Francesco Di Iorio (2023). “Methodological Individualism and Reductionism” in Nathalie Bulle and Francesco Di Iorio (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Methodological Individualism: Volume II*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

**Methodological Individualism and Reductionism[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Francesco Di Iorio**

**1 Introduction**

This chapter analyzes and critiques an idea that is currently widespread in the philosophy of the social sciences, as well as among some proponents of analytical sociology, namely that methodological individualism (MI) is committed to reductionism.

As understood in this chapter, the concept of reductionism is a rehashed modern version of the ancient concept of atomism and describes the inability of certain sociological and economic approaches to take into account the systemic and socio-cultural constraints that influence individual action. According to the reductionist interpretation of MI, this doctrine is incapable of allowing for the social conditioning of individuals and therefore lacks scientific and epistemological legitimacy. To put it simply, MI fails to develop realistic and valid explanations of social phenomena (Di Iorio 2015: 75-115).

Two important clarifications must be made here. The first is that, while the term ‘reductionism’ is mainly used in reference to MI with the above-mentioned negative meaning, it is also, though rarely, used in a different way. In particular, Jon Elster (2023) defines his brand of MI as reductionist, but clarifies that this does not mean that he denies the existence of institutional constrains on agents and the possibility to explain social phenomena “by structural reasons” (see also Elster 1982; Lukes 2006, p. 6). It only means that any account of these phenomena must be based on a micro-foundationalist research strategy and that explanations in terms of holistic entities that exist over and above the individuals must be rejected (ibid.; 1985). This chapter does not deal with this Elsterian use of the term reductionism, but investigates the legitimacy of the more common use of it with respect to MI. The second clarification that I want to make is that, while MI, as understood by its main theorists, is not committed to reductionism in the negative sense of the word, this is not true for some simplistic variants of individualist explanation that are either based on fictional assumptions (social contract theory, mathematical theory of economic equilibrium) or on psychologism (e.g. Homans’ behavioral sociology). In the subsequent pages, MI is used solely to describe the non-atomistic version of this approach – i.e., the version endorsed by its main theorists – while reductionism refers to the widespread and mistaken view that MI is constitutively incapable of accounting for social and systemic constraints on action.

This chapter is structured around three main points. First, it seeks to clarify the precise meaning of the term *reductionism* as it is used in the contemporary literature by critics of MI. Even though those who accuse MI of being reductionist all agree that this approach is incompatible with the systemic analysis of social phenomena and social conditioning, they do not always arrive at this conclusion in the same way. As we will see, there are two types of reductionist interpretations of MI: that of *psychological reductionism*,and that of *semantic reductionism* (Di Iorio and Chen 2019). In addition, the latter can be divided into a *nominalist variant* and an *anti-nominalist variant*. The variations between these different concepts of reductionism are explained and analyzed in detail, filling a gap in the methodological debate about MI that arises precisely from the fact that, within the framework of this debate, the word *reductionism* is often used without considering its partially polysemic nature.

Second, this chapter shows that both of these reductionist interpretations of MI are incorrect, and that they paint a caricature of this approach that does not reflect the views actually held by its most important theorists. I argue that MI has been a systemic, or structural, approach from the outset, even if, as pointed out above, there are atomistic versions of MI.

Third, this chapter critiques the theory that since MI is reductionist, it should be replaced by a new approach, sometimes called *structural individualism*, that would represent a middle ground between holism and MI (Demeulenaere 2011; Udehn 2002). Almost all contemporary critics of MI agree on the need to develop this third way. They mistakenly regard systemic analysis as a characteristic invention of the holistic tradition that is incompatible with MI, although they do recognize the validity of the MI’s critique of sociological determinism.

**2 Psychological reductionism**

The interpretation of MI in terms of psychological reductionism was developed relatively independently by thinkers from a variety of intellectual traditions. Despite some differences in terminology, they all critiqued MI along essentially the same lines of argument. This interpretation of MI was espoused by the Swedish sociologist Lars Udehn (2001, 2002), for example, who published the only history of MI available in English, and whose work has influenced analytical sociology. The British philosopher Roy Bhaskar (1979), who was the originator of critical realism, also put forward this interpretation of MI, as did two famous proponents of his epistemological approach: the economist Tony Lawson (1997, 2003) and the sociologist Margaret Archer (1995). Another well-known thinker who has supported the idea that MI is based on psychological reductionism is the Popperian philosopher Joseph Agassi (1960, 1975).

According to the thinkers above, MI is psychological reductionism in the sense that it seeks to reduce the social to the mental. From their point of view, MI denies the presence of a social structure characterized by rules, roles, and sanctions, and that exists objectively – that is, independently of what the actors think about their freedom of action in social life. In other words, MI does not take into consideration the fact that constraints must be conceived of as realities that exist outside the minds of individuals and that limit freedom of action precisely because of their external character. This critique of MI, stemming from Durkheim and Marx’s work, is based on the central importance that this approach places on the comprehensive method in sociology. The fact that proponents of individualism (such as Menger, Weber, Simmel, and Schütz) have insisted on the need to seek the ultimate cause of action inside the actor, and, in particular, in his or her way of interpreting the world, is seen as proof that MI is a purely subjectivist (and therefore anti-realistic and psychologistic) theory of socio-cultural constraints. These constraints are thereby reduced to purely mental constructions, despite being objective because they exist independently of individual opinion (Di Iorio 2016b).

Let us consider an everyday example. In many American cities it is against the law to drink alcohol in the street. Now imagine that a European tourist is unaware of the existence of this prohibition and walks through the streets of one of these cities drinking a beer. Even if the tourist thinks that he or she is free to behave in this way, there is in fact an objective constraint that exists independently of his or her subjective opinion. As a result, if a police officer sees the tourist behaving in this way, the officer will intervene. This trivial example highlights the way in which MI is considered incapable of explaining the structural constraints that limit the freedom of the actor by those who interpret it in terms of psychological reductionism.

As Udehn (2002:487) points out, ‘according to Weber, von Mises, [and] von Hayek . . . [s]ociety and culture are subjective phenomena existing only in the minds of individuals’. The difference between objective constraints and psychological beliefs about social constraints is explained by Udehn using the *exogenous/endogenous* dichotomy: *exogenous* refers to objective reality, that which is outside the human mind, while *endogenous* refers to the subjective beliefs of the actors, or to the psychological dimension (ibid). With regards to MI, Udehn wrote that ‘social institutions appear . . . only among the endogenous variables’, meaning that they are only what individuals conceive of them as being in the light of their own interpretation of the social world and its constraints (ibid:448). Consequently, MI cannot truly take into account the way in which these institutions create an objective social conditioning by limiting the freedom of the actors: ‘institutionalism is incompatible . . . with . . . methodological individualism’ (ibid; see also Udehn 2001:355). According to Udehn (2001:318), we must get rid of the original version of MI and use an approach that he calls ‘structural individualism’, following the Dutch sociologists Reinhard Wippler (1978) and Werner Raub (1982). This interpretation should be seen as a ‘synthesis of individualism and holism’ (Udehn 2002a:318). The difference between structural individualism and MI is that in MI, ‘no causal, or explanatory, power is attributed to social phenomena’ (ibid) in the holistic sense, whereas structural individualism recognizes that social dynamics depend partly on the beliefs and evaluations of individuals, and partly on holistic factors. In the case of structural individualism, objective institutional factors that exist independently of the individual conscience, such as the social roles of the actors and the legal structure of the society, are taken into account in the explanation.

A similar view to that of Udehn is shared by all those philosophers, economists, and sociologists who are inspired by the critical realism of Roy Bhaskar. As Lawson (1997:137) – one of the most famous successors of the British thinker – explained, MI, as it is conceived by theorists of the comprehensive approach in the social sciences, such as Hayek, ‘does not acknowledge a reality of social structures existing apart from their being conceptualised in action’ (see also Lawson, 1997:28ff). In other words, the problem with MI is that it cannot define these structures ‘in . . . objective terms . . . but only . . . in terms of human beliefs’ (ibid:138-139). This means that society consists ‘ultimately, in the opinions, beliefs and attitudes of individual agents’ (ibid:139). However, this view is mistaken since the ‘structures’ that govern and influence human interactions are ‘irreducible to individual conceptions’ (ibid), even if they ‘are dependent upon . . . the concepts and actions of human agents’ (ibid:147). Consequently, MI lacks an ‘adequate . . . ontology’ (ibid:148) of the social world and its structural dimension. It represents an anti-realist and anti-objectivist – or *idealist* (King 2004) – theory of this world and its constraints, which is erroneous since these result from the fact that ‘social practices’, ‘social rules’, and ‘social positions’ exist as objective realities (Lawson 2003:39).

Another scholar who has interpreted at least part of the individualist tradition in terms of *psychologism* – in particular, that which relates to the comprehensive sociology developed by Weber – is Joseph Agassi (1960, 1975). A disciple of Popper, he suggested getting rid of the concept of MI in favor of that of *institutional individualism*. The distinguishing feature of this institutional individualism is the fact that it assumes that ‘the existing institutions constitute a part of the individual’s circumstances which together with his aims determine his behavior’ (Agassi 1960:247). Agassi believes that according to the traditional psychologistic-version of MI, these institutions play no role (ibid; see also Udehn 2002:489). His institutional individualism, on the other hand, ‘denies that individuals’ aims and physical circumstances alone determine human action’ (Agassi 1975:147). Within the framework of this anti-psychologistic individualism, ‘people’s opinions enter as a major factor in the social situation; but they enter not so much as personal opinion but rather as institutional or public opinion’ (Agassi 1960:266). In addition, institutional individualism recognizes that ‘institutions mould character and character transforms institutions’ (ibid:267). As Udehn points out when analyzing the approach held by Agassi, ‘in the original version of methodological individualism, social institutions are something to be explained in terms of individuals. They appear only in the explanandum or, better, the consequent of an explanation, but never in the explanans, or antecedent. In institutional individualism, on the other hand, social institutions explain and, therefore, also appear in the explanans, or antecedent of an explanation’ (2002:489). Institutional individualism, according to Agassi, is a happy medium between holism and individualism. It seems obvious that this new type of individualism proposed by Agassi is very close to Udehn’s concept of structural individualism mentioned earlier.

**3 Collective beliefs and their consequences**

Psychological reductionism accuses MI of reducing the social to the mental and of denying that objective sociocultural or institutional constraints influence action. This accusation is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of MI’s interpretive approach (*verstehen*). It is certainly true that MI insists that it is necessary to take into account the meaning of human actions, that is, the way that individuals ‘see’ things (Weber [1922] 1978:13; see also Bronner and Géhin 2017:58-128; Di Iorio 2015:55-74; Picavet 2015, 2018). On the other hand, it is incorrect to say that according to MI socio-cultural constraints should be conceived of in an anti-realistic or purely subjectivist way. To understand this, it is necessary to consider two points.

The first is to note that, contrary to what Udehn and the other scholars mentioned in the previous section have argued, MI does not focus on the issue of interpreting strictly personal beliefs such as, for example, the isolated opinion of a particular individual about whether or not he or she is free to drink on the streets of American cities (see also Bronner 2011). In order to explain the socio-cultural constraints that influence action, MI gives little importance to this type of belief because, in the words of the British interpretive sociologist Anthony King (2004:190), these ‘are not the basis of social life’. In reality, MI recognizes the centrality of a principle that Alfred Schütz (2000), reinterpreting Weber in the light of Husserl, called *intersubjectivity*. To use the words of Weber ([1922] 1978), this principle precisely identifies the fact that individualist sociology is not the science of strictly subjective opinions, but, on the contrary, the science of typical ways of acting and thinking. In other words, MI applies its interpretive approach to a shared meaning or, if one prefers to use the phrase that Raymond Boudon (2001) has borrowed from Durkheim, to ‘collective beliefs’. As Hayek (1952:34) has pointed out, from MI’s point of view, social systems must be regarded as ‘the implications of many people holding certain views’, that is, as ‘the consequences of the fact that people perceive the world and each other through sensations and concepts which are organized in a mental structure common to all of them’ (ibid:23).

The second point to note in order to clearly distinguish MI from any form of psychological reductionism, is simply that within MI, the interpretive conception of collective beliefs – according to which they must be explained in terms of ‘good reasons’ – is strictly linked to the analysis of the objective and real consequences produced by these beliefs, which are often unintentional (Di Iorio 2015:104). MI takes into account the different types of social constraints by combining the dimension of *verstehen* and that of the study of aggregate effects produced by collective beliefs (Boudon 1997; Cherkaoui 2006). For Weber, for example, the caste system in India and the powerful socio-cultural constraints it produces at the social level are the consequence of a set of shared magical and religious beliefs that can be understood through an interpretive process (Weber 1946:396-415).

Confusing MI with a theory of psychological reductionism is mistaken, precisely because MI is an interpretive approach that considers the objective consequences of collective beliefs shared by the actors. Among these consequences that define the nature of social conditioning, there is indeed the emergence of socio-cultural or institutional structures, often formed unintentionally (see Di Iorio 2015:75ff). In the section ‘Individuals and systems’ below, I will follow in the footsteps of Mises and Hayek and consider the case of the spontaneous order of the competitive market. MI presupposes, on the one hand, the existence of structures that transcend the will and understanding of isolated individuals, and on the other hand, the possibility that these structures will produce a feedback effect on the actors by limiting their freedom of choice, as we will see in more detail in the subsequent pages (see Bulle 2018; Hayek 2011). The simple fact that, according to MI, a large proportion of these structures are unintentional renders clearly untenable the idea that this approach aims to reduce the social dimension to the mere content of individual psyches. As Popper (1963:124-125) wrote, from MI’s point of view, ‘the real task of the social sciences is to explain those things which nobody wants’[[2]](#footnote-2) (see also Antiseri 2004).

**4 Semantic reductionism**

The interpretation of MI in terms of semantic reductionism was developed within analytic philosophy during the second half of the twentieth century, and today it has also become popular in sociology and economics circles. Multiple scholars have contributed to the dissemination of this interpretation of MI, among which we can mention, for example, Mandelbaum, Lukes, Kincaid, Pettit, and Sawyer. The expression *semantic reductionism* that I use to describe this way of thinking about MI is borrowed from Antonio Rainone (1990).

As is well-know, MI locates the cause of social dynamics in individuals and their way of conceiving the world instead of looking for it in holistic-type factors such as, for example, the economic structure – in Althusser's sense – or the *habitus* in the sense of culturalists (see Boudon 2010:28,29; Demeulenaere 2015; Picavet 2015). From the point of view of holism, the actors and their motivations have little importance because the individual experience is determined unconsciously and mechanically by hidden causes (Boudon and Bourricaud [1982] 2004:387ff). In order to oppose this type of sociological perspective, proponents of MI have often insisted that social phenomena must be explained in terms of individuals and not in terms of holistic factors (Bronner and Géhin 2017:9-13). Take, for example, this famous passage by Max Weber that is often cited in the literature on MI:

If *I* have now become a sociologist (according to my documents of appointment!) it is to a large measure because I want to put an end to the whole business—which still has not been laid to rest— of working with collective concepts. In other words: sociology, too, can only be pursued by taking as one’s point of departure the actions of one or more (few or many) *individuals*, that is to say, with a strictly “individualistic” method.

(Weber [1920] 2012:410).

According to the interpretation of MI in terms of semantic reductionism, the idea that researchers should not explain social phenomena in terms of holistic-type collective concepts means that the social sciences should conform to a principle of semantic reduction of social predicates to individual predicates (Kincaid 2017; Petroni 1991; Rainone 1990). Social phenomena should therefore be explained by presupposing that it is possible to reduce the vocabulary referring to social properties to the vocabulary referring to individual properties. In other words, MI is interpreted as a theory where the *meaning* of descriptions, concepts, and explanations used in the social sciences should be understood as always and necessarily referring to a simple sum of individual properties (see Mandelbaum 1955; Lukes 1973; Ruben 1985; Kincaid 1986, 1996:142-190; Kincaid and Zahle 2019; Little 1990; Rainone 1990; Pettit 1993:165-215; Petroni 1991; Sawyer 2002, 2003; Zahle and Finn 2014; Elder-Vass 2014). This type of interpretation of MI is linked to a reformulation, in terms of language analysis, of the old idea that the whole is more than the sum of the parts. As Steven Lukes explains, according to this interpretation of the individualist tradition, ‘facts about society and social phenomena are to be explained solely in terms of facts about individuals’ (1968:120).

However, any approach based on a semantic reduction of social predicates to individual predicates is ‘obviously implausible’ (Kincaid 1986:504). It follows that MI is mistaken. For example, the phrase ‘nation X is richer than nation Y’ is, from a semantic point of view, irreducible to a sum of individual qualities because it does not mean that every member of nation X is richer than every member of nation Y (Di Nuoscio 2018). Those who interpret MI in terms of semantic reductionism have sometimes used very technical arguments to show the impossibility of this type of reductionism, for example the famous ‘multiple realizations’ problem (Kincaid 1986). I will not consider these technical arguments here because presenting them in detail would be pointless for this analysis, given that I readily admit that they are correct and valid and my approach is simply to explain that MI is not semantic reductionism in the sense specified above (Bulle 2018).

In summary, interpreted as a form of semantic reductionism, MI should be rejected for two reasons: on the one hand, the analysis of social phenomena must necessarily be based on the use of semantic concepts and laws that are irreducible to individual properties – the whole being, from a semantic point of view, more than the simple sum of the parts; on the other hand, being based on a principle of semantic reduction, MI is unable to recognize the fundamental fact that explanations in the social sciences must take into account social factors (for example, the religious culture of a country) and laws (such as the law of supply and demand) that, in addition to being semantically irreducible to individual or psychological properties, create systemic constraints that influence individual actions.

**5 Individuals and systems**

The interpretation of MI in terms of semantic reductionism is not plausible for three reasons that are all linked to the same problem: while the analytic philosophers who have put forward this interpretation have certainly developed formally precise analyses of the necessarily systemic nature of the social sciences, they have paid little attention to carefully studying the original work of the thinkers they criticize. Philologically and historically, this interpretation of MI, like that in terms of psychological reductionism considered above, is not valid.

The first reason is simply that semantic reductionism has been explicitly attacked by several theorists who adhere to MI, for example the sociologists Raymond Boudon and James S. Coleman, or the members of the Austrian school of economics, as well as Karl Popper and some of his followers. These scholars recognized the systemic and irreducible nature of social phenomena. According to Popper, the fact that the whole is more than the sum of the parts in any science is simply a truism:

the triviality as well as the vagueness of the statement that the whole is more than the sum of its parts seems to be seldom realized. Even three apples on a plate are more than ‘a mere sum’, in so far as there must be certain relations between them (the biggest may or may not lie between the others, etc.): relations which do not follow from the fact that there are three apples, and which can be studied scientifically. (Popper 1957:82)

Carl Menger, another famous methodological individualist, also emphasized that social phenomena always present systemic characteristics, long before Popper (see also Antiseri 2004:141ff; Campagnolo 2013, 2016). In his view, ‘social structures . . . in respect to their parts are higher units’ (Menger [1883] 1985:142). They are characterized by ‘functions’ that ‘are vital expressions of these structures in their totality’ (ibid:139). According to Menger (ibid:147), society is a system inasmuch as each of its parts – each individual or each subsystem (such as a family or a business) – ‘serves the normal function of the whole, conditions and influences it, and in turn is conditioned and influenced by it in its normal nature and its normal function’ (see also Simmel [1892] 1977). Hayek (1967:70), influenced by Menger, wrote that society ‘is more than the mere sum of its parts’ and that it is a system characterized by the fact that its constituent parts ‘are related to each other in a particular manner’. As for Boudon, he notes that there is no example of an explanation that does not refer to systemic properties in the social sciences, structural analysis being quite simply an inevitable and indispensable characteristic of any sociological research (Boudon 1971:1-4; see also Boudon and Bourricaud 2004:387-388; Di Iorio 2016b:361).

As I have already pointed out, methodological individualists have stressed the fact that social phenomena must be explained ‘in terms of individuals’ (Kincaid 2017:87). This does not mean that they wanted to develop explanations in terms of semantic reductionism, but that they aimed to provide a critique of sociological determinism, that is, the tendency to explain human action as simply the mechanical product of holistic factors (see Popper 1966a, 1966b). Presupposing that the cause of social phenomena is to be sought at the individual level, and not at the level of holistic-type sociocultural factors, means, among other things, that the influence of emergent structures produced by human interactions (see the second section) is not deterministic, but mediated by the tacit or explicit interpretative capacities of the actors (Boudon 2010:30-32; Bulle 2018; Bronner and Géhin 2017:53-128; Di Iorio 2015:11-74). Herein lies the crux of the difference between holism and individualism: holism refutes the crucial importance of individual interpretive capacities and, therefore, conceives of action as a mechanical product of the context (Antiseri and Pellicani 1995; Boudon 2010; Bulle and Phan 2017; Bulle 2018; Di Nuoscio 2018; Demeulenaere 2000). As Menger (1985:133) explains, from the point of view of MI, human systems are not deterministic machines, since this type of machine is ‘composed of elements which serve the function of the unit in a thoroughly mechanical way. They are the result of purely . . . mechanical . . . forces’. In contrast, human systems ‘simply cannot be viewed and interpreted as the product of purely mechanical force effects. They are, rather, the result of human efforts, the efforts of thinking, feeling, acting human beings’ (ibid).

The second reason why interpreting MI in terms of semantic reductionism is untenable is related to the important role played by the concept of unintended consequences within this approach (see Antiseri 2004; Laurent 1994). This concept is concerned with emergent effects that cannot be reduced to predicates that describe the individuals’ psychological and behavioral properties, for the simple reason that it refers to neither human will nor to the properties of individual action but to the global behavior of a system that is spontaneous or unplanned (see Menger 1985:133; Merton 1936; Hayek 1952:39-40; Popper 1957:157-158; Jarvie 1972:173-178, 2001; Elster 1989:91-100; Rainone 1990; Boudon 1997; Cherkaoui 2006:1-15; Boettke and Candela 2015). Let us consider the ‘complex’ version of the theory of the invisible hand of the market developed by Mises and Hayek, two famous individualists, that built upon Adam Smith’s work (see Mises [1922] 1981 :28ff; Hayek 1948:77-91; Hayek 2011; Dumouchel and Dupuy 1983; Nemo 1988:67-106; Laurent 1994; Petitot 2009, 2012, 2016; Di Nuoscio 2018; Caldwell 2007:205-231). According to this theory, the functioning of the market is not semantically reducible to concepts and laws that concern individual properties. Indeed, the market is based on an unintentional coordination of economic activities (Di Iorio and Chen 2019:9). The theory of the invisible hand asserts that the laws governing the economic system are not psychological and strictly individual since the emergent effects prevail over and surpass the intentions of the actors. For example, the law of supply and demand, as conceived by Mises and Hayek, is linked to an aggregation effect that stems from an unintentional mechanism that is irreducible to psychological laws. This fact explains why if someone owns a car and wishes to sell it on, he or she will not be free to determine the selling price without taking into account its market value, which is an emergent phenomenon. According to this Austrian theory of the invisible hand of the market, since a price is determined through a systemic effect that depends on the combination of a very large number of individual actions and the use of distributed information, it cannot be explained using predicates that only describe human desires and individual properties (Hayek 1948:77-91).

The third and final reason why interpreting MI in terms of semantic reductionism is wrong is that, as shown by Menger’s systemic conception of the social mentioned above, where the whole influences the parts and vice versa, it is untrue that MI denies the existence of semantically irreducible factors capable of creating constraints that affect individuals and limit their freedom (Rainone 1990; Bulle 2018; Bouvier 2011; Demeulenaere 2015; Di Nuoscio 2016; Manzo 2007, 2015; Raub, Buskens and Van Assen 2011). The example of the individualistic explanation of the market in terms of invisible hand processes set out above is also useful for understanding this point. In the theory of Mises (1981: 28ff) and Hayek (1948:77-91, 2011) – which is partly inspired by the work of Menger – prices, which are unintentional emergent properties, allow the coordination of economic activities precisely because their variation influences the decisions of actors by limiting their freedom of choice (Di Iorio and Chen 2019:9). There is a feedback mechanism through which the price system, which is an emergent phenomenon created unintentionally by individuals, influences individuals because of their budget limitations (ibid). This mechanism is governed by a principle of circular causality, or, by a double causality (downward and upward) that allows the adaptation from the global level to the individual level and vice versa (Bouvier 2011; Di Iorio 2016a; Di Iorio and Chen 2019; Nemo 1988:67-106; Petitot 2016). For this reason, Hayek (1967, 1978, 2011) describes the economic order based on monetary prices as a complex self-organizing system (Caldwell 2007:363ff; Dumouchel and Dupuy 1983; Laurent 1994; Petitot 2009, 2016).

Throughout the history of MI, it is possible to find countless examples of explanations in terms of circular causality between the micro and macro factors (Coleman 1990; Raub, Buskens and Van Assen 2011). Let us consider another example taken from the work of Max Weber ([1953] 2005a:181ff). Weber explained that the emergence (upward causation) of capitalism (macro phenomenon) in Northern Europe was produced unintentionally by several Calvinist entrepreneurs (micro level) who all saw their success in the pursuit of wealth as a sign of divine election. As part of this analysis, Weber also pointed out that the development of capitalism has dramatically altered the way of life of individuals (downward causation from macro to micro) because it created a mechanized and highly regulated system of production that has become typical of modernized societies, and that ended up restricting certain aspects of human freedom.

**6 Nominalism and reductionism**

The scholars who have developed the interpretation of MI in terms of semantic reductionism considered in the previous sections regard this approach as closely linked to a nominalist ontology. Quite often they are not opposed to this type of ontology; in fact, most of these thinkers accept and even defend it (Little 1990; 2016; Epstein 2015), but they criticize MI because, in their opinion, MI does not combine nominalism with a systemic and emergentist approach. There is, however, an anti-nominalist variant of the interpretation of MI in terms of semantic reductionism, that is, in terms of an atomist theory of the social that denies that the whole is more than the sum of the individual parts. According to the philosophers who developed this variant, in particular Mario Bunge (2000) and Brian Epstein (2015), the criticism of MI analyzed in the previous two sections is partially incorrect due to the impossibility of combining anti-reductionism and nominalist ontology. For them, the incompatibility between MI and the existence of irreducible global properties is strictly linked to the intrinsic limits of the type of ontology of this approach. In other words, they criticize MI as a nominalist perspective because they equate its metaphysical dimension with reductionism.

According to Bunge (2000:148), MI fails to understand that ‘social systems such as families, tribes, villages, business firms, armies, schools, religious congregations, informal networks, or political parties . . . are just as real and concrete as their individual constituents’. In contrast, ‘individualists insist that all these are just collections of individuals: they underrate or even overlook structure’ (ibid). The consequence of this is that ‘individualists resist the systemic approach. They insist on studying only the components of social systems, that is, individuals, while overlooking their structure or set of connections’ (ibid). According to Bunge’s view, MI is therefore wrong because it is linked to a nominalist ontology, and to defend this type of ontology would be to deny the existence and the crucial importance of any systemic dimension.

Epstein (2015:36ff) has proposed an analysis that is partially similar to Bunge’s, but, unlike Bunge’s analysis, it centers on the concept of ‘supervenience’. Like Bunge, Epstein (ibid) argues that because of its nominalist ontological assumptions, MI is unable to take into account the fact that social phenomena cannot be reduced to individual phenomena. However, unlike Bunge, he insists that nominalism entails the theory that social facts supervene on the individualistic ones (Di Iorio and Herfeld 2017:18). According to Epstein, this means that society ‘is entirely composed and determined by individual properties’ (Di Iorio and Herfeld 2017:18). The problem, he contends, is that social properties do not supervene only on individual properties, but also on ‘physical’ properties (Epstein 2015:46ff). The economic situation of a region, for example, is not only affected by human factors such as political decisions on taxation or investment, but also by material factors such as crop failures, earthquakes, or flooding. Therefore, according to Epstein, MI cannot grasp the irreducible nature of social phenomena, nor the complexity of their causes, due to a strictly ontological problem.

The first thing to note about the position of Bunge and Epstein is that, even if many individualistic scholars, such as Simmel, Mises, Hayek, and Popper, have explicitly defended a nominalist ontology of the social, others, such as Boudon and most of his followers, prefer to avoid engaging in metaphysical debates and steer clear of defining their approach in terms of nominalism (see Boudon 1996). Boudon sometimes seems to conceive of nominalism as a reductionist theory in Bunge’s sense, incapable of correctly defining the analytical presuppositions of interpretative sociology:

Churches, political institutions, birth rates, nations, climate data, cities, traditions exist just like individuals. It seems difficult to distinguish these two types of entities on the basis of their degree of reality, if this expression means anything. It seems even more difficult to distinguish them on the basis of a causal or temporal priority. (Boudon 1996:378, translation)

Boudon and other contemporary individualistic thinkers’ distrust of nominalism is not taken into account in the work of Bunge and Epstein, since these two philosophers simply equate MI with a form of nominalism, which is a problematic aspect of their perspective.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Moreover, the line of argument they propose does not seem convincing for other reasons. Bunge and Epstein both give a caricatured view of nominalism, as it was historically conceived and defended by individualists who accepted it as the basis of their explanatory approach.

Regarding Bunge’s critique, let me stress that it is incorrect to assert that nominalist thinkers such as Popper, Mises, and Hayek have outright denied the existence and influence of systemic and institutional structures. Rather, they have argued that these structures should not be viewed as Platonic substances that ‘exist independently of the individuals which compose them’ (Hayek 1948:6). In other words, the nominalism of these scholars is a critique of substantialism, not of emergentism, downward causation (understood in non-deterministic terms), or the systemic approach (see Antiseri 2004; Antiseri and Pellicani 1995; Bouvier 2020; Di Iorio 2015:75-120; Di Nuoscio 2018; Nadeau 2016; Pribram [1912] 2008). These thinkers all recognize that social interactions are characterized by irreducible global properties, but they regard these global properties as derivatives of the existence of individuals, not as sui generis entities. From their point of view, there is no contradiction between nominalism and a systemic approach, since these two concepts are two sides of the same coin. In other words, correctly conceived, ontological individualism recognizes that any social phenomenon is characterized by semantically irreducible global properties but denies that these properties create or define a new substance that exists independently of individuals (see Di Iorio and Chen 2019:11-13). Indeed, these global properties disappear if the individuals and their interactions disappear (Popper 1957:82). For example, from this point of view, the tactical organization of a soccer team exists precisely as an emergent property, not as a sui generis entity.

Consequently, Bunge’s thesis, in which the metaphysical position of ontological individualists denies the structural and institutional dimension of social phenomena, amounts to criticizing a caricature, or at best an approximation of the point of view denounced. This passage from Mises is very instructive in this regard:

It is uncontested that in the sphere of human action social entities have real existence. Nobody ventures to deny that nations, states, municipalities, parties, religious communities, are real factors determining the course of human events. Methodological individualism, far from contesting the significance of such collective wholes, considers it as one of its main tasks to describe and to analyze their becoming and their disappearing, their changing structures, and their operation. And it chooses the only method fitted to solve this problem satisfactorily. (Mises [1949] 2004:42)

Epstein’s position is also problematic. Historically, nominalist individualists have never conceived of their ontological conception as a theory of supervenience in the sense specified above (Di Iorio and Herfeld 2017). To maintain that collective entities are not sui generis substances, existing independently of individuals (what individualists mean by nominalism), in no way amounts to asserting that social phenomena are only determined by human factors (ibid). The difference between these two perspectives seems to escape Epstein, who, like Bunge, does not seem to have a satisfactory command of the texts he criticizes. The mundane truth that social phenomena are also influenced by material factors is clearly reflected in the theoretical work of individualists, as well as in the empirical explanations they have offered (see Bouvier 2015:574). For example, for the members of the Austrian school of economics, who all endorse the subjectivism of value, the scarcity of a metal affects its price and, consequently, the allocation of resources and the economic structure of production (Hayek 1948:77-91). Epstein’s mistake therefore seems to be to confuse the nominalism of the individualists with a naive idea that they never defended: the *reductionist* theory according to which any aspect of social life should be explained causally in terms of individual properties. As I have pointed out, the nominalism of individualists must be seen as the idea that social explanations, including the analysis of the influence of physical factors on sociological and economic phenomena, cannot be based on the tendency to hypostatize social groups by treating them as substances. However, respecting this ontological rule does not prevent considering the causal role of physical properties at the social level. As the nominalist Hayek (1952:25) puts it, according to MI, the social sciences deal with not only ‘the relations between man and man’, but also with ‘the relations between men and things’. Contrary to what Epstein writes, according to this approach, the social supervenes on both individual and non-individual properties.

**Conclusion**

As Nathalie Bulle (2018:1) rightly states, the ‘importance of . . . MI . . . for explanation in the social sciences and the breadth of controversy surrounding it are only equaled by the misunderstandings of which it has been, and still is, the object’. Indeed, as we have seen in the previous sections, the widespread tendency to interpret MI as a reductionist theory that should be discarded is not valid. The call to replace this approach by a new systemic theory that is neither holistic (and determinist), nor individualist (in the sense of reductionist) seems to be ill-suited since MI is, by its very nature and because of its history, anti-reductionist and systemic.

The confusion that persists today about MI in philosophy depends in large part on the fact that in this field, thinking about social science methodology has often become too abstract and self-referential, that is detached from the intellectual debates of the past and of the detailed analysis of the empirical explanations proposed by the classic social scientists. During the last few decades, the study of the reductionism/anti-reductionism dichotomy has acquired a disproportionate role within the Anglo-American analytic philosophy of the social sciences, but it is difficult to justify the importance it is accorded from the point of view of the concrete and historical dimension of the research (Bulle 2018). Indeed, as Raymond Boudon (1971:1-4) explained, the structural approach is quite simply indispensable and inevitable in the social sciences, given that there is no example of genuinely reductionist explanation and that this type of explanation is quite simply impossible (see also Petitot 2009). Proponents of MI and, in particular, individualistic sociologists, have always been aware of the necessity of systemic analysis. It is true that there is an atomistic version of MI that, instead of being interested in the real world and its constraints, aimed to define abstract and simplified models of society by conceiving the actors in hyper-rationalist terms (see Hayek 1948:1-32). However, even the atomistic thinkers of the Enlightenment, who developed social contract theories based on a strongly idealized conception of individuals and inspired by a mechanistic philosophy close to the ​​semantic reductionism criticized by Lukes and Kincaid, have never been, strictly speaking, reductionists. They had to implicitly consider multiple systemic constraints that affect human action, such as those implied by the rules of language, since they must be respected if one wishes to discuss between co-contracting parties in order to arrive at the definition of a social contract (see Di Iorio 2015:91,92).

In this chapter, I have considered the relationship between MI and reductionism by showing that there are roughly two types of reductionist interpretations of MI. I have analyzed and criticized the interpretation of MI in terms of psychological reductionism as well as that in terms of semantic reductionism. In addition, I have clarified that the latter of these interpretations of MI has two variants: one nominalist and the other anti-nominalist.

**References**

Agassi, J. (1960). Methodological Individualism. *The British Journal of Sociology* 11(3):244-270. doi:10.2307/586749.

Agassi, J. (1975). Institutional Individualism. *The British Journal of Sociology* 26(2):144-155. doi:10.2307/589585.

Antiseri, D. (2004). *La Vienne de Popper*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.

Antiseri, D. and Pellicani, L. (1995). *L’Individualismo Metodologico: Una Polemica sul Mestiere dello Scienziato Sociale*. Milano: Franco Angeli.

Archer, M. S. (1995). *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bhaskar, R. (1979). *The Possibility of Naturalism*. Sussex: Harvester.

Boettke, P. and Candela, R. (2015). What Is Old Should Be New Again: Methodological Individualism, Institutional Analysis and Spontaneous Order. *Sociologia* 2:5-14.

Boudon, R. (1971). *Uses of Structuralism*. London: Heinemann.

Boudon, R. ([1977] 1979). *Effets Pervers et Ordre Social*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.

Boudon, R. (1988). Individualisme ou Holisme: Un Débat Méthodologique Fondamental. In Mendras, H. and Verret, M. (Eds.), *Les Champs* *de la Sociologie Française* (pp. 31-45). Paris : Armand Colin.

Boudon, R. (1996). Risposte alla Domande di Enzo Di Nuoscio. In Di Nuoscio, E., *Le Ragioni degli Individui. L’Individualismo Metodologico di Raymond Boudon*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino.

Boudon, R. (2001). *The Origins of Value: Essays in the Sociology and Philosophy of Beliefs*. New Brunswick : Transaction Publishers.

Boudon, R. (2010). *La Sociologie comme Science*. Paris : La Découverte.

Boudon, R. and Bourricaud, F. ([1982] 2004). *Dictionnaire Critique de la Sociologie*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.

Bouvier, A. (2011). Individualism, Collective Agency and the “Micro-Macro Relation. In Jarvie, I. C. and Zamora-Bonilla, J. (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Philosophy of Social Science* (pp. 198-215). London: Sage Publications. Doi:10.4135/9781473913868.

Bouvier, A. (2015). Review of *The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences* by Brian Epstein. *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger*, 140(4):567-594.

Bouvier, A. (2020). Individualism VersusHolism. In Atkinson, P. A. et al. (Eds.). *Sage Research Methods Foundations*. London: Sage Publications.

Bronner, G. (2011). *The Future of Collective Beliefs*. Oxford: Bardwell Press.

Bronner, G. and Géhin, É. (2017). *Le Danger Sociologique.* Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.

Bulle, N. (2018). Methodological Individualism as Anti-Reductionism. *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 19(2):161-184. doi:10.1177/1468795X18765536.

Bulle, N. and Phan, D. (2017). Can Analytical Sociology Do without Methodological Individualism? *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 47(6):1-31. doi:10.1177/0048393117713982.

Bunge, M. (2000). Systemism: The Alternative to Individualism and Holism. *Journal of Socio-Economics* 29(2):147-157. doi:10.1016/S1053-5357(00)00058-5.

Caldwell, B. (2003). *Hayek’s Challenge: An Intellectual Biography of F. A. Hayek*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Campagnolo, G. (2013). *Criticisms of Classical Political Economy: Menger, Austrian Economics and the German Historical School.* London/New York: Routledge.

Campagnolo, G. (2016). The Identity of the Economic Agent — Seen from a Mengerian Point of View in a Philosophical and Historical Context. *Cosmos* *and* *Taxis: Studies in Emergent Order and Organization* 3(2-3):64-77.

Cherkaoui, M. (2006). *Le Paradoxe des Conséquences: Essai sur une Théorie Wébérienne des Effets Inattendus et Non Voulus des Actions.* Paris, Librairie Droz.

Coleman, J. S. (1990). *Foundations of Social Theory.* Cambridge, MA/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Demeulenaere, P. (2000). Individualism and Holism: New Controversies in the Philosophy of Social Science. *Mind & Society* 1(2):3-16. doi:10.1007/BF02512311.

Demeulenaere, P. (2011). Introduction. In Demeulenaere, P. (Ed.), *Analytical Sociology and Social Mechanisms* (pp. 1-30). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Demeulenaere, P. (2015). Methodological Individualism: Philosophical Aspects (pp. 308-313). In Wright, J. D. (Eds.) *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences.* 2nd ed. Oxford: Elsevier. Doi:10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.63050-7.

Di Iorio, F. (2015). *Cognitive Autonomy and Methodological Individualism: The Interpretative Foundations of Social Life.* Dordrecht: Springer:

Di Iorio, F. (2016a). Introduction: Methodological Individualism, Structural Constraints and Social Complexity. *Cosmos and Taxis: Studies in Emergent Order and Organization* 3(2-3):1-8.

Di Iorio, F. (2016b). World 3 and Methodological Individualism in Popper’s Thought. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 46(4):352-374. doi:10.1177/0048393116642992.

Di Iorio, F. and Chen, S.-H. (2019). On the Connection between Agent-Based Simulation and Methodological Individualism. *Social Science Information*, 58(2):1-23. doi:10.1177/0539018419852526.

Di Iorio, F. and Herfeld, C. (2018). Review of *The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences* by Brian Epstein. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 48(1):105-128. doi:10.1177/0048393117724757.

Di Nuoscio, E. (2016). Herbert Spencer and Friedrich von Hayek: Two Parallel Theories. *Cosmos and Taxis: Studies in Emergent Order and Organization* 3(2-3):56-63.

Di Nuoscio, E. (2018). *The Logic of Explanation in the Social Sciences.* Oxford: Bardwell Press.

Dumouchel, P. and Dupuy, J.-P. (Eds.) (1983). *L’Auto-Organisation de la Physique au Politique*. Paris : Le Seuil.

Elder-Vass, D. (2014). Social Entities and the Basis of Their Powers (pp. 39-53). In Zahle, J. and Collin, F. (Eds.), *Rethinking the Individualism-Holism Debate: Essays in the Philosophy of Social Science.* Berlin: Springer.

Elster, J. (1982). Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory: The Case for Methodological Individualism. *Theory and Society*, Jul., 1982, Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 453-482.

Elster, J. (1985). *Making Sense of Marx.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Elster, J. (1989). *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Elster J. (2023). What's the alternative? In Bulle N. and Di Iorio F. (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Methodological Individualism Volume 1*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Epstein, B. (2015). *The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hayek, F. A. (1948). *Individualism and Economic Order*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hayek, F. A. (1952). *The Counter-Revolution of Science: Studies on the Abuse of Reason.* Glencoe: The Free Press.

Hayek, F. A. (1967). *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hayek, F. A. (1978). *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Hayek, F. A. (2011). *Droit, Législation et Liberté.* Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.

Hedström P. and Bearman P. (2009). *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jarvie, I. C. (1972). *Concepts and Society*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Jarvie, I. C. (2001). *The Republic of Science: The Emergence of Popper’s Social View of Science, 1935-1945*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Kincaid, H. (1986). Reduction, Explanation, and Individualism. *Philosophy of Science* 53(4):492-513.

Kincaid, H. (1995). *Philosophical Foundations of the Social Sciences: Analyzing Controversies in Social Research.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kincaid, H. (2017). Philosophy Without Borders, Naturally: An Interview with Harold Kincaid. *Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics* 10(1). doi:10.23941/ejpe.v10i1.281.

Kincaid, H. and Zahle, J. (2019). Why Be a Methodological Individualist? *Synthese* 196(2):655-675.

King, A. (2004). *The Structure of Social Theory.* London: Routledge.

Laurent, A. (1994). *L’Individualisme Méthodologique*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.

Lawson, T. (1997). *Economics and Reality.* London/New York: Routledge.

doi:10.4324/9780203195390.

Lawson, T. (2003). *Reorienting Economics.* London/New York: Routledge.

Little D. (2016). *New Directions in the Philosophy of Social Science*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield International.

Little, D. (1990). *Varieties of Social Explanation: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Social Science*. Boulder: Westview Press. Doi:10.2307/2185667.

Lukes, S. (1968). Methodological Individualism Reconsidered. *The British Journal of Sociology* 19(2):119-129. doi:10.2307/588689.

Lukes, S. (1973). *Individualism*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.

Lukes, S. (2006). *Individualism: New Introduction by the Author*. Lanham, USA: Harper & ECPR Press.

Mandelbaum, M. (1955). Societal Facts. *The British Journal of Sociology* 6(4):305-317. doi:10.2307/587130.

Manzo, G. (2007). Comment on Andrew Abbott/2. *Sociologica* 1(2):1-8. doi:10.2383/24752.

Manzo, G. (2014). Data, Generative Models, and Mechanisms: More on the Principles of Analytical Sociology. In Manzo, G. (Ed.). *Analytical Sociology: Actions and Networks*. Chichester: John Wiley.

Manzo, G. (2015). Macrosociology-Microsociology (pp. 414-421). In Wright, J. D. (Ed.) in vol. 14 of *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Elsevier: Oxford. Doi:10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.32086-4.

Menger, C. ([1883] 1985). *Investigations into the Method of the Social Sciences with Special Reference to Economics.* New York: New York University Press.

Merton, R. K. (1936). The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action. *American Sociological Review* 1(6):894-904. doi:10.2307/2084615.

von Mises, L. (2007). *Theory and History: An Interpretation of Social and Economic Evolution*. Auburn, AL: Mises Institute.

von Mises, L. ([1922] 1981). *Socialism: An economic and sociological analysis.* New York: Liberty Found.

von Mises, L. ([1949] 2004). *Human action: A Treatise on economics.* Auburn, AL: Mises Institute.

Nadeau, R. (2016). Cultural Evolution, Group Selection and Methodological Individualism: A Plea for Hayek. *Cosmos and Taxis: Studies in Emergent Order and Organization* 3(2-3):9-22.

Nemo, P. (1988). *La Société de Droit Selon F. A. Hayek*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.

O’Driscoll, G. P. and Rizzo, M. J. (1985). *The Economics of Time and Ignorance.* Oxford/New York: Basil Blackwell.

Petitot, J. (2009). *Per un Nuovo Illuminismo: La Conoscenza Scientifica come Valore Culturale e Civile.* Milano: Bompiani.

Petitot, J. (2012). Individualisme méthodologique et évolution culturelle. In De Mucci, R. and Leube, K. R. (Eds.). *Un Austriaco in Italia: Studi in Onore di Dario Antiseri*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino.

Petitot, J. (2016). Complex Methodological Individualism. *Cosmos and Taxis: Studies in Emergent Order and Organization* 3(2-3):27-37.

Petroni, A. M. (1991). L’Individualisme Méthodologique. *Journal Des Économistes Et Des Études Humaines* 2(1):25-61.

Pettit, P. (1996). *The Common Mind: An Essay on Psychology, Society, and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Doi:10.1093/0195106458.001.0001.

Picavet, E. (2015). Methodological Individualism in Sociology (pp. 9751-9755). In Smelser, N. J. and Baltes, P. B. (Eds.) *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences.* 2nd ed. Elsevier: Oxford. Doi:10.1016/B0-08-043076-7/02022-2.

Picavet, E. (2018). Rationality and Interpretation in the Study of Social Interaction in Bronner, G. and Di Iorio, F. (2018). *The Mystery of Rationality: Mind, Beliefs and the Social Sciences.* Cham: Springer.

Popper, K. R. (1957). *The Poverty of Historicism*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Popper, K. R. (1963). *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Popper, K. R. ([1945] 1966a). *The Open Society and Its Enemies, vol. 1: The Spell*

*of Plato.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Popper, K. R. ([1945]: 1966b). *The Open Society and Its Enemies, vol. 2*: *The High*

*Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx and the Aftermath*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Popper, K. R. ([1977] 2003). *The Self and Its Brain: An Argument for Interactionism.* London: Routledge.

Pribram, K. ([1912] 2008). La Genesi della Filosofia Sociale Individualistica. In Grillo, E. (ed.) *L’Individualismo nelle Scienze Sociali*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino (original in German: *Die Entstehung der individualistischen Sozialphilosophie*, Leipzig, C. L. Hirschfeld, 1912).

Rainone, A. (1990). *Filosofia Analitica e Scienze Storico-Sociali.* Pisa: ETS.

Raub, W. (1982). The Structural-Individualistic Approach towards an Explanatory Sociology. In Raub, W. (Ed.) *Theoretical Models and Empirical Analyses: Contributions to the Explanation of Individual Actions and Collective Phenomena.* Utrecht: E.S. Publications.

Raub, W., Buskens, V. and Van Assen, M. (2011). Micro-Macro Links and Microfoundations in Sociology. *The Journal of Mathematical Sociology* 35(1-3). doi:10.1080/0022250X.2010.532263.

Ruben, D.-H. (1985). *The Metaphysics of the Social World.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Sawyer, R. K. (2002). Nonreductive Individualism. Part I: Supervenience and Wild Disjunction. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 32(4):537-559. doi:10.1177/004839302237836.

Sawyer, R. K. (2003). Nonreductive Individualism. Part II: Social Causation. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 33(2):203-224. doi:10.1177/0048393103252207.

Schutz, A. (1998). *Éléments de Sociologie Phénoménologique* (introduction and translation by Thierry Blin). Paris : L’Harmattan.

Simmel, G. ([1892] 1977). *The Problems of the Philosophy of History: An Epistemological Essay*. New York: The Free Press.

Udehn, L. (2002a). *Methodological Individualism: Background, History and Meaning*. London: Routledge.

Udehn, L. (2002b). The Changing Face of Methodological Individualism. *Annual Review of Sociology* 28:479-507. doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.28.110601.140938.

Weber, M. (1946). *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Gerth, H. H. and Wright Mills, C. (Eds.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Weber, M. ([1922] 1978). *Economy and Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Weber, M. ([1953] 2005a). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* London/New York: Routledge.

Weber, M. ([1920] 2012). Letter to Robert Liefmann 9 Mars 1920. In Brunn, H. H. *Max Weber: Collected Methodological Writings* (translation by H. H. Brunn). London/New York: Routledge.

Wippler, R. (1978). The Structural-Individualistic Approach in Dutch Sociology: Toward an Explanatory Social Science. *The Netherlands Journal of Sociology* 14(2):135-155.

Zahle, J. and Collin, F. (Eds.) (2014). *Rethinking the Individualism-Holism Debate: Essays in Philosophy of Social Science*. Dordrecht: Springer.

1. An earlier and partly different version of this chapter was published in French in a special issue of *L’Année Sociologique* (2020/1. Vol. 70, pp. 97-128) guest-edited by Nathalie Bulle. I would like to thank her and the other participants of the conference ‘L’individualisme méthodologique aujourd’hui’, organized in June 2019 at the French School of Rome, for their valuable comments on this chapter. I would also like to express my gratitude to Jean Petitot and three anonymous referees for their constructive suggestions.Most of this text was translated from the French by Jennifer Clark. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For reasons that will be specified in this section, I consider the dichotomy developed by Udehn between structural individualism, which he conceives as a novel and recent invention within the framework of sociology, and traditional individualism of the psychologistic-type (for example Weber) to be erroneous. Traditional sociological individualism does not seem to me to be psychologistic or anti-structural. The expression *structural* *individualism* is sometimes used in a sense that is slightly different from that given by Udehn, that is, to refer to the non-atomist individualism of sociologists and to distinguish it from the atomist individualism of orthodox economics (see for example Hedström and Bearman 2009; Manzo 2014). I have no problem with this kind of use of the concept of structural individualism and even recognize that it may have some practical utility. My analysis has simply aimed to show that, historically, anti-atomist and anti-reductionist individualism is not a recent invention. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. That said, it is necessary to note that when he refers to collective entities, Boudon often seems to develop anti-realistic arguments accepted by ontological nominalists, for whom these are pseudo-entities. He writes, for example, that MI ‘on principle refuses to treat a group as an actor that, like the individual, is endowed with an identity, a conscience and a will’ (Boudon 1988:35, translation). His position on nominalism seems to me to be characterized by a certain ambiguity. The few lines he devotes to ontological problems seem to sketch a vision that is not entirely incompatible with the interpretation of nominalism defended in the work of ontological individualists and that is analyzed in the subsequent part of the section. This interpretation of nominalism is rather different from that advanced by Bunge, which seems more or less accepted by Boudon when he expresses his distrust vis-à-vis nominalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)