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Full and Sketched Micro-foundations. The Odd Resurgence of a Dubious Distinction

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Full and Sketched Micro-Foundations

The Odd Resurgence of a Dubious Distinction

by Gianluca Manzo

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Little's "Analytical Sociology and the Rest of Sociology" is a thoughtful reflection upon analytical sociology (hereafter AS) and its limitations. Differently from previous critics [Opp 2007; Abbott 2007; Gorski 2009, 176-181; Gross 2009], Little more overtly expresses a positive appreciation of AS, which he sees as "an important contribution to our thinking about social research" and an "illuminating approach to social explanation." Similarly to those critics, however, Little considers that AS's scope is diminished by the following weaknesses: 1) AS is committed to a reductionist version of methodological individualism; 2) AS's theory of action is simply a variant of rational-choice theory; 3) AS underestimates the historical roots of social phenomena. Overall, Little's paper devotes much more energy to discussing the first of these limitations. It argues that the reductionist strategy on which AS is built implies an excessively strong micro-foundation requirement. According to Little, this ultimately induces AS to regard large sectors of sociology which do not fulfill this requirement as "less than fully scientific," even though, Little argues, they are rigorous and explanatory.

In this short rejoinder to Little, I defend three arguments: 1) Little caricatures the ambitions of AS; 2) Little's conception of social ontology and explanation is in fact virtually the same as that of AS; 3) Little's distinction between a "strong" and a

“weak” form of micro-foundation is not a robust basis on which to attack AS because this distinction is internally contradictory.¹

Let me start with the supposedly imperialistic attitude of AS. Little builds on Demeulenaere’s [2011, 1] statement according to which AS “should [...] be seen [...] as an effort to clarify (“analytically”) theoretical and epistemological principles which underlie any satisfactory way of doing sociology (and, in fact, any social science).” In my opinion, this is a bad starting point. Demeulenaere’s statement – which implies that AS is more a branch of the philosophy of social sciences than an approach of relevance for theoretically-minded empirically-oriented social scientists – should not be regarded as an accurate description of how analytical sociologists conceive themselves. Whilst it is undeniable that AS contains a normative dimension, careful inspection of AS programmatic writings suggests that AS adopts a far less peremptory posture.

Let us first recall that Hesdtröm and Swedberg [1998, 25] overtly stressed that “the essence of the mechanisms approach is to be found in a special style of theorizing.” “Special” does not mean “general,” nor that the approach is the only legitimate sociological perspective. On the contrary, the normative “perimeter” of the approach is clearly defined from the outset. AS’s original intent was, on the one hand, to make sociological theory conceptually more precise and with clearer empirical *explananda*, and, on the other hand, to complement statistically-oriented research with more systematic and creative theoretical thinking [Hesdtröm and Swedberg 1998, 1, 15-21; Hedström 2005, 3-4, 12-13]. Recent statements like “the overarching purpose of the book is to move sociology in a more analytical direction” or “our hope is that the analytical-sociological framework will emerge as the central template for a renewed sociology for the Twenty-first century” [Hedström and Bearman 2009, 4, 21] should thus be understood within the current state of our discipline, in which much published work still falls within what Abell and Reyniers [2000, 748] called “fugitive frameworks,” i.e. analyses that build on (a mix of) opaque linguistic expressions, loose concepts, a distorted use of otherwise rigorous methods, and mere descriptivism – note that serious social scientists outside AS have also tried to establish boundaries of this kind [Goldthorpe 2000, 1-11].

What about, more specifically, the “rest of sociology” considered by Little? Despite the general expression adopted, his research examples come from two research traditions, namely (comparative) historical sociology and qualitative-oriented micro-sociology. Several elements suggest that AS does not disregard these perspec-

¹ Here I do not address Little’s reading of AS’s action theory because I have elsewhere discussed this point at length in response to Gross’s identical interpretation [Manzo 2010].

tives *a priori*. First, Hedström and Swedberg [1998, 23] overtly acknowledged that Goffman's analyses are full of "situational mechanisms," i.e. linkages between actors' behaviour and the specific social situation to which they are exposed. Second, AS has recently engaged in explicit dialogue with ethnography with a view to their mutual enrichment [Vaughan 2009]. Third, ethnographic observation was a methodological pillar for some of the scholars who contributed to launching AS [Gambetta 1993; Gambetta 2009; Gambetta and Hamill 2005]. Finally, explicit conceptual bridges between AS and historical sociology are under construction, with the analysis of social networks providing possible theoretical and methodological leverage [Barkey 2009].

Thus, contrary to what Little claims, AS has clearly identified intellectual "adversaries"; it does not consider itself the "whole of sociology" or "a uniquely best research strategy for sociology"; it discusses with a large spectrum of sociological approaches; and it fully acknowledges the importance of combining abstraction with thick descriptions of historically, socially situated interacting actors.

Let me now move to Little's point that AS is based on a "reductionist strategy" according to which a "good explanation [...] should not make reference to meso or macro level factors." To see that this objection is simply factually wrong, consider the two following excerpts:

Verbally, we can say that phenomenon M is a function of actions m, which are dependent on situation S of the actor, which situation is itself affected by macro-social actions M [Boudon 1986, 30].

Thus structure at one time (macro-level) generates the conditions which together with existing interests shape the actions of actors (micro-level) that jointly produce outcomes which modify the structure of a later time (macro-level) which generates conditions that again (through constraints and incentives) shape actions (micro-level) that jointly produce outcomes (macro-level) and so on [Coleman 1993, 63].

Boudon's and Coleman's statements provide us with a simple description of the static and the dynamic version of the so-called "structural individualism" originally proposed within Dutch sociology in an overly anti-reductionist spirit [Wippler 1978, 143]. While they did not use the term, Hedström and Swedberg [1998 11-13] explicitly follow a "weak version of methodological individualism" which takes "certain macro-level states as given and incorporates them into the explanation." The reference to the concept of "structural individualism" comes with Hedström [2005, 5, 70-74] and with Hedström and Bearman [2009, 4, 8, 10-11]. These programmatic AS works conceptualize macro-states as supervening on micro-level properties and assume that they exert a relatively autonomous causal power. The qualification "relatively" refers to the fact that at least one individual component must be at work for the macro-level state to produce some changes in the social world. To highlight

the circular relation between structure and action at issue here, I have elsewhere proposed the notion of “complex methodological individualism” [Manzo 2007].

Let us now consider the following quotation from Little’s “Level of the Social” [2006, 353]:

All of these social factors are constituted by the set of agents who populate them at a given time. Agents act within the context of these structures; and their actions both reproduce and modify the structure. At any given time, agents are acting in ways that affect future states of the system while being prompted or constrained by existing structures and mentalities in ways that influence their future actions.

What is the real difference between this position, which Little labels “methodological localism,” and the “structural individualism” contained in Boudon’s and Coleman’s above statements, and today advocated by AS? The similarity is also striking with respect to the epistemological implication that Little draws from his ontological position [*ibidem*, 360]:

There are no causal mechanisms that do not supervene upon the structured choices and behavior of individuals. The mechanisms through which social causation is mediated turn on the structured circumstances of choice of intentional agents, and nothing else.

In footnote 24, associated with this passage, Little explicitly acknowledges that Hedström and Swedberg [1998, 24] endorse his position that “there exist no such things as ‘macro-level mechanisms’” [Little 1998, 161] also explicitly writes: “There is no such thing as pure social causation from macro-state to macro-state.” So why does Little now attack AS for positing that “the mechanisms are supposed to occur solely at the level of the actors – not at meso or macro levels”?

Whilst it may seem that Little is criticizing himself, “Analytical Sociology and the Rest of Sociology” contains a nuance that helps to explain this apparent contradiction. Little maintains that the microfoundation requirement can be interpreted either as “a full specification of the microfoundations in every case” or as “a sketch of the way that a given social-level process might readily be embodied.” He explicitly admits that he is “inclined to interpret the requirement in the second way” while AS tends to give priority to the first. Here, therefore, Little seems to rehabilitate a distinction that sometimes appeared in his early writings [Little 1991, 196, 200; Little 1998, 6, 8] but that is absent from his more recent work [Little 2006; Little 2009; Little 2010; Little 2011] – note, however, that even in Little [1998] the distinction is absent from chapter 10, which provides the very systematic treatment of causal explanations. The implication that he draws from this distinction seems stronger than before, however. Little concludes, in fact, that “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.”

I regard Little's flexible interpretation of the microfoundation requirement as highly problematic. First of all, what distinguishes a full individual-level narrative from a sketched one? Little does not provide any analytical criterion with which to separate the two kinds of micro-level accounts. Second, when should we stop at a sketch and when should we not? On this point, Little's advice is: “We need to be confident there are microfoundations, and the meso properties need to be causally robust. But if this is satisfied, we do not need to extend the explanation down to the actors.” But how could one “be confident there are microfoundations” if one does not detail several possible individual-level narratives and assess the empirical relevance of each of them? Once this operation has been performed, however, the sketch is no longer needed because (at least) one detailed (potential) microfoundation has been provided. The idea of microfoundation sketches is thus circular and self-defeating.

Besides its conceptual vagueness and logical inconsistency, Little's distinction between “strong” and “weak” microfoundation requirements is unconvincing on empirical grounds. Little fails to provide any compelling example of a mechanism that leads from a given meso-level factor A to a given meso-level factor B “without proceeding according to the logic of Coleman's boat – up and down the struts,” to take his own words (an objection that may be extended to Jepperson and Meyer [2011], whom Little takes as inspiring source). The opposite is true. When in the last section of the paper Little discusses five pathways through which “meso-level structures have causal powers” (in particular he focuses on organizations), all of them amount to a detailed description of how micro-level properties like individuals' beliefs, values, desires, incentives, or identity are shaped by the specific organizational and institutional settings at hand.

This negative result is perfectly in line with the “strong microfoundationist” Little – who claims, for instance, that “if we are interested in analysis of the casual properties of states and governments, we need to arrive at an analysis of the institutions and constrained patterns of individual behaviour through which the state's characteristics are affected” [Little 2009, 165]. This result is also fully compatible with AS's research program, which Little oddly considers “reductionist.” By contrast, this result is strikingly in contradiction with the main argument that the “weak microfoundationist” Little now seeks to defend: that explanations of “one set of factors in terms of another set of factors at the same level” (what he calls “lateral strategies”) are fully legitimate and deep explanations.

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Keywords: Analytical sociology, structural individualism, complex methodological individualism, micro-foundation, supervenience.

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