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Comment on Giuseppe A. Micheli/2

by Alan Scott *and* Tony Lynch

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“The same or almost the same points were always
being approached afresh from different directions,
and new sketches made”
Wittgenstein 1953, V

Social Theory is hard, and we need to be regularly reminded of this, for it is a hardness all too easy to repress. There are two ways of doing this. First, by assimilating social theory into physical theory; second, by dissolving it into subjectivism or relativism.

The first – even the key – step in avoiding either mistake is to understand what it is that makes social theory different from physical theory.

The physical scientist, when doing science, does not ask questions about him or herself, “but about something else that is the subject matter of the question” [Williams 1995, 119] – the atomic weight of water, say. And when our scientist gives the answer – 18.02amu – he or she is not saying “I think,” or “I believe” that it is 18.02amu (though that reflective analogue is there,) they are saying “It is a fact that,” or “It is the case that” this is the atomic weight of water. To put it colourfully: they are saying it *impersonally*; and it is this impersonality that marks theory in the physical sciences.

Of course, such impersonality, or its aspiration, may be thought of the mark of theory generally, be it in the social or physical sciences. We want to know, for instance, when political revolutions occur or how depressions arise; but here is the difference. For however much we may seek for impersonality in the *explicanda*, there is no such impersonality in the *explicandum*.

When one asks when political revolutions occur one cannot deny one is asking why people revolt; and if one thinks a little further, one cannot deny that this means asking what it is that leads this person and that person to answer the question “What shall I do?” with “Revolt!”

What the social theorist seeks to understand – at this level, at least – is something that is *personal*, not impersonal. Whether one revolts or not is individually first-personal. And so when it comes to explaining – again, at this level – why someone

answers this question in this or that way, we ask for their reasons; that is the deliberation they performed, or, given their actions are intentional, could have performed.

As Bernard Williams summarizes: “It follows [...] that intentional action can always be explained by reference to a consciousness which the agent at least could have had and in many cases did have, and which refers to the agent” [*ibidem*, 125.]

Here we have approached the issue in social theory; the issue so often expressed as that of “power” or “agency” and “structure” or “context”; and it is a real issue – it cannot be avoided by turning human agents into structural *Träger* or by treating structure as epiphenomenal to individual action. As Micheli writes:

Understanding individual or collective behaviours requires indexicality. Explaining a behaviour means to ‘indexicalize’ it, namely to insert it in a context-dependent framework: “I,” “now,” “here,” where “I” refers to whoever is speaking, “now” to the time, “here” to the place of utterance. Nevertheless, social scientists aspire to explore the world without adopting any privileged point of view and their search for general rules (or at least middle-range rules) leads them to bracket the context.

What, then, to do?

The first thing is to appreciate that social theory faces questions of *depth* and *scope*. The question of depth is that of how much individuals’ intentional states are to be explained in structural/contextual terms; while the issue of scope is that how much, if at all, individuals’ intentional states matter when it comes to large(r) scale social phenomena.

If this is the first thing to do, it is not the last, for any answer that is not merely speculative or dogmatic must emerge from social theory itself; which means from social theorists doing social theory.

Here is where Micheli makes his valuable contribution.

Careful to avoid the dogmatism of “scientism,” and the free but nutritionless lunch of subjectivist relativism – both of which are denials, not forms, let alone the right form, of social theory – he encourages a pluralist approach.

Micheli wants us to appreciate that the idea of “structure” (or, as he prefers because of its wider generality, “context”) as it functions in social theory “is always an intrinsically relative idea of context.”

In the first place it is *historically* relative in the sense that past definitions of context “float back up to the surface, past definitions of context reappear.” Micheli tells the story of how the “two main axes” of the idea of context in social theory – “situation vs. frame, and global vs. analytical” – have oscillated in various styles of social theory from Durkheim and Weber to the present.

In the second place – and a crucial explainer of the historical oscillations – Micheli points out that “the choice of the kind of context [a theorist deploys] depends on the action theory [they] adopt.”

But the absolutely key point is that “the personal experience and sensitivity of the researcher” is itself an ineliminable element in all this.

If it is true – and it is true – that “intentional action can always be explained by reference to a consciousness which the agent at least could have had and in many cases did have, and which refers to the agent.” And it is true (in part, because of this very fact) that “in the social sciences no illusion we can discover truth is permitted: all we can hope for is to have a better grasp of the meaning of observed behavior” (abstract), then we have to accept, at the very heart of social theory, an element not merely of *formal*, but of *substantial*, individualism.

From the vantage point offered by commitment to (so choice of) this or that style of theory as it articulates itself on the analytical/global, situation/frame, axes, it may be that agent intentionality is merely *formal* in that while not denied, it has little or no explanatory depth and scope when it comes to the explaining significant social phenomena. But this – as evidenced by the wide historical array and oscillations of social theory – can’t simply be true of the *theorist* (of, as it were, the *explicanda* provider as themselves the *explicandum*).

Is this where subjectivist relativism enters and poisons the wells of understanding? Not according to Micheli. It does not because the history of social theory is part of its very subject-matter. The history of social theory illuminates what intentionality means for social theory. And it shows us that what we need – what we must always keep in mind – is the “gestalt” like “crossing and cross-fertilizing situation” [p. 18] of situation and frame, analytical and global as social theory develops, ramifies and critically engages.

This is why Micheli’s conclusion – in which he articulates for social theorists who make use of the idea of context – that is, *all* of them – “a few [in fact, four] (and minimalist) rules of thumb” isn’t a damp squib. It is, in fact, exactly what is needed when we do social theory, having recognized the not merely formal but substantial individualism expressed in committing or choosing *this* or *that* internally conjoined notion of context and intentionally realized logic of action.

We have to *a)* “accept the circular return” of context, logic of action (and, connectedly, research design) as “a natural consequence of the impossibility of grasping the social realm as a whole”; *b)* accept “that every logic of action requires its own contextual approach, just as every contextual scenario requires its own hypothesis about the logic of action.” We should *c)*, in doing *a)* and *b)* “take into account the level of efflorescence of the social process under analysis.” And so *d)*, view social

theory properly done not as this or that theory in action, but panoptically view all such theories as – in Wittgenstein’s words – “sketches of landscapes” which arise as we “travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction” [Wittgenstein 1953, vii]. As Micheli sums up: “a syncretistic elaboration of theories and methods is the razor’s edge on which we have to walk.”

In all this Micheli is right and illuminating. The only pity is that his argument isn’t always easily approachable, though we hope and expect continuing dialogue to dispose of this problem. As we noted at the outset, social theory is hard, but here it is perhaps harder than it need be. The difficulty arises, we suspect, from the anguished nature of the argument, caught as it is between three positions each of which is in tension with the others: *a*) a commitment to social science in a scientific mode; *b*) an undogmatic recognition of the limits of that way of doing social science (“no illusion we can discover truth is permitted”); *c*) a resistance to the temptation – into which it might lead us – of an intellectually lazy relativism. In brief: as our reconstruction of the issues and arguments at the heart of Micheli’s paper hopefully makes clear, we have considerable sympathy for the second and third of these positions, but less for the first. We would not have started there to arrive at these properly minimalist rules of thumb. Weber’s acknowledgment of the plurality of types of action and Blumer’s symbolic interactionism stand here for the whole tradition of interpretative sociology. The main orientation, however, remains towards rational actor models and analytical sociology (especially the sociology of mechanisms). While this makes the open-mindedness of Micheli’s argument all the more commendable, it also renders the road to the rules of thumb rockier than it may have otherwise been. Our brief reference to William’s more consistent interpretive stance points to an alternative potential starting point.

Despite these reservations, the opening of a dialogue between interpretative and explanatory approaches in the social sciences, and one furthermore that so carefully seeks to avoid grandstanding, is to be heartily welcomed.

References

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Comment on Giuseppe A. Micheli/2

Abstract: In the social sciences any illusion of discovery the truth is admitted: we can just hope to have a better grasp of the meaning of the observed behaviour. Which implications has, this peculiar property of the social sciences, on the way they construct theories about the effect of the context on the formation of the social behaviour? In order to give some answers to this question, this paper consists of three parts. First, some epistemological frailties of the concept of context in the effort of understanding social dynamics are discussed. Then, some trajectories of the idea of context are briefly sketched by reconstructing three crucial oscillations of the concept around a sort of barycentre with respect to two typologies: the one distinguishing between situation and frame, the other between global, analytical and structural properties. Lastly, some minimalist rules of thumb are suggested in order to correctly associate logics of action, contextual properties and research designs.

Keywords: Social theory, explanation, individualism, context.

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