

Filippo Barbera, Nicola Negri

# Comment on Peter Abell, Teppo Felin and Nicolai J. Foss. **Crypto-Rational Choice or Complex Mechanisms?**

(doi: 10.2383/78820)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2014

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

## **Licenza d'uso**

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

# Comment on Peter Abell, Teppo Felin and Nicolai J. Foss

## Crypto-Rational Choice or Complex Mechanisms?

by Filippo Barbera *and* Nicola Negri

doi: 10.2383/78820

### 1. Introduction

In their 2011 paper, Jepperson and Meyer (JM) proposed a critique of the micro-level mechanisms-based explanation, arguing that when Methodological Individualism is presented as an all-purpose and self-sufficient matrix for social theory the resulting posture is a “microchauvinist” one. This posture – the argument goes on – is present to varying degrees in, for example, the work of Abell [1996], Coleman [1990], Elster [1989], Hechter [1989], and Hedström and Swedberg [1998]:

Here the claim is that social scientific explanation must reason through causal processes that reach to the presumed bottom-line of the person, conceived as a sharply defined purposive “actor” [JM, p. 57].

Felin, Foss and Abell (FFA) (this issue) argue back that Methodological Individualism is the:

natural starting point for understanding collective phenomena and structures because it attempts to unpack the constituent and component parts, their underlying interests, beliefs, preferences, strategies and interactions and to theorize how phenomena, structures, institutions and so forth are generated, maintained and evolve [...].

Further elaborations on both sides are available in the pros and cons debate about “analytical sociology” [Hedström and Bearman 2009] hosted by this journal [Sociologica, 1, 2012].

JM propose to complement methodological individualism with socio-organizational processes (SOP) and institutional processes (IP). JM admit that:

[...] all causal social processes work through the behaviors and ideas of individual persons [...] this ‘ontological truism’ is a basic premise of all post-Hegelian naturalist social science. But this premise (sometimes called ‘ontological individualism’) in no way necessitates an explanatory (or ‘methodological’) individualism.

FFA maintain instead that *explanatory* power realizes only through actions and interactions, and macro-level accounts should never be conceived as rock-bottom explanations.

Both positions have fresh analytical insights to offer as well as shortcomings worth to be highlighted, with – in our opinion – FFA doing better for clarity and precision and JM being bolder in raising challenging topics. In this essay, we will provide an introduction to the broader debate raised by JM and FFA stressing differences, misunderstandings and (hopefully) perspectives for integration.

## 2. Is Complexity a Simple Concept?

To begin with, macro-level social factors as the ones mentioned by JM are really at the core of whether kind of sociology. However, producing lists of cunning conjectures does not necessarily imply sound explanatory statements: an inventory of plausible mechanisms can easily transform itself into a set of “big narratives” where everything is *equally* key for the explanation of the phenomena. In other words, macro-level explanatory accounts must specify and detail the *how* mechanisms through which the macro-level change (or stability) occurs. To produce a long list of plausible factors, dimensions and variables such as groups values, roles, prestige patterns, emotional dynamics, interactions rituals chain, organizational cultures is certainly useful but it is hardly enough from an explanatory viewpoint.

It follows that plausible SOP & IP processes should make sense of the fine-grained mechanisms or “powerful particulars” – to borrow a “critical realist” notion – able to generate the phenomena of interest: every *causally* relevant research program must therefore include a *syntactical* dimension [Abbott 2004]. Without it, the “multilevel” schemas supported by JM may obscure, rather than clarify, social processes. For instance, to argue that a multilevel approach of the nexus between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism must “contextualize” the Reformation in broader

societal processes, such as: *i*) the weakening of old roles and the emergence of new ones, less constrained by “liturgical” routines and codes; *ii*) the decline of imperial legitimacy and the rise of nation-states; *iii*) the strengthening of secular normative orders in place of religious ones and, finally, *iv*) the new mundane obligations correlated to the emergent set of duties and salvations ideas, seems more a reaction against the “sociological dandyism” or playing-with-models<sup>1</sup> as an end in itself attitude that sometimes characterize the formal-analytical approaches they criticize, rather than a theoretical alternative to them.

At the same time, JM raise a key topic when they argue that the ontological truism stating that just individuals exist should not be confused with explanatory individualism [see also Udehn 2001]. When this happens – and this is a major disagreement with FFA – the micro-foundation of social processes may result in a *waste of time*, bringing in “causally irrelevant material.” This is actually an apt point that any methodological individualist should not ignore. To rephrase it: from an explanatory viewpoint, the “variance” of roles-set may be more important than the “variance” of actions associated with these roles. It goes without saying that “roles” do not produce any effect without “actions:” but in this case “actions” matter only in an ontological sense, not in an explanatory one. JM put it clearly:

One does not need to assume very much about values or personality to understand that young persons in the 1990s might have seen investment banking as an attractive career [p. 63].

### 3. Position Matters

To dig deeper let us briefly consider the vacancy-chain/position argument raised *en passant* by JM [p. 62]. Positions can be defined as “empty places” endowed with specific properties (such as material and symbolic advantages, rights to act and power) independent of people’s characteristics. Positions “exist prior to the interaction of individuals filling these positions” [Udehn 2001, 305] and their structural effect arises in two ways [Sørensen 1996, 1334]: firstly the location of people in a given social structure affects their micro-level parameters. In labour market research, for instance, the incentives structure of the internal markets affects workers’ efforts and skills. Secondly, positions create effects *independently* of the characteristics of indi-

<sup>1</sup> Goldthorpe [2003, 101] has referred to “sociological dandyism” as: “*a preoccupation with models, whether statistical or theoretical, on account more of their intrinsic elegance, refinement and subtlety than of what can be shown to follow from their sociological use that is of major substantive relevance, whether from the standpoint of pure or applied interests.*”

viduals. As wages and rewards in a job are thus not determined by the incumbent's individual resources and productivity, but by being attached to qualifications or positions [Petersen 2004, 30]. We may not be able to explain many macro-level phenomena (inequality and the distribution of assets above all) without knowing about the properties of the positions people occupy. Petersen summarizes the vacancy competition model as follows [*Ibidem*, 30]:

1) There exists a fixed occupational structure, characterized by a distribution of jobs;

2) Opportunities to get ahead will be determined by the rate at which vacancies in the occupational structure open up, through turnover, job creation, and others;

3) People differ in the job-relevant resources they possess (e.g. human capital, experience), and help them to compete for positions in the occupational structure;

4) People want to get ahead in the structure (the action part);

5) The rate at which opportunities to get ahead open up in the occupational structure varies systematically between demographic groups.

Points 1-2-5 specify structural properties, while points 3-4 refer to individual properties [see also Barbera 2012]. In the light of JM paper, the “variance” of positions and their properties matters more than the “variance” of micro-level properties. JM would argue that downstream positions matter for explanatory purposes, while upstream workers do not. To detail the micro-level processes would imply to “bring in causally irrelevant materials.” But if what counts is the “variance of roles” and not the “variance of actions,” it follows that actors adopt a role and follow the prescribed behavioral patterns in quite a deterministic way: the subjective interpretations and the “degree of freedom” that roles leave for actions has to be ignored, *pace* Robert K. Merton and – let us say – every post-functionalist sociology.

This lead to the more general topic we wish to raise: the simpler the micro-level assumptions and the associated model of actor, the easier it is to rely on macro-level explanations. Paradoxically, the best way to support macro-level explanations is to postulate a rational-choice model where action just *adapts* itself to constraints and opportunities. The vacancy-chain model, for instance, simply requires a “need for achievement” attitude and a blatantly rational exploitation of career opportunities within organized settings.

#### **4. Keep it Simple, Stupid (KISS, but not too much)**

We claim that to work as they are meant to do, most often macro-level explanations such as competitive niches [Hannan and Freeman 1989], fields [Fligstein 2001],

complex networks [White 2001; White 2008], and chains of positions [Sørensen 1996] implicitly assume rational choice models. Competitive niches reward evolutionary selection, in one form or in the other a cognate concept of market and rationality [Nelson and Winter 1982]; fields are arenas for power-driven interactions, strongly based on “strategic interaction as the key habitus” [Bourdieu 1993]; chains of opportunities affect organizational dynamics through tournaments or competition for the vacant position [Petersen 2004]; networks offer context of opportunities, information and rewards [Burt 1982].

To this point, FFA oppose a sound argument: where JM support the idea that micro-foundation is irrelevant to grasp “complex” processes, FFA maintain the opposite. Micro-foundation is crucial *exactly because* social processes are complex and, when this complexity is properly considered, the risk of a crypto-rational choice remains remote.

For instance, consider organizational demography, which have extended the idea of vacancy-chain to include a variety of organizational structures [e.g., Stewman and Konda 1983; Stewman 1986]. Here job distributions, vacancy chains and managerial staffing and hiring practices shape a compound structure of probabilities for advancement. These probabilities structure are then modelled to construct organizational “Venturi tubes,” which specify the relative career chances over the entire organizational hierarchy [Chase 1991, 146] (*cf.* Fig. 1).

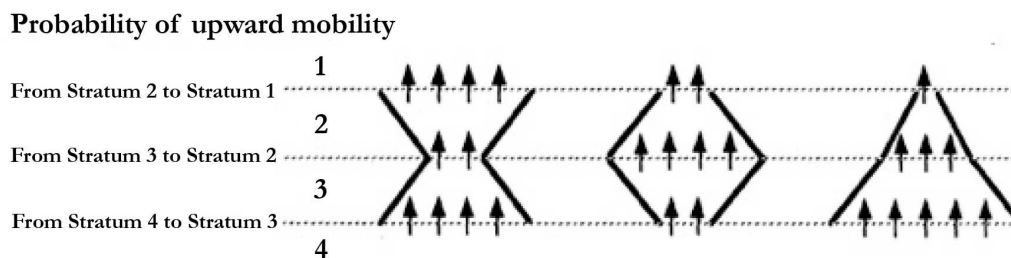


FIG. 1. Three possible shapes for Venturi Tubes in a mobility system with four strata.

Source: Chase 1991, 147.

The Venturi tubes pictured in Fig. 1 show that individual chances of promotion may take different forms and, moreover, these *are not isomorphic to formal organizational structure*: “Pyramidal organizations often do not have pyramidal chances for promotion” [Stewman 1986]. Therefore, individual chances of promotion can not be inferred from the formal organizational structure. These issues point to radical uncertainty for intentional actors that prevents careers from being governed by the maximization decisions assumed in a rational choice theory [Beckert 2002]. Even a bounded rationality approach [Simon 1982] in which vacancies are formalized as

processes where an individual when thinking about moving up only evaluates the next vacant position is not always convincing. In fact, in organized settings intertemporal discount rates are usually quite low. Broadly speaking, one could argue that human's career projects include *long-term perspectives* through which individuals image themselves over time. In these cases, to take decisions is to necessarily deal with the organization of time beyond the immediate present [Pizzorno 2006, 388].

Organizational careers, hence, are characterized by logics of action where people have long-term perspectives, but these cannot be understood as rational choice decisions. Other kinds of mechanisms about one's chances of promotion will play a key role in this case: e.g., career as an end in itself; promotion as an indicator of collective identity and homophily; job career as a kind of "moral progress." Besides instrumental rationality, in this way both the cognitive and normative dimensions of social action can be included in a "broader" model of rational action [Boudon 1993; Manzo 2012].

All in all the interplay between micro and macro complexity should accordingly work as a "no-fly zone" where contenders find perspectives for integration. Methodological individualist should be ready to admit that micro-level processes may matter just in ontological terms but they may be weak in explanatory ones, being only a "convenient device" to make sense of macro-level properties and their change over time and space. On the other hand, approaches such as JM's should deal more seriously with the syntactical dimension of social processes and, in doing this, avoid "big narratives" that actually may hidden crypto rational-choice accounts.

## 5. Other Kinds of Complexity

The interplay between macro and micro complexity would also help not to overweight the role of "culture" and to describe institutional processes (IP) as self-generating systems, where ideas seems to "act" as they were human beings. For instance, at page 65 JM write:

Calvinism appears to have provided new models of social discipline and executive administration, [...] protestant cultural model gave concrete legitimacy to a wide range of collective projects.

And also:

(t)he institutionalizations of religious pluralism contributed to the conventionalization of intellectual pluralism.

In these examples, IP appear as they were processes of transformation of “systems of symbols” in other “systems of symbols:” ideas, frames, meanings and values seems to be able to *intrinsically* transform themselves and produce effects over time. These processes are described without taking into consideration the role of actions and interactions that channel them, as in the case of diffusion and contagion of ideas [see Coleman *et al.* 1957; Hedström 1998].

This “idealistic” slant is therefore at odds with the “post-Hegelian naturalist social science” JM declare to embrace and, we believe, it has a further negative consequence for it separates IP from SOP: ideas seems to have an endogenous transformative power not only because they endogenously “act” without actors, but also because the complex interplay between networks, institutions and “culture” is not properly considered. The set of “big narratives” seems therefore to produce a new “phenomenology of the spirit” mixed with historicist accounts and supplied with multi-level schemas.

To be clear, we agree with the need to introduce cultural mechanisms in the macro-micro-macro schemas [Barbera and Negri 2015]; and we find convincing those approaches that deal rigorously with the cultural meaning of actions [Lizardo 2006], providing sound explanations of symbols, non-intentional behavior and the like [Gross 2009; see Manzo 2010 for a reply]. The explanation of the *meaning* of social action can and should be included in the macro-micro-macro framework, even with regard to its most complex implications such as social identity and non-intentional processes. We support the idea that the *mainstream* conception of macro-micro mechanisms does not pay enough attention to the issue of social identity, recognition processes and comparability among actions [Edling and Rydgren 2014; Pizzorno 2006]. In other words, the bottom left-hand corner of the Coleman Boat in the approaches JM criticize often implies *pre-formed actors*, without accounting for the cultural and symbolic dimensions of social processes that *constitute* them as such.<sup>2</sup> For example, often agents reflexively ask themselves about their own preferences: they do not merely desire something, but rather they question how much these desires are “correct,” as in the case of a “life-plan” [Frankfurt 1971]. These “meta-preferences” refer back to those social processes that preside over the genesis of trans-individual evaluation criteria or categories, which in turn refer back to the origins

<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that the issues of social identity and recognition processes are excluded from the frame of analytical sociology. For instance Manzo [2012, 44], argues that individual’s desire to possess and to defend a well-defined social identity has to be considered as a “reason triggers” mechanism, based on cognitive “good reasons” *à la* Boudon [1993, 52]. Nonetheless, actors – and their identity-based wishes – are always pre-formed entities (e.g. actors *have* an identity and social circles just *confirm* or *disconfirm* it).



and functions of comparability schemes between actions and agents [Barbera and Negri 2015].

Comparability schemes among actions are symbolic and social representations and not components of intentional and goal-oriented actions: rather, they are “an expression of being and belonging” whose symbolic meaning is acknowledged by other agents because it fits an institutionalized system of rules, regardless the intentions of the agent. As we know, a representation as a symbolic expression needs an appropriate context: a cut in a canvas is not always recognized as a work of art! As Searle [2005] wrote, X stands for Y *in* Z, because X to be a symbol for Y needs a context Z. These conditions are alike to being able to classify colors when there is light. We cannot state that someone who sees colors *intends* to see them. Rather, seeing colors is a *way of being* inherently human, which occurs under appropriate light conditions quite independently of the agent’s intentions.

We maintain that these are crucial points for a sound sociological explanation, but we also claim that all these issues should be understood avoiding the trap of both idealism and historicism, as well as deriving from these *concepts* clear explanatory *statements* with a syntactical backbone.

## 6. Terra Incognita: Hic Sunt Leones?

All in all we agree with FFA criticism because it seems to us an effective safeguard against both the traps of idealism and historicism. FFA, we maintain, rightly criticizes the unduly statement of JM according to which: 1) Methodological Individualism would be based on a false micro-level assumption, namely that exist a mass of similar (or “modal”) individuals," whose actions aggregate through market-like mechanisms; 2) organized complexity and individual-level relations that are too heterogeneous or complex to theorize at the micro-level support accordingly a macro-to-macro explanation. FFA do not agree with this conclusion and support the opposite viewpoint:

if individuals [...] interact in a simple manner, than we may indeed be able to dispense with them [...] and their interaction and focus – as J&M advocate – upon macro-relations.

In other words, as we already claimed, a direct macro-to-macro link is more plausible assuming homogeneous actors and simple additive micro-to-macro mechanisms, as in rational-choice accounts. For instance, let’s assume a situation where “rationality” is the common factor *shared* amongst individuals – as in the so-called “representative agent” device – while “irrational” factors are *randomly* distributed

amongst the individuals and they will accordingly cancel each other out in the micro-to-macro aggregation process. Goldthorpe [2000, 105] puts this case clearly:

Suppose that in their actions in some respect the members of an aggregate or collectivity are subject, on the one hand, to an influence that bears on all alike and, on the other hand, to a variety of influences not deviating systematically from the common influence and bearing only on particular individuals or small groups. It can be shown that even if the common influence is clearly weaker than the idiosyncratic influences taken together, knowledge of the former is still likely to allow a large part of the variation in the behaviour of the aggregate to be accounted for. This result comes about [...] essentially because the effects of the idiosyncratic influences tend to cancel out and thus leave the effect of the common influence, even if relatively weak, as still the decisive ones at the aggregate level.

But, as Edling notes:

In order for the “systematic force” to leave a trace in the aggregate, it is required that we have uncorrelated residuals. Otherwise we cannot assume that we are dealing with a genuine effect. Substantially, this implies an assumption of atomistic agents, i.e. individual without social ties. [Edling 2000, 5].

In sum, the “idiosyncratic forces” must be assumed as randomly distributed in the population and the assumption of simple and *atomised actors* follows accordingly.

Be true as it may, these simple micro-level assumptions may – as we argued previously – justify the irrelevance of micro-foundations. In atomized settings, where interaction does not occur, macro-level change can be easily described as straight macro-to-macro links: e.g. direct links between the change of constraints at time T and the (aggregate) choices at time T+1. Here lies the paradox: the best way to support macro-level explanations is to postulate a simple rational-choice model where action *adapt* in an *atomistic* manner just to constraints and opportunities. On the contrary, in a population of non-atomised actors it is impossible to assume that the idiosyncratic factors are randomly distributed, because people tend to interact with people alike. Or, but the conclusion is the same, repeated interaction makes people alike. In such (more “complex”) cases, micro-level foundation is key to properly explain macro-level phenomena.

All in all – as we remarked – it seems more correct to assume that organized complexity and micro-level heterogeneity *require* to model different kinds of “interaction regimes,” while simpler micro-level situations – such as the one presupposed by rational-choice models – do not. In this vein, FFA correctly emphasize that MI deals with the idea of:

how diverse and heterogeneous interests, beliefs and expectations are (somehow) aggregated in various way – leading (or not) to collective equilibria. [p. 4].

This being said, we also claim that FFA perspective remains confined within a too narrow analytical space. FFA do not take seriously enough (or so it seems to us) the crucial insights of JM according to which macro-micro mechanisms that support the genesis of social identities, recognition patterns and comparability schemes in social action need to be included in the macro-micro-macro schema they favor. Consequently, FFA frame correctly the problem of “emergence” and the key role of micro-to-macro mechanisms, where collective outcomes can truly be surprising and emergent. Nevertheless, FFA do not deal with macro-to-micro mechanisms that *constitute* the “conditions of possibility” of action and interaction. Where do actors and comparability schemas among actions come from? In FFA perspective actors are always pre-formed entities assumed as “able to act,” for no uncertainty in judgment criteria is postulated. But this assumption should never be taken for granted. As Pizzorno notes [2006, 392]:

In addition to the uncertainties that stem from the unpredictable nature of possible changes in the state of the world, the subject could also subsequently find himself confronted with the possibility that the objective of his choice, at the moment of producing a reward, has lost its value. This is not a simple case of regret. The person is not confronted with the possible irrationality of a past decision. The decision, at the moment it was made, was in all effects rational. But when the outcomes of the choice is appraised, the person could find that he no longer holds the same preferences, the same tastes, as when he made the choice. In making that choice he aimed to determine his identity, that is, the recognition of his social standing. Now it is as if the person finds himself to be another person.

Therefore – the argument goes on – the person perceives one of his past acts as belonging to an identity that no longer considers his own, and no-one any longer recognizes the values that were realized through that choice:

The currency used to calculate the utility of the choice is now useless, and it can no longer be exchanged for any other. Rationality is not in the intention of the agent; it is in the eye of the beholder. Or better, of the participants in a social situation. [Pizzorno, *ibidem*].

These arguments urge to consider those macro-micro mechanisms – implicit in JM arguments, while disregarded by FFA – which make sense of macro-micro downward causation processes as *prerequisites* of actions and intentions: namely, generative mechanisms of social identity and comparability/evaluation criteria among actions. To this end, the concept of “immersion” [Campbell 1974; Andrighetto *et al.* 2007; Conte *et al.* 2007] may prove useful. Put it succinctly, this concept includes those individual-level properties that are non-intentional consequences of the interactional context in which agents are immersed [Baldassarri 2009, 403]. To restate a

metaphor we have already used, if the light is switched on, I will see colors around me independently of my intentions. This is in line with the Latin roots of *im-merge*, that means to disappear by entering into any medium, such as the moon into the shadow of the sun.<sup>3</sup>

## 7. Conclusions: Nuts and Bolts for the Analysis of Immergence

We have just outlined as JM standpoint urges to deal with those “immergentist” macro-micro mechanisms such as those described by Pizzorno. We noticed that these mechanisms call into the picture the role of “relational contexts” or “circles of recognition” in which actors are embedded and that are the sources of their social identity and evaluation criteria. But when and how a network structure constitutes a circle of recognition? Is there any role for action-like processes? If a methodological individualist should not discard these questions as irrelevant, a tentative answer needs to consider the interplay between social organizational processes (SOP) and institutional process (IP), a perspective which is lacking in JM “multi-level” schemas. On the other hand, FFA seem ready to admit that “common values precede rather than follow from social interaction” (p. 5), and that this always requires an action-like explanatory argument. But their attention is mainly – if not exclusively – reserved for the micro-to-macro path, without grasping that *similar* selection processes and matching mechanisms also work *within* macro-to-micro immergentist paths, as in the recognition pattern illustrated by Pizzorno [2006]. Other analytical tools serve similar purposes: rituals [Collins 2004], orders of worth [Stark 2009], quality conventions [Boltanski and Thevenot 2006], conceptions of control [Fligstein 2001], disciplines and control strategies [White 2001; 2008].

To conclude, let us clarify how the concepts of disciplines and control strategies can both illustrate when and how a network configuration matters for the social identity and evaluation criteria of the actors and enhance the scope of micro-foundation by making sense of those *reflexive* strategies which support self-selection and matching processes in the macro-micro-macro path.

1) Networks and the constitution of social actor: on the basis of White’s analysis [1992; 2001; Azarian 2005; 2010] a circle of recognition emerges from networks with structurally equivalent nodes. White also states that an individual outside specific relational conditions will be prey of “value uncertainty.” Positioned at the intersec-

<sup>3</sup> The concept of immergence we refer to therefore differs from the so-called “second-order” emergence or “incorporation” in which the emergent effect is represented in the producing system, and this representation contributes to replicate the effect [Conte *et al.* 2007, 42].

tion of multiple networks that link different parts of the social space, the agent is “bombed” erratically by different and contradictory inputs. His position within a network is so specific that “cultural rules” are too general and therefore useless as a guide to action. A support could however be the comparison with other peers, who are in the same structural situation and exposed to the same flow of inputs and perceived constraints. By comparison, actors who feel they are structurally equivalent can work out what “normality” is and/or which the standards for evaluating actions are [Azarian, 2005]. It is by this comparison and control that they can generate and reproduce their own (organizational) schemes, which White calls “disciplines.” These schemes become a stable mode of action, support a collective identity and allocate social roles accordingly. Within a given discipline, agents improve their control over erratic flows and uncertainty that afflict them. They share a relatively stable system of constraints and norms and acquire a stable framework for action accordingly: a discipline therefore allows the comparability of different behaviors. Disciplines shape individual identity anchoring it to a wider identity, i.e., to a collective profile or to an order of worth [Stark 2009]. Whoever fits the measures and standards dictated by such a scheme is recognized as a member of the discipline: through the effort to act according to a given discipline, agents *acquire* comparability [Azarian 2005]. The Weberian entrepreneurs mentioned by JM maybe a case in point.

2) Reflexive strategies in the macro-micro-macro process: consider a situation of semantic uncertainty, such as when different orders of worth clash or contradict each other. Something (including one’s action) may be considered worth and valuable because it is economically profitable, or for the prestige it gives access to, or in connection with the traditional principle it represents, or because the public and civic value it stands for. These orders of worth may require zero-sum games: more money, less prestige and public goods, for instance. In these cases – which are ubiquitous in social life – keeping a tie can be counter-productive, as it becomes a cause of semantic contradiction that does not guarantee stability to one’s action [see Barbera and Audifredi 2012; Barbera and Negri 2015]. As White [2008, chapter 8] illustrated the so-called “control strategies” play here an important role. Control is considered the sum of attempts agents rely on to control “confusion” as well as the contingency of stimuli coming from their social ties [Azarian 2005]. A crucial control strategy is decoupling, through which agents isolate themselves from undesired ties and unwilling dependencies. Actually, the very identity of agents is the non-deterministic result of these attempts to control/justify stimuli coming from their social ties. Hence *an* identity asserts itself when agents establish control strategies that last out the contingencies that affect them.

Consider, for example, creative lifestyles in metropolitan areas [Florida 2004], or the political-aesthetic mixes which drive quality enogastronomy [Sassatelli and Davolio 2010]. In these cases goods take their value from being produced or consumed within a restricted circle that attributes value to such choices [Pizzorno 2006]. Thanks to this social interdependency, *agents are inclined to generate a network*, which constructs the source of value for their own action, thus avoiding the Olson paradox [Bellanca 2007, see in particular pp. 42-51]. Or consider “specialised public goods” that – as pure public goods – are non-exclusive and non-rival, but differently from them the user can take full advantage only if certain access costs are paid for. For instance, understanding a specific jargon is needed to take part in a political coalition. But this jargon it is not a universal public good as whoever takes advantage of it has a particularly high entrance cost. “Specialised public goods” also avoid the Olson paradox: whoever wants to learn the language for the specific sub-group or coalition automatically feeds into the collective network. In this case abandoning collective action would mean substituting a shared language with a private one. Just like in collective action problems, “specialised public goods” also need to deal with congestion created by too many participants. The higher the number of people who use a specialised language learnt with great efforts, the more the language gets fuzzy. At this point it becomes worthwhile for the people who first learnt the specialised language to leave the coalition and try to find another. This may occur either by attempting to regain a sort of “purity” of the original message [Bellanca 2007, 44-51], or by negating the validity of the message and so renouncing the fruits of the common good.

Let us conclude highlighting that these last examples seem to fit well FFA point, according to which structures and institutions can not be taken as primitive of social theorizing as they are the results of the choices and self-selection processes that precede them. But, as we suggested, to fully exploit the analytical implications of this posture the immergentist macro-to-micro processes proposed by JM need to be properly considered.

## References

- Abbott, A.  
2004 *Methods of Discovery: Heuristics for the Social Sciences*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Abell, P.  
1996 “Homo Sociologicus: Do We Need Him/Her?” Pp. 229-234 in *Social Theory and Sociology*, edited by S.P. Turner. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell.

Barbera and Negri, *Comment on Peter Abell, Teppo Felin and Nicolai J. Foss*

Andrighetto, G., Campennì, M., Conte, R., Paolucci, M.

2007 "On the Immersion of Norms: a Normative Agent Architecture." Proceedings of AAAI (Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence) Symposium, *Social and Organizational Aspects of Intelligence*. Washington DC, November 8-11.

Azarian, R.G.

2005 *The General Sociology of Harrison C. White. Chaos and Order in Networks*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

2010 "Social Ties: Elements of a Substantive Conceptualization." *Acta Sociologica* 53 (4): 323-338.

Baldassarri, D.

2009 "Collective Action." Pp. 391-418 in *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*, edited by P. Hedström and P. Bearman. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Barbera, F.

2012 "Meso-Level Mechanisms and Micro-Level Foundation." *Sociologica* 1: [doi:10.2383/36899](https://doi.org/10.2383/36899).

Barbera, F. and Audifredi, S.

2012 "In Pursuit of Quality. The Institutional Change of Wine Production Market in Piedmont." *Sociologia Ruralis* 52 (3): 311-331.

Barbera, F. and Negri, N.

2015 "Rituals as Mechanisms." In *Paradoxes, Mechanisms, Consequences: Essay in Honor of Mohamed Cherkaoui*, edited by G. Manzo. Oxford: Bardwell Press (forth.)

Beckert, J.

2002 *Beyond the Market: the Social Foundations of Economic Efficiency*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bellanca, N.

2007 *L'Economia del Noi. Dall'Azione Collettiva alla Partecipazione Politica*. Milano: Università Bocconi Editore.

Boltanski, L. and Thévenot, L.

2006 *On Justification. Economies of Worth*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Boudon, R.

1993 "Toward a Synthetic Theory of Rationality." *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 7 (1): 5-19.

Bourdieu, P.

1993 *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Burt, R.S.

1982 *Toward a Structural Theory of Action: Network Models of Social Structure, Perception and Action*. New York: Academic Press.

Campbell, D.

1974 "Downward Causation in Hierarchially Organised Biological Systems." Pp. 179-186 in *Studies in the Philosophy of Biology*, edited by F.J. Ayala and T. Dobzhansky. London/Basingstoke: MacMillan.

- Chase, I.D.  
1991 "Vacancy Chains." *Annual Review of Sociology* 17: 133-154.
- Coleman, J.S.  
1990 *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Coleman, J.S., Katz, E. and Menzel H.  
1957 "The Diffusion of an Innovation among Physician." *Sociometry* 20 (4): 253-270.
- Collins, R.  
2004 *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Conte, R. Andrighetto, G., Campenni, M., Paolucci, M.  
2007 "Emergent and Immergent Effects in Complex Social Systems." Proceedings of AAAI (Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence) Symposium, *Social and Organizational Aspects of Intelligence*. Washington DC, November 8-11.
- Edling, C.  
2000 "Rational Choice Theory and Quantitative Analysis: a Comment on Goldthorpe's Alliance." *European Sociological Review* 16 (1): 1-8.
- Edling, C. and Rydgren, J.  
2014 "Analytical Sociology: Bringing Culture and Identity Back In." *Sociologica* 2. [doi:10.2383/78818](https://doi.org/10.2383/78818)
- Elster, J.  
1989 *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Fligstein, N.  
2001 *The Architecture of Markets. An Economic Sociology of Twenty-First-Century Capitalist Societies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Florida, R.L.  
2004 *Cities and the creative class*. London: Routledge.
- Frankfurt, H.G.  
1971 "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person." *The Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1): 5-20.
- Goldthorpe, J.H.  
2000 *On Sociology: Numbers, Narratives, and the Integration of Research and Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
2003 "Sociology as Social Science and Cameral Sociology. Some further Thoughts." *European Academy of Sociology. Third Annual Lecture*. 25 October, Paris Sorbonne.
- Hannan, M.T. and Freeman, J.  
1989 *Organizational Ecology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hechter, M.  
1989 "Rational Choice Foundations of Social Order." Pp. 60-81 in *Theory Building in Sociology*, edited by J.H. Turner. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Hedström, P.  
1998 "Rational Imitation." Pp. 306-327 in *Social Mechanisms*, edited by P. Hedström and R. Swedberg. Cambridge, U: Cambridge University Press.



Barbera and Negri, *Comment on Peter Abell, Teppo Felin and Nicolai J. Foss*

Hedström P. and Bearman P. (eds.)

2009 *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Hedström, P. and Swedberg, R.

1998 "Social Mechanisms: An Introductory Essay." Pp. 1-31 in *Social Mechanisms*, edited by P. Hedström and R. Swedberg. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Jepperson, R. and Meyer, J.

2011 "Multiple Levels of Analysis and the Limitations of Methodological Individualisms." *Sociological Theory* 29 (1): 54-73.

Lizardo, O.

2006 "How Cultural Tastes Shape Social Networks." *American Sociological Review* 71: 778-807.

Manzo, G.

2010 "Analytical Sociology and Its Critics." *Archives Européennes de Sociologie/European Journal of Sociology* 51 (1): 129-170.

2012 "Reason-based explanations and analytical sociology. A rejoinder to Boudon." *Revue européenne des sciences sociales* 50 (2): 35-65.

Gross, N.

2009 "A Pragmatist Theory of Social Mechanisms." *American Sociological Review* 74 (3): 358-379.

Nelson, R.R. and Winter, S.G.

1982 *An Evolutionary Theory of Economic Change*. Cambridge, MA, and London, UK: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press.

Petersen, T.

2004 "Aage Bøttger Sørensen's Contributions to Quantitative Sociology: from Studying Processes to Studying Structure." *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 21: 27-44.

Pizzorno, A.

2006 "Rational Choice and Collective Action." Pp.373-398 in *Handbook of the Philosophy of Science 15: Philosophy of Anthropology and Sociology*, edited by S. Turner and M. Risjord.

Sassatelli, R. and Davolio, F.

2010 Consumption, Pleasure and Politics. Slow Food and the Politico-Aesthetic Problematization of Food. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 10 (2): 202-232.

Searle, J.R.

2005 "What is an Institution." *Journal of Institutional Economics* 1 (1): 1-22.

Simon, H.A.

1982 *Models of Bounded Rationality* (1 & 2). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Sørensen, A.B.

1996 "The Structural Basis of Social Inequality." *American Journal of Sociology* 101 (5): 1333-1365.

Stark, D.

2009 *The Sense of Dissonance. Accounts of Worth in Economic Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Stewman, S.

1986 "Demographic Models of Internal Labor Markets." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 31 (2): 212-247.

Stewman, S. and Konda, S.L.

1983 "Careers and Organizational Labour Markets: Demographic Models of Organizational Behavior." *American Journal of Sociology* 88 (4): 637-685.

Udehn, L.

2001 *Methodological Individualism: Background, History and Meaning*. Routledge Studies in Social and Political Thought. London: Routledge.

White, H.C.

1992 *Identity and Control. A Structural Theory of Social Action*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

2001 *Markets from Networks. Socioeconomic Models of Production*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

2008 "Notes on the Constituents of Social Structure Soc. Rel. 10 – Spring '65." *Sociologica* 1: [doi:10.2383/26576](https://doi.org/10.2383/26576).

## Comment on Peter Abell, Teppo Felin and Nicolai J. Foss

### Crypto-Rational Choice or Complex Mechanisms?

---

**Abstract:** Despite harsh debates and misunderstandings, macro and micro level explanatory accounts have a number of way to reach a better theoretical integration. In this paper, we comment on the debate between Jepperson and Meyer vs. Felin, Foss and Abell, to illustrate how macro and micro-level explanations deal with the same set of analytical dimensions (networks, institutions, positions, meanings) and fundamental mechanisms (matching, self-selection, individual and collective action). To integrate seemingly opposite theoretical postures, we maintain, partisans of macro-level accounts must deal with the syntactical dimension of social explanation, while micro-level advocates must consider topics such as social identity and the comparability of actions.

---

*Keywords:* *Methodological Individualism; Complexity; Social Identity; Comparability; Social Networks.*

---

**Filippo Barbera** is Associate Professor of Economic Sociology at the University of Torino and Affiliate to the Collegio Carlo Alberto (Moncalieri). His recent publications include: "Development," in *International Encyclopedia of Sociology*, edited by G. Ritzer. London: Basil Blackwell, 2015 (forthcoming); F. Barbera and N. Negri, "Rituals as Mechanisms," in *Paradoxes, Mechanisms, Consequences: Essay in Honor of Mohamed Cherkaoui*, edited by G.L. Manzo, Oxford: Bardwell Press, forthcoming, 2015.

**Nicola Negri** is Professor of Economic Sociology at the University of Torino. His recent publications include: F. Barbera and N. Negri, "Rituals as Mechanisms," in *Paradoxes, Mechanisms, Consequences: Essay in Honor of Mohamed Cherkaoui*, edited by G.L. Manzo, Oxford: Bardwell Press, forthcoming, 2015.