials actors could use in their efforts to carve out hierarchies of cultural distinction if they were faced with cultural formations as flat and uniform as Saidian ‘Orientalism’” [*ibidem*, 45-46]. The idea here is that the particular intellectual and professional environment established certain points of difference around which participants competed. These dividing lines set the terms of professional competition, and prospective colonial administrators as well as functioning administrators needed to establish their program for governance around a distinctive package of these assumptions.

This mechanism is a fairly clear one; and it provides a promising basis for explaining some of the otherwise puzzling aspects of colonial rule and native policy. It derives, fundamentally, from Bourdieu’s theories of social capital. Consider an analogy with current military policies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Suppose there are two large ideas of strategy in the air, counter-insurgency and state-building. Suppose that each of these frameworks of thought has resonance with different groups of powerful political leaders within the government. And suppose that senior military commanders are interested in establishing their credentials as effective strategists. It makes sense to imagine that there may be a competition for choosing on-the-ground strategies and tactics that align with the grand strategy the theater commander thinks will further his long-range career success the best.

This mechanism is consistent with an actor-centered theory of explanation: actors (administrators or generals) are immersed in a policy environment in which conflicting ideas about success are debated; the actors seek to align their actions to the framework they judge to be most likely to prevail (and preserve their careers). No one wants to be the last Curtis LeMay in Vietnam when the prevailing view back home is “winning hearts and minds.” The explanation postulates a social fact – the prevalence of several intellectual frameworks about the other, several ethnographic discourses; and the individual’s immersion in these discourses permits him or her to act strategically in pursuing advantageous goals.

So this illustrates the way that factors (1) and (2) work in Steinmetz’s explanation. What about (3)? This falls in the category of what Steinmetz calls “symbolic and imaginary identifications” [*ibidem*, 55]. Here Steinmetz turns away from conscious calculation and jockeying on the part of the colonial administrator in the direction of a non-rational psychology. Steinmetz draws on psychoanalytic theory and the theories

of Lacan here. But it remains an agent-centered analysis. Steinmetz refers to elements of mentality as an explanation of the administrators' behavior, and their possession of this mentality needs its own explanation. But what proceeds from the assumption of this mentality is straightforward; it is a projection of behavior based on a theory of the mental framework of the actor.

The fourth factor in Steinmetz's analysis turns to the states of agency of the colonized. Here he refers to strategies of response by the subject people to the facts of colonial rule, ranging from cooperation to resistance. This aspect of the story too is highly compatible with a microfoundations approach; it is straightforward to see how social mobilization theory can be fleshed out in ways that make it an agent-centered approach.

So Steinmetz's account seems to have several important characteristics. First, it is interested in providing a contextualized explanation of differences in nominally similar outcomes (different instances of German colonial rule). Second, it is interested in providing an account of the causal mechanisms that shaped each of the instances, in such a way as to account for their differences. Third, the mechanisms that he highlights are largely agent-centered mechanisms. Fourth, the account deliberately highlights the contingency of the developments it describes. Individuals and particular institutions play a role, as well as historical occurrences that were themselves highly contingent. And finally, there is a pervasive use of collective concepts like field, ideology, worldview, and ethnography that play a crucial causal role in the story. These concepts identify a supra-individual factor. But each of them can be provided with a microfoundational account. So Steinmetz's analysis here seems to be largely consistent with microfoundationalism. It diverges from analytical sociology in one important respect, however: Steinmetz does not couch his explanatory goals in terms of the idea of deriving social outcomes from individual-level actions and relations. Rather, it is for the reader to confirm that the mechanisms cited do in fact have appropriate microfoundations.

### *Immanuel Wallerstein on Absolutist Monarchy*

A common kind of causal narrative employed by historians is to identify a set of key actors, key circumstances, and key resources; and then to treat a period of time as a flow of actions by the actors in response to each other and changing circumstances. We might describe this as "explanation of an outcome as cumulative result of actions by differently situated actors, within a specified set of institutions, resources, and environmental factors."

Individual actions make sense in the context, so we have explained their behavior at the micro level. But we can also “calculate” aggregate structural consequences of these actions, and we can thereby reach conclusions about how change in one set of structural conditions led to another set of structural changes through the flow of situated actors choosing their strategies. The powers and resources available to different groups of actors are different and must be carefully assessed by the historian.

This explanatory logic is illustrated in Emmanuel Wallerstein’s account of the development of the so-called absolute monarchy [Wallerstein 1974]. Actors choose strategies based on the circumstances, alliances, and opponents that confront them. Actors include: king, lord, peasant, merchant, civil servant, bandit, clergy. Most of these actors also have collective organizations that function as actors at a group level. Economic crisis in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries led officials of medieval states to broaden and extend their bureaucracies [*ibidem*, 134]. Kings profited from disorder to extend their wealth at the expense of the nobles. Kings set more ambitious objectives for their states [*ibidem*, 135]. Kings needed support from nobles and created parliaments. Kings used a variety of strategies to centralize power. These actions aggregate into a new set of circumstances, a more effective set of centralized state powers, for the next period of play.

Institutions come into this kind of narrative in two ways. First, they are objective constraints and facts on the ground for the actors, leading actors to adjust their strategies. But second, institutions are built and modified through strategic actions and oppositions of the actors during a period of time. The king wants to strengthen the institutions of tax collection in the provinces; local lords oppose this effort. Each party deploys powers and opportunities to protect its interests. The resultant institutions are different from what either party would have designed.

Where do “causes” come into this kind of narrative? Climate change is a good example. Wallerstein considers the idea that climate change caused the emergence of a new set of institutions of land use [*ibidem*, 33 ff.]. The mechanism is through the actions of the various stakeholders, competing and cooperating to adjust institutions to fit their current needs. Let us say the king is in a situation of greater power than the peasant or the lord. The king largely prevails in institutionalizing a new set of land use practices. One of the causes of the new institution is climate change, working through the strategic actions of the several groups of players. Or: Medieval landowners suffer income loss during a period of economic crisis; they recognize an income opportunity in enclosing public lands for private cultivation; peasants resist using traditional forms of protest; landowners generally have a power advantage and are supported by the state; landowners prevail. In this story, economic crisis causes change of land property

relations, mediated by the strategic actions of key actors and groups. (Marx and Brenner tell different versions of this story).

A different kind of example comes in at the level of the state. Wallerstein holds that the absolutist state caused the extension of the world trading system. What does he mean by this? He means that new state institutions created new powers and opportunities for several groups of actors, and the net result of these actor's strategies was to bring about a rapid increase in trade and associated military strategies. Again – a macro cause of a macro outcome, flowing through an analysis of the strategies, interests, and powers of the historically situated actors.

This model of agent-based causal narratives seems to fit well into the methodology of agent-based simulations, with adjustments of the conditions of play from one iteration to the next. We would specify the goals and knowledge possessed by the actors. We would stipulate the institutional “geography” of the playing field. The institutions would define the powers possessed by each actor and the resources available for competition. We would represent alliances, competitions, and outcomes as they develop, noting that there is a stochastic and path-dependent nature to the unfolding of these scenarios.

Essentially the model for explaining social change and stability goes along these lines: actors act according to their interests and psychology. To explain a new outcome we need to identify either:

- a structural circumstance or resource that significantly changed the situation of action for one or more groups;

Or:

- a change in the conditions of agency in the actors themselves – ideology, religion, new factual theories and beliefs.

Either of these changes can then account for a persistent pattern of behavior leading to a new social outcome. This framework of explanation fits well into the ontology of methodological localism and also leaves room for meso-level causal factors.

### *Robert Brenner on Agricultural Revolution*

One of the defining controversies in the field of economic history in the past 35 years is the Brenner debate. Robert Brenner published “Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe” in *Past and Present* [Brenner 1976] and “The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism” [Brenner 1982]. In between these publications (and following) there was a rush of substantive responses from

leading economic historians, including M.M. Postan and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie.<sup>6</sup> Brenner's theories injected important new impetus into the old question: what led to the advent of capitalism?

The core issue of the debate is large and important: what were the social factors that brought about the major economic transformations of the European economy since the decline of feudalism? Feudalism was taken to be a stagnant economic system; but in the Sixteenth century things began to change. There was an agricultural revolution in England, with technological innovation, changes of cropping systems, and significant increase in land productivity. There were the beginnings of manufacture, leading eventually to water- and steam-powered machines. There was a population shift from the countryside to towns and cities. There was industrial revolution. So what were the large social factors that caused this widespread process of social and economic change? What propelled these dramatic changes of economic structure?

Brenner's explanation of these developments is thus based on "micro-class analysis" of the agrarian relations of particular regions of Europe. The processes of agricultural modernization unavoidably favored some class interests and harmed others. Capitalist agriculture required larger units of production (farms); the application of larger quantities of capital goods to agriculture; higher levels of education and scientific knowledge; etc. All of this required expropriation of small holders and destruction of traditional communal forms of agrarian relations. Whose interests would be served by these changes? Higher agricultural productivity would result; but the new agrarian relations would be ones that would pump the greater product out of the control of the producer and into elite classes and larger urban concentrations. Consequently, these changes did not favor peasant community interests, in the medium run at least. It is Brenner's view that in those regions of Europe where peasant societies were best able to defend traditional arrangements – favorable rent levels, communal control of land, and patterns of small holding – those arrangements persisted for centuries. In areas where peasants had been substantially deprived of tradition, organization, and power of resistance, capitalist agriculture was able (through an enlightened gentry and budding bourgeoisie) to restructure agrarian relations in the direction of profitable, scientific, rational (capitalist) agriculture.

Thus Brenner rejects the population and prices family of explanations, on the ground that these factors – population increase, price and wage changes – are factors which were common throughout Europe during the relevant period, and yet were

<sup>6</sup> Many of the most significant articles are collected in Aston and Philpin's *The Brenner Debate* [Aston and Philpin 1985].

accompanied by breakthrough to capitalist agriculture in some areas, tightening of feudal bonds in others, and entrenched peasant freeholding in yet others. Therefore population increase cannot be the decisive causal factor leading to breakthrough.

Instead, Brenner holds that it was the particular features of local class and property relations that determined whether increasing commerce and population would lead to breakthrough to capitalist agriculture or not. “Changes in relative factor scarcities consequent upon demographic changes exerted an effect on the distribution of income in medieval Europe only as they were, so to speak, refracted through the prism of changing social-property relations and fluctuating balances of class forces” [Brenner 1982, 21].

In order for these changes to take place in a given area, therefore, it was necessary that there be a group (a microclass) which had both the economic interest to further these changes and the political power to do so. On Brenner’s account, the decisive factors determining whether this process of change would take place or not were the particular set of property arrangements which existed in a given region and the distribution of the means of power which were available to contending groups. Where landlords could effectively force peasants to accept changing property relations, the transition to capitalist agriculture could proceed. But where peasant communities had the power to resist changes in property relations – in particular, abolition of communal lands, expropriation of small peasant property, etc., they were able to block the emergence of the property relations within which capitalist agriculture, wage relations in the countryside, and more efficient production could emerge.

Brenner’s thesis is thus that the central causal factor in the pattern of agrarian development in Europe – the factor which covaries the most closely with patterns of development, regression, and stagnation – is the particular character of class relations in a region and the set of incentives and opportunities which the local property relations impose on the various actors.

From the distance of several decades, the dividing lines of the Brenner debate are pretty clear. One school of thought (Postan, Ladurie) attempts to explain the economic transformations described here in terms of facts about population, while the other (Brenner’s) argues that the central causal factors have to do with social institutions (social-property relations and institutions of political power). The demographic theory focuses its attention on the factors that influenced population growth, including disease; the social institutions theory focuses attention on the institutional framework within which economic actors (lords, peasants, capitalist farmers) pursue their goals. The one is akin to a biological or ecological theory, emphasizing common and universal demographic forces; the other is a social theory, emphasizing contingency and variation across social space.



So several things are plain from this discussion. First, Brenner's explanation is a causal one, and it is an explanation that depends on identifying concrete social mechanisms that brought about the outcomes of interest. Second, Brenner's approach is inherently microfoundational; Brenner's research strategy is to disaggregate large social facts into more concretely described local facts (power relations between locally situated actors). In this respect the logic of the argument parallels the structure of Coleman's boat; with the important exception, however, that meso-level factors such as the specifics of the social-property system are assigned a stable causal role.

An important consequence of the Brenner debate was the renewed focus it placed on the question of social causation. Brenner and the other participants expended a great deal of effort in developing theories of the causal mechanisms that led to economic change in this period. And in hindsight, it appears that a lot of the energy in the debates stemmed from the false presupposition that it should be possible to identify a single master factor that explained these large changes in economic development. But this no longer seems supportable. Rather, historians are now much more willing to recognize the plurality of causes at work and the geographical differentiation that is inherent in almost every large historical process. So the advice that Bois extends – don't let your large theory get in the way of detailed historical research – appears to be good counsel.

### *Andrew Abbott on The Professions*

Andrew Abbott's sociological treatment of the professions is a good place to close this series of examples [Abbott 1988; Abbott 1999]. Several gifted sociologists over the past thirty years have made innovative contributions to the study of the "sociology of professions." Most recent among these is Andrew Abbott, whose book, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor*, is a superlative contribution to sociological theory formation. Abbott has also given attention to one profession in particular, university faculty, in two other interesting books, *Chaos of Disciplines* and *Department and Discipline: Chicago Sociology at One Hundred* [Abbott 2001; Abbott 1999].

Examples of professions that are considered by Abbott and others include psychiatrists, social workers, accountants, physicians, professors, and pharmacists. The list might be extended to include journalists, lawyers, real estate agents, university presidents, property assessors, architects, clergy, and engineers. But what about more borderline examples: skilled auto mechanics, sculptors, acupuncturists, necromancers, landscapers, and tarot card readers? And how about corporate executives,

bankers, skilled pickpockets, and pirates? We know what a professional opera singer is: it is a person who can earn her living in this career. But is an opera singer a “professional” in the relevant sense? What is a “professional,” anyway? What are the relationships among profession, occupation, skill, expertise, income, work, prestige, and credential? And how is this a sociological question?

As the examples suggest, there are several dimensions of qualification that we might intuitively consider to define the concept of “professional.” Is it a person who earns his/her living by exercising a skill or talent? Is it a person who has had formal training in a high-prestige type of work? Is it a person who is credentialed by a recognized credentialing agency? Is it a person who is tagged with the social label “professional” by other people in his/her society? Or is it a person who is a member of an organization of people doing the same kind of work?

We might suppose that the concept of “professional” is an overlap concept that involves the intersection of skill, knowledge, credential, association, and prestige – with the implication that there are members of society who have several of these features but not others, and are therefore not regarded as “professionals.”

Once we have clarified the concept – that is, once we have delineated the domain of social behavior and action that falls under the concept of “the professions” – we can then do specific empirical work. The empirical work falls in many areas, and much of it depends on detailed studies of historical cases. We can examine the training and schooling that is customarily associated with the profession of pharmacy or accounting at a particular point in time; we can trace out the multiple professional organizations and associations that existed for pharmacists or accountants in the 1920s; we can examine in detail the processes involved in accreditation and credentialing for the profession at a certain time; and we can observe the rising and falling fortunes of the professions over time, as they compete for space in the ecology of an existing social system. (Abbott gives a lot of attention, for example, to the struggle between social workers and psychiatrists over the right to treat mentally ill patients).

The topic of training regimes and professional associations is particularly accessible to empirical study; the sociologist can dig into archives and discover quite a bit of concrete detail about the ways in which accountants or physicians were trained in 1920 and the ways in which they were credentialed by the relevant professional organizations. They can consider the processes by which a segment of the skilled work force becomes “professionalized.” And they can consider in detail the lobbying campaigns and public relations efforts conducted by professional organizations to retain certain skilled performances exclusively for their members. (This is the jurisdictional question that is central in many studies of the professions).

Abbott's conceptual approach is signaled by the subtitle of his book: "The division of expert labor." He highlights abstract knowledge as the prime criterion of an area of skilled work constituting a profession: "For abstraction is the quality that sets interprofessional competition apart from competition among occupations in general. Any occupation can obtain licensure (e.g., beauticians) or develop ethics code (e.g., real estate). But only a knowledge system governed by abstractions can redefine its problems and tasks, defend them from interlopers, and seize new problems – as medicine has recently seized alcoholism, mental illness, hyperactivity in children, obesity, and numerous other things. Abstraction enables survival in the competitive system of professions" [Abbott 1988, 8-9]. Expertise is an expression of abstract knowledge; and the possession of knowledge-based expertise is the result of formal training and the foundation of licensure.

For Abbott, then, the sociology of the professions needs to focus on the systems through which the relevant forms of abstract knowledge are created; the educational systems through which pre-professionals acquire this knowledge; and the professional associations that oversee both education and current practice through their power of licensure. These associations turn out to be potent social actors: through their leadership at a given point in time, they take actions designed to improve the profession and improve the social and economic environment for the profession in the future. (This is the competitive part of the story mentioned above).

The other central sociological question that comes up in Abbott's treatment is the organizational one: how are the organizations of society arranged in such a way as to incorporate the specialized knowledge of the professions? This takes us into consideration of hospitals, law firms, banks, and universities, and the intricate pathways of development through which each of these organizational forms have developed in the past century. (This is also a point of contact with Zald's careful work on organizations such as the YMCA and social-service organizations [Zald 1970]).

I've dwelled on this part of sociology because it is one of the areas of sociological research that involves a fascinating mix of objective, case-based research and somewhat ephemeral social entities – the profession of accountancy, the profession of acupuncture. These are social "things" in some sense – but they are highly abstract entities involving a constant change of personnel, standards, curriculum, bodies of knowledge and expertise, and zones of jurisdiction. As such, the study of professions seems to well illustrate a point that seems fundamental here: that we need to understand the social world as a plastic, heterogeneous, and shifting range of activities, rather than as an ensemble of fixed social structures or entities. The beauty of Abbott's work is his ability to give some definition to a reality that he fully recognizes to be in flux.

### *Andreas Wimmer on Methodological Nationalism*

Are there logical divisions within the global whole of social interactions and systems that permit us to focus on a limited, bounded social reality? Is there a stable level of social aggregation that might provide an answer to the “units of analysis” question in the social sciences? This is a question that is highly relevant to the premises of analytical sociology – regions, levels of analysis, and on world systems. Here I’ll focus on the nation-state as one such system of demarcation.

We can start with a very compelling recent critique of current definitions of the social sciences. Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller offer an intriguing analysis of social science conceptual schemes in “Methodological nationalism and beyond: Nation-state building, migration, and the social sciences” [Wimmer and Schiller 2002].<sup>7</sup> The core idea is the notion that the social sciences have tended to conceptualize social phenomena around the boundaries of the nation-state. And, these authors contend, this assumption creates a set of blinders for the social sciences that makes it difficult to capture some crucially important forms of social interaction and structure.

Wimmer and Schiller characterize the idea of methodological nationalism in three forms:

The epistemic structures and programmes of mainstream social sciences have been closely attached to, and shaped by, the experience of modern nation-state formation.... The social sciences were captured by the apparent naturalness and givenness of a world divided into societies along the lines of nation-states.... Because they were structured according to nation-state principles, these became so routinely assumed and ‘banal’, that they vanished from sight altogether [*ibidem*, 303-4].

A second variant, typical of more empirically oriented social science practices, is taking national discourses, agendas, loyalties and histories for granted, without problematizing them or making them an object of an analysis in its own right. Instead, nationally bounded societies are taken to be the naturally given entities to study [*ibidem*, 304].

Let us now address a third and last variant of methodological nationalism: the territorialization of social science imaginary and the reduction of the analytical focus to the boundaries of the nation-state [*ibidem*, 307].

The three variants of methodological nationalism ... are thus ignorance, naturalization, and territorial limitation [*ibidem*, 308].

Their view is a complex one. They think that the social sciences have been trapped behind a kind of conceptual blindness, according to which the concepts of nation and state structure our perception of social reality but disappear as objects

<sup>7</sup> Wimmer’s *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict: Shadows of Modernity* is also of great interest [Wimmer 1998].

of critical inquiry. Second, they argue that there were real processes of nation and state building that created this blindness – from nineteenth century nation building to twentieth century colonialism. And third, they suggest that the framework of MN itself contributed to the concrete shaping of the history of nation and state building. So it is a three-way relationship between knowledge and the social world.

“Nationalism” has several different connotations. First, it implies that peoples fall into “nations,” and that “nations” are somewhat inevitable and compact social realities. France is a nation. But closer examination reveals that France is a social-historical construct, not a uniform or natural social whole. (Emmanuel Todd makes a similar historical version of this argument in his account of the formation of France as a “nation” [Todd 1991]). Alsatians, Bretons, and Basques are part of the French nation; and yet they are communities with distinct identities, histories, and affinities. So forging France as a nation was a political effort, and it is an unfinished project.

Second, nationalism refers to movements based on mobilization of political identities. Hindu nationalists have sought power in India through the BJP on the basis of a constructed, mobilized (and in various ways fictional) Hindu identity. The struggle over the Babri Mosque, and the political use to which this symbol was put in BJP mobilization, illustrates this point. But “nationalist politics” also possess a social reality; it is all too evident that even fictive “national identities” can be powerful sources of political motivation. So nationalist politics in the twentieth century were a key part of many historical processes. (Michael Mann illustrates this point in his treatment of modern ethnic cleansing [Mann 2005]). And, of course, there may be multiple national identities within a given region; so the “nation” consists of multiple “nationalist” groups. (Ben Anderson provides an extensive development of the political and constructed nature of ethnic and national identities [Anderson 1983]).

What about the other pole of the “nation-state” conjunction – the state? Here the idea is that the state is the seat of sovereign authority; the origin and enforcement of legal institutions; and the holder of a monopoly of coercive power in a region. A state does not inevitably correspond to a nation; so when we hyphenate the conjunction we make a further substantive assumption – that nations grow into states, and that states cultivate national identities.

The fundamental criticism that Wimmer and Schiller express – the fundamental defect of methodological nationalism – is that it limits the ability of social scientists and historians to perceive processes that are above or below the level of the nation-state. Trans-national processes (they offer migration as an example) and sub-national processes (we might refer to the kinds of violent mobilization studied by Mann in the *Dark Side of Democracy*; [Mann 2005]) are either invisible or unimportant, from the point of view of methodological nationalism. So the methodology occludes social

phenomena that are actually of great importance to understanding the contemporary world. Here is how they suggest going beyond methodological nationalism in the field of migration studies:

Going beyond methodological nationalism in the study of current migration thus may require more than a focus on transnational communities instead of the nation and its immigrants. In order to escape the magnetism of established methodologies, ways of defining the object of analysis and algorithms for generating questions, we may have to develop (or rediscover?) analytical tools and concepts not coloured by the self-evidence of a world ordered into nation-states. This is what we perceive, together with many other current observers of the social sciences, as the major task lying ahead of us. We are certainly not able to offer such a set of analytical tools here. [323-24]

### *Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel on Situated Actors*

A key part of Erving Goffman's work can be described as "close observation of individual behavior in social context." This has two ends – individual behavior and social context. And Goffman wants to shed light on both poles of this description. In particular, he almost always expresses interest in the social norms that surround action – the expectations and norms through which other people interpret and judge the individual's conduct [see Goffman 1974; Goffman 1980].

The study of face-to-face social behavior and interaction may be described as "micro-sociology" or (in Garfinkel's case), ethnomethodology. The ultimate behavioral materials are the glances, gestures, positionings, and verbal statements that people continuously feed into the situation, whether intended or not. These are the external signs of orientation and involvements – states of mind and body not ordinarily examined with respect to their social organization [Goffman 2005, 1]. There are several orienting themes among these statements and within Goffman's work – frames, we might call them.

- There is the idea of face-to-face behavior, in private, in public, and in everyday life.
- There is focus on the social setting within which local behavior takes place – the norms and constraints that are embodied in the group and constraining of the individual.
- There is emphasis on the particulars of the place – the factory, the asylum, the hotel.
- There is the social-cognitive situation of the individual – the way in which he or she answers the question, "What is going on here?"

So Goffman starts much of his work with fine-grained, detailed observations of behavior – elements as subtle as the bodily signs of embarrassment in a conversation. Second, he wants to discover some of the structures of mental processing through which individuals act in social settings – the frames, scripts, and rituals that guide social perception and action for individuals. Third, he wants to tease out the social judgments and norms that provide the normative and guiding context for the actor’s movements – the judgments surrounding “saving face,” embarrassment, shame, pride, and proper performance. There is also a psychiatric dimension of Goffman’s work: “abnormal behavior” and the description and contextualization of unexpected patterns of behavior are frequent elements of Goffman’s discourse.

Here is how Pierre Bourdieu distilled Goffman’s originality:

The work of Erving Goffman is the product of one of the most original and rarest methods of doing sociology – for example, putting on a doctor’s white coat, in order to enter a psychiatric asylum and thus putting oneself at the very site of the infinity of minute interactions which combine to make up social life [...] Goffman’s achievement was that he introduced sociology to the infinitely small, to the things which the object-less theoreticians and concept-less observers were incapable of seeing and which went unremarked because they were too obvious, like everything which goes without saying. These entomologist’s minutiae were bound to disconcert, even shock, an establishment accustomed to surveying the social world from a more distant and more lofty standpoint [Bourdieu 1983, 112].

This is a nice description of Goffman’s work. It leaves out an important dimension, however, namely, the social and contextual side of Goffman’s gaze. Goffman was always interested in the nuances of social expectation, norm, and script within particular social settings. And this makes his work thoroughly sociological.

Another major innovator in this field is Harold Garfinkel. Garfinkel made highly original contributions to the field of micro-sociology in the form of his program of ethnomethodology, and the fruits of these contributions have not been fully developed. Garfinkel’s work is of particular interest because it illustrates another dimension of the idea of agent-centered sociology – the idea of the situated actor, the idea that we need to have a substantially richer set of concepts in terms of which to characterize the actor’s thought processes, and the idea that current conceptions of the rational actor or the cultural actor are inadequate. In order to provide a basis for explanations of social outcomes deriving from the interactions of purposive agents, we need a developed and nuanced set of ideas about how agents tick. And theorists like Garfinkel and Goffman provide substantial resources in this area.

One way of describing Garfinkel’s work is that he is offering an empirical research program designed to fill in a rich theory of the human actor’s “competence”

in engaging in ordinary social interactions. What does the actor need to know about immediate social relationships and practices in order to get along in ordinary social life? And how can we study this question in empirically rigorous ways? The program of ethnomethodology is intended to focus attention on the knowledge of rules and practices that ordinary people employ to make sense of their social surroundings.

One objection that some purists might offer of this formulation is that it puts the object of investigation “inside the head,” rather than in the behavioral performances – primarily conversations and classificatory tasks – that Garfinkel primarily studies. It is thought that Garfinkel’s method is formal rather than mentalistic. It is true that he says repeatedly that he is not interested in getting inside the head of the individuals he studies. But the logic of his findings still has important implications for the cognitive systems of the individuals, and this is in fact the only reason we would be interested in the research. So I want to understand his research along the lines of a Chomskian linguist: making inferences about psychologically real “competences and capacities” on the basis of analysis of non-mental performances (utterances).

On this approach, Garfinkel did not pretend to offer a full theory of agency or actor consciousness; instead, his work functioned as a sort of specialized investigation of one aspect of social cognition – the competences, rules, and practices we can attribute to specific actors on the basis of careful analysis of their observable performances.<sup>8</sup>

### *Kathleen Thelen on Institutions*

Kathleen Thelen is explicit in drawing a contrast between the premises of analytical sociology and the assumptions and practices of historical institutionalism in “The Explanatory Power of Historical Institutionalism” [Thelen 2002]. Here are some representative passages:

Thus, historical institutionalists have consistently drawn attention to the way in which institutional configurations “foster the emergence of particular definitions of mutual interest” (Immergut 1998: 339), and how they also often shape political outcomes by facilitating the organization of certain groups while actively disarticulating others (e.g., Skocpol 1992) [*ibidem*, 92].

A good deal of historical-institutional scholarship shows that the impact of institutions is often heavily mediated by features of the overarching political or historical context, a point that Charles Ragin’s work has repeatedly emphasized and underscored (Ragin 1987; also Katznelson 1997) [*ibidem*, 93].

<sup>8</sup> John Heritage’s *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology* [Heritage 1984] is generally recommended as a highly insightful survey and discussion of Garfinkel’s work.



However, beyond that, the emphasis on timing and sequencing in historical institutional research is also motivated by the insight, borne out in a number of studies, that when things happen, or the order in which different processes unfold, can itself be an extremely important part of the causal story (Pierson 2000c) [*ibidem*, 97]

Thus, for example, a number of authors have suggested that rational choice institutionalism applies best to understanding the strategic interaction of individuals in the context of specific, well established and well known rules and parameters (e.g., Bates 1997; Geddes 1995). By contrast to this, the strength of historical-institutional approaches is precisely in the leverage it provides on understanding configurations of institutions (Katznelson 1997) and over much longer stretches of time (Pierson 2001). Historical institutionalism is concerned not just with how a particular set of rules affects the strategic orientation of individual actors and their interactions, but also with the broader issue of the ways in which institutional configurations define what Theda Skocpol has termed “fields of action” that have a very broad influence not just on the strategies of individual players but on the identities of actors and the networks that define their relations to each other [*ibidem*, 103-104].

These passages highlight a number of general dimensions of difference between HI and AS. Let’s turn now to Thelen’s concrete research in historical institutionalism. *How Institutions Evolve* [Thelen 2004] is a very good book and an important contribution. It offers a comparative study of the institutions of skills formation in four countries. Different configurations of institutions are found in Germany, UK, Japan, and the US.

Thelen makes use of a very sophisticated comparative method here, with lots of nuance in her knowledge of the specifics of the four cases. Here too there is a real and original contribution. This approach is more fine-grained than much comparative work; much less interested in discovering a small set of distinguishing variables and more interested in discovering the texture and some broad causal processes.

The research offers a sustained effort to provide a new angle on the question of the “evolution” and “persistence” of important social institutions. One of her central results is that the circumstances influencing the emergence of a set of institutions and the goals of the powerful players may be quite different from the constituents and “functions” a century later. The institutions are “morphed” by successive sets of interests and strategies. “History” and “function” must be separated; and the institutions are plastic.

Her overarching view is that institutions are not “frozen in time”; they are malleable and plastic, and the actions of individuals and groups push and pull in ways that alter the institution over time. So two aspects of institutions are equally important and surprising when we examine them in a comparative historical context. We can observe both plasticity and persistence in these basic institutions of skill formation.

Here are several key statements that express her central view of institutions:

How did we get from there to here? Not through a wholesale breakdown of the old institutions and their replacement with new ones [...] This case, in short, calls for an analysis both of the mechanisms of reproduction that sustained these institutions and the mechanisms behind their functional and distributional transformation over time [*ibidem*, 7].

The effect of ongoing but often subtle changes in institutional arrangements that, over time, can cumulate into significant institutional transformation [*ibidem*, 216]. Institutions that are not actively updated and fitted to changes in the political and market environment can be subject to a process of erosion through which Jacob Hacker has called ‘drift’ [*ibidem*, 218].

For institutions to survive they cannot stand still. They must be constantly adapted to changes in the social, market, and political environment [*ibidem*, 276].

This system was not created ‘of a piece’ but rather, evolved as successive layers were patched on to a rudimentary framework developed at the end of the nineteenth century [*ibidem*, 39].

The point in each case is that the creation and existence of the institution at one juncture can have a formative impact on actor strategies, interests, identities, and orientations subsequently [*ibidem*, 295].

Thelen is very plain in her refutation of “functionalism” as a theory of the features of important social institutions. The crude functionalist assumption would be something like this: the institutions that result in equilibrium are those that do the best job overall of satisfying the social needs that define the institution. Thelen denies that there is convergence in institutions towards a single optimal form.

Such analyses provide a powerful refutation of functionalist theories of institutional origins and they do so precisely by showing how the current shape of institutions is deeply conditioned by the historical circumstances surrounding their genesis [*ibidem*, 27].

She also takes issue with the metaphor or explanatory framework of “punctuated equilibrium” – stasis through long periods, interrupted by major disruptions and new equilibria.

Contrary to strong punctuated equilibrium models that lead us to expect big changes in the context of big historic breaks, we often find significant continuities through historically “unsettled” times, and ongoing contestation and renegotiation in ‘settled’ periods that nonetheless over time add up to significant change [*ibidem*, 292].

Instead she captures instance after instance of long, slow transformation and modification of institutions by important parties. She describes a process of “layering” and adaptation to new circumstances. This is a new ontological paradigm; it emphasizes the dynamic nature of social entities and their responsiveness to the changing needs and strategies of the parties who influence and inhabit them.

The present study thus rejects those versions of a path-dependent argument that paint a deterministic picture of institutional “lock in,” and elaborates an alternative perspective that underscores the contested nature of institutional development and in so doing, recovers the political dynamics that drive institutional genesis, reproduction and change [*ibidem*, 31].

Elements of continuity and change are not separated into alternating sequences where one or the other (let alone “agency” or “structure”) dominates, but rather are often empirically closely intertwined [*ibidem*, 35].

Institutions can be transformed in subtle but very significant ways through a variety of specific mechanisms ... (institutional layering and conversion) [*ibidem*, 35-36].

Another noteworthy aspect of her analysis is her use of causal mechanisms as the central explanatory strategy. The mechanisms that she cites are largely within strategic politics / rational choice and strategic action by important players – craft unions, artisans, industrial firms, state players, labor unions. She makes use of “process tracing” without specifically calling it out; but the heart of her historical analysis is a teasing out of the causal processes that led to the developments and changes of the training regimes she describes. She offers a very interesting analysis of the possible causal mechanisms underlying “institutional complementarities” that avoids a functionalist assumption [*ibidem*, 285 ff.].

Many of these mechanisms work through analysis of the opportunities and interests that exist for “powerful actors” (labor movement, industry, political leaders and parties) within the institutional setting who may specifically strive for adjustment of institutional components in order to secure a more compatible fit.

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## Analytical Sociology and The Rest of Sociology

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Abstract: The programme of analytical sociology brings sharp focus to fundamental issues in sociology as a scientific discipline. Its practitioners offer a clear paradigm of how sociological explanations ought to proceed, from individual actors to social outcomes. This essay considers limitations of the approach as a general framework for all sociological research, however. The essay surveys recent high-quality research by a number of sociologists and other social scientists and demonstrates that their explanations often do not conform to the aggregative model advocated by AS. Additional philosophical arguments are provided for justifying the point that we can attribute relative explanatory autonomy to meso-level social structures. The essay offers a brief description of an approach to social ontology referred to as “methodological localism.”

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*Keywords: Analytical sociology, methodological individualism, methodological localism, philosophy of sociology, philosophy of social science, reductionism.*

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