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Analytical Sociology: Appreciation and Ambivalence

by Isaac Ariail Reed

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Daniel Little's paper, "Analytical Sociology and the Rest of Sociology," is a meditation on the criteria for good sociological knowledge. It operates by putting the programmatic commitments of the intellectual movement of Analytical Sociology (henceforth AS) into conversation with an *ad hoc* gathering together of sociological excellence. This is an interesting and fruitful strategy, for it allows philosophical axioms and empirically compelling work to be sewn together, and thus for epistemological objections and arguments to be developed with reference to actual knowledge claims in current social science – a kind of philosophy of science *in situ*. I applaud the strategy; I have objections to some of Little's results. But first it must be said that 1) Little's argument is clearly stated, and his analysis of sociological work is made, via his appendix, highly transparent (for this he must be commended, because it makes criticism of his work possible, and, one hopes, productive); and 2) his overarching argument constitutes a very productive inquiry into the basis for rationality in social science. I do not agree with it entirely, but then, my objections are perhaps themselves only clear in contrast to Little's program, developed over a career in the philosophy of social science, and now on his working blog *understandingsociety.org*. Here are my questions for this particular paper.

1. When Does Social Life Work Mechanistically?

In examining the work of various sociologists, Little pursues a strategy of intellectual matching – asking whether the explanations produced in their work identify mechanisms, whether they attend to actors, and so on. Thus, for example, his conclusion is that Steinmetz and Mann offer mechanisms to their reader, while Abbott’s explanation is not mechanistic. This is fair enough, but it obscures a central question, one that in my view is of particular salience to historical sociology: how and when does social life *coalesce* into mechanisms? Steinmetz’s work, for example, suggests that one must trace historically the way fields go from being unsettled to being settled. More generally, one might propose that the metaphor of “mechanism,” rather than being a foundational term for social causality, might be considered a sort of meta-type of social causality, one among several, that obtains in certain times and spaces. Part of the task of sociological explanation, then, would be to explain not only by identifying mechanisms at work, but also – and presumably with a slightly different terminology – when and how social life takes on a mechanistic cast.

This problem can be rephrased, for better or worse, as an old question from classical theory, and from Marx and Weber in particular: the problem is explaining not only the mechanisms that animate capitalist modernity, but also the historical trajectories whereby social life became so mechanistic. Of course, one way to do this is to just look for more mechanisms in the Middle Ages, and another is to throw mechanisms out and just “interpret” the classics as humanistic meditations on the nature of modernity. The implication of AS [e.g. Hedstrom 2005] appears to be that one should resolutely choose the former strategy over the latter. I wonder, though, if there is a third possibility: to locate and explain with mechanisms when they obtain, but to avoid reducing all social causality to that which fits, well or badly, the metaphor of mechanism.

This, of course, connects to Little’s note on “context.” He explains that “context and detail are more important for these researchers than for the AS framework.” For Little, this indicates a need for AS to be less guided by rational-choice oriented theory in its picture of the actor, and more pluralist in its methodological toolkit. But the point actually runs deeper. For it might be that attention to context is not just important, but rather essential, to explanation in the human sciences; it might be that the tendency towards immediate abstraction that characterizes AS is epistemologically misguided. AS is, of course, correct in its suspicion that sometimes “contextual” explanations are just descriptions; AS wants something more, and furthermore “context” is often used as a cryptic term that delays the theoretical specification of argument. As Ivan Ermakoff [2008, xxii] argues: “But what is the ‘context’? Are we

talking about diffused ideological beliefs, the legacy of past and current conflicts, the structure of social relations, or political institutions? Most often, we mean all of these bundled together. As a result, we do not mean much.”

Yet the epistemological question remains: does casual explanation in the human sciences strictly fit the model whereby abstract mechanisms are discovered that explain specific instances, case outcomes, or effects? Is the combination of generality and particularity in good sociological explanations precisely that which obtains when we use physical theory to explain what happens when I drop my water glass on concrete? Or is it the case that human social life, embedded as it is in idiosyncratic meanings, requires attention to the ways in which these meanings mold the “ontological” entities of human actors and their various interactions or relations? If the latter, then “attention to context” is something that should probably be unpacked and redefined within the philosophy of social science, and then reconnected to our working models of sociological explanation.

One reading of Little’s analysis of Goffman and Garkfinkel would understand it as call for this reconsideration of the interpretation of context. But this reconsideration, while perhaps implied here and there, is not drawn out and developed in its full epistemological implications. It should be, however, because AS is engaged in a project of redefining what a good sociological explanation is, and as it does so, we have to carefully consider the implications of its position, and at least put up for argument other components of sociological explanation as worthy of programmatic treatment. My argument would indeed be that explanation in the human sciences *requires* attention to “contexts,” and in particular the historically variable contexts of meaning formations, whose fundamental structures are semiotic, and thus arbitrary and conventional. One implication of this argument would be that the human sciences require a more pluralized repertoire of theoretical constructs than that granted by AS, an issue I return to below.

2. When and Where Can I Find The Purposive Actor?

Little argues forcefully that meso to meso causation is both epistemologically allowable, and, furthermore, essential to certain formats of explanation in the human sciences. Within the framework of realist claims about emergence, I think this argument holds; I also accept that there is philosophical warrant for separating composition and explanation, and that this warrant supports Little’s position that explanation can be “grounded in” microfoundations while simultaneously not strictly following the aggregative model implied by Coleman’s boat. All of this makes sense within the

epistemological space set out by Little, and in conversation with AS's version of that same space.

However, Little's criterion for how to proceed with research from this epistemological position relies on a further theoretical commitment. His idea is that meso-meso claims can be grounded in microfoundations via "a sketch of the way that a given social-level process might readily be embodied in individual-level activities." Later, in referring to organizational explanations of disaster he comments that "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." One way to understand this argument is that explanations occur, necessarily, against a background set of assumptions about the social world, and that no piece of explanatory work can challenge all such assumptions at once. This might be a workable (and pragmatist) understanding of the role of "ontology" in constructing sociological explanations. To understand something important about how organizations produce risk, for example, we probably have to rely upon a certain notion of how people tend to act inside organizations, and this notion is, after all, well-developed and empirically well-supported in sociology (for organizations in the Twentieth century at least). But this is not the route Little takes; instead, Little moves to "microfoundationalism." What is this microfoundational grounding?

My sense from this paper, and from his other work, is that Little wants to make the "purposive actor" or the "agentic individual" into a philosophical cornerstone of social science; his argument is that this conceptualization can replace the narrower understanding of the (possibly asocial) calculative actor of rational choice theory. Here again one is struck by the ahistorical ambition shared by Little and AS. For one might reasonably ask: what historical processes, which interactions with discourse and various institutions, and which historical ontologies of power produce the purposive actor as Little understands him? Furthermore, in terms of research criteria: *how do we know* when the "generic assumptions" about actors and how they proceed are warranted? What, in other words, is the full content of these assumptions, how was this content developed, and what are the scope conditions for the application of these assumptions in the building of explanatory knowledge claims in social science research?

There are certain Bourdieusian aspects of Steinmetz's causal account in *The Devil's Handwriting* that may appear to fit Little's purposive-yet-not-calculative actor [this is complex issue in Bourdieusian sociology, however: see, e.g., Bourdieu 1990, 148-149; Calhoun 1993]. Yet in my view Steinmetz's use of Lacan undermines Little's arguments about agency, individuals, etc., even though Little counts it as an instance wherein Steinmetz's explanation contains a "theory of the actor." The problem is that

it stretches the meanings of “purposive” or “agency” too far to suggest, as I believe Little’s argument does, that the aspects of colonial rule that Steinmetz theorizes with Lacanian terminology are instances of individual actors going about their business in the world *purposively* or *agentially*. In particular, the division between the symbolic and the imaginary that accounts, in Steinmetz’s causal narrative, for such instances as William Solf’s self-identification with the Samoan Chiefs he was busy dominating appears to me to be an explanatory complex quite distant from any universal model of the purposive actor that Little has in mind; instead, it is a specification of the role of fantasy in mental life as molded by historically specific discursive formations as well as competition in the field of the colonial state. Put baldly, Lacan’s account of desire and signification seems, to me at least, to share very few assumptions with Hedstrom’s “Desire, Belief, and Opportunity” model of the individual actor.

This is just one example, and it is an example that is all too easy for my argument. (After all, what theoretical artifice could be more foreign to AS than that of Lacanian psychoanalysis?) Furthermore, Little does *not* commit to a “sparse” theory of the actor – he resists it in his conclusion. Yet, in my reading, Little is proposing that meso-meso explanations work when we agree that the maneuverings of the individual agents whose actions constitute those meso structures are more or less understood as the purposeful acts of individuals. I am not certain this is an agreement we either have, or want, in the human sciences.

3. What Is The Relationship Between Sociological Theory as It Is Understood by AS and Social Theory in Some Broader Sense of The Term?

Little’s appreciation for, and occasional ambivalence towards, the project of AS is pictured nicely by his metaphorical use of gravity. He explains that, due to the presence and intellectual power of AS, “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.” Little cites Garfinkel and Goffman as alternatives, but one might generalize the point: given the pull of AS, what other gravity wells do or should exert their intellectual force on the development of sociological knowledge?

For, much like his own working blog, the theoretical resources developed in many of Little’s exemplars are remarkably broad, and, from the perspective of AS, terribly idiosyncratic and unanalytic. Little has not confronted, in this paper at least, what that suggests about the sources and construction of good sociological explanations. If Steinmetz is using not only Lacan and Bourdieu, Mann is relying on Stern,

and Abbott [2001] has turned to Mead and Bergson on time then perhaps AS's impulse to present an incredibly parsimonious theoretical toolkit as the royal road to sociological explanation should be judged a bit more harshly. I write this *not* to defend broader social theory as some inherent scholarly good (there are plenty of defenses of that kind out there), but rather because in my view AS threatens to move from an appreciation of parsimony to its fetishization, and thus risks truncating ability of sociological research to achieve the fundamental goal of causal explanation.

Would it not be possible, in other words, to propose as a counterpoint to analytic sociology something like "interpretive social theory"? I do not mean normative theory (e.g. Jurgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe on democracy). Rather, I mean to note that if one surveys the texts that Little is analyzing, one finds a whole set of concepts whose ultimate purchase is indeed on social *reality*, but whose development, understanding, and use departs radically from the strictures of analytic sociology. And thus one must ask: what is this world of social theory? Does it merely frame research topics broadly, or provide normative, philosophical, or pretentious props to the sociologist who calls herself a theorist? Or is there something else going on in the human sciences? One way to understand this difference is to place all of the interpretive social theory in the context of discovery, and suggest that the truly great analytic concepts are just those theoretical constructs that survive the context of justification [see Reichenbach 1938; Popper 2002; for an account of theorization in the context of discovery see Swedberg 2012]. But I do not think this is correct. Interpretive social theory is useful precisely because it allows sociology to better understand certain aspects of social life and to build justifiable causal explanations based on these understandings, even if its insights cannot be converted into the rubric of mechanisms and various other key concepts from AS.

My questions for Little are spurred quite clearly by his own text. In a sense, then, they are unfair as criticisms; his article, subtly and carefully, at least opens the reader up to the human sciences as I am suggesting we view them. Perhaps one way to put the issue is the following. The advent of analytical sociology is, I would argue, both a continuing cause, and simultaneously a symptom of a new era for social science theorizing, and for sociology's self-conception. It is a cause because the labor of self-identified analytical sociologists continues to reorganize the cognitive maps of working social scientists in tremendously productive ways; it is a symptom because the institutional and historical roots of the intellectual shift towards analytical sociology have had other, different expressions in the work, identities, and theoretical maneuvers of sociologists who do not identify with, or necessarily share the presuppositions of, the analytical sociology movement. There are other sociologists, tending other sheep in other valleys, who have also moved from description to explanation,

who have tried to explain cultural tastes, who have articulated an understanding that theoretical development need not be conflated with methodological innovation, and, most importantly, have built good sociological explanations. Little's paper points us in their direction; it may underestimate how much of a departure from AS their work implies.

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Abstract: Daniel Little's discussion of the relationship between Analytical Sociology's stated program and various exemplars of sociological scholarship occasions three questions. The first two are historical and "contextual": When and where is social life mechanistic, and how does it become that way? When and where does the assumption of a purposive, agentic actor apply? The third is reflexive: what is the relationship between analytic sociological theory and social theory more broadly understood? These questions lead to an argument that sociology, as a human science, should have a broader base of theoretical concepts, and a more meaning-centered understanding of causal explanation, than Analytical Sociology would suggest.

Keywords: Sociological theory, analytical sociology, historical sociology, interpretation, causality.

Isaac Ariail Reed is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Colorado. He is the author of *Interpretation and Social Knowledge: On the use of theory in the human sciences* (University of Chicago Press, 2011). His current work addresses the cultural and social transformation of colonial North America, and theories of power and domination.