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Methodological Individualism

and Methodological Localism: A Discussion

with Daniel Little

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Daniel Little (born 1949) is chancellor emeritus and professor of philosophy

at the University of Michigan-Dearborn as well as professor of sociology

at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He is one of the most influen-

tial living thinkers in the field of the philosophy and methodology of the

social sciences and has written extensively on topics such as social explana-

tion, Marx, the philosophy of history, organizational dysfunction, and the

ethics of economic development. He has also provided a relevant contribu-

tion to the individualism-holism debate. Little (2012a, pp. 10, 12) rejects

holism and praises an “an actor-centered approach to social explanation” on

the ground that the methodological requirement of “microfoundations” for

causal and structural claims is “a universal requirement on valid sociological

research” (ibid., p. 12; see also Little, 2014). However, he partly questions the assumptions of methodological individualism because, in his opinion, this

approach is committed to “reductionism” (Little, 2016, p. 78) in the sense

that it considers individuals to be “a-social” because it does not take into

account structural and socio-culturally variable constraints on action (ibid.).

According to Little, methodological individualism is the view that “social

explanations must be couched in terms of the laws of individual psychology”

(1991, p. 192). He suggests rejecting this approach in favor of “method-

ological localism,” an orientation that combines microfoundationalism with

anti-reductionism (Little, 2014, p. 55): “providing microfoundations for a

social fact does not mean the same as reducing the social fact to a collection

of purely individual facts” (Little, 2016, p. 79).

According to Little (1991, p. 183), methodological individualism consists

of three related but distinct claims: an ontological thesis, “a thesis about

the meaning of social concepts, and a thesis about explanation.” In his

opinion, the ontological thesis, which states that “social entities are nothing

but ensembles of individuals,” is trivially “true,” while the two other claims

are inadmissible (ibid., pp. 183–184). According to the meaning thesis, social

concepts must be definable via a “meaning reduction,” i.e., “in terms that

refer only to individuals” (pp. 185–186). The problem with this claim is that

this is impossible because social concepts cannot be defined using solely a

strictly individualist vocabulary, i.e., without referring to “social institutions

and social relations” (ibid., p. 185). The thesis about explanation contends

that “all social facts and regularities must ultimately be explicable in terms

of facts about individuals” (ibid., p. 186). Little (ibid., pp. 186–187) argues

that it is equally mistaken given the causal role played by the “emergent

properties” in social explanation.

For Little (2016, p. 139), while methodological individualism is incom-

patible with any kind of emergent causality, methodological localism is

supportive of the idea of “weak emergence” as opposed to that of strong emer-

gence because, as implied by the above, it “allows that the emergent factor

is amenable to microreductive explanation.” In his view, a major problem

with methodological individualism is that, since “social phenomena super-

vene upon individual phenomena,” but are not reducible “to individual-level

concepts and explanations,” methodological individualism fails to recognize

the relative “autonomy of the social” from individual facts (ibid., p. 195; see

also Little, 2016, pp. 118, 128). All “social facts are embodied in the states

of mind and behavior of individuals…but…some social facts (institutions,

social practices, systems of rules) have explanatory autonomy independent

from any knowledge we might be able to provide about the particular ways in

which these facts are embodied in individuals” (ibid., p. 128). In other words,

ensembles “sometimes have system-level properties that exert causal powers

with regard to their own constituents” (ibid., p. 143). In Little’s opinion, the

existence of these irreducible systemic effects is “a point in favor of a modest

holism” (ibid.).

Within Little’s theoretical framework, the “idea of relative explanatory

autonomy” of the social is related to the claim that, while micro-foundation

is in principle always available, it is not always necessary: “mid-level system

properties are often sufficiently stable that we can pursue causal explanations

at that level, without providing derivations of those explanations from some

more fundamental level” (ibid., p. 143). For example, if we have empirical

evidence that independently of the sociocultural context “a certain organiza-

tional structure for tax collection is prone to corruption of the ground-level

tax agents” we can “use that feature as a cause of something else” without

descending at the micro-level and account for the motivations of action (ibid.,

p. 145). This is because the “way an organization is structured makes a differ-

ence to its performance” and it “is a causal power all by itself ” (p. 212).

While methodological individualism is based on the assumption that “social

causation proceeds always and exclusively through actions and interactions of

individuals,” methodological localism rejects it (p. 205). The latter approach

challenges “the exclusive validity of one particular approach to social expla-

nation, the reductionist approach associated with MI and Coleman’s boat.

Rather, social scientists can legitimately aggregate explanations that call upon

meso-level causal linkages without needing to reduce these to derivations

from facts about individuals” (p. 145). Little (p. 205) also thinks that “it is

legitimate to postulate causal powers for structures whose effects are realized

in other meso-level structures,” that is a “meso-meso social causation” such as,

for example, the following one: “decreasing social isolation causes rising inter-

group hostility” (p. 214). In his opinion, this “meso-meso causal connection”

is prohibited by methodological individualism (p. 209). The various versions

of this approach “—microeconomics, analytical sociology, Elster’s theories of

explanation, and the model of Coleman’s boat—presume that explanation

needs to invoke the story of the micro-level events as part of the explanation”

(208). On the contrary, methodological localism “requires that we be confi-

dent that…micro-level events exist and work to compose the meso level; but

it does not require that the causal argument incorporates a reconstruction

of the pathway through the individual level in order to have a satisfac-

tory explanation. This account suggests an alternative diagram to Coleman’s

boat” (pp. 208–209). The causal powers of an organization “having to do

with efficiency, effectiveness, and corruptibility can be disaggregated into the

incentives and behaviors of typical individuals” (p. 212). However, “here is

the key point: we don’t need to carry out this disaggregation when we want to

invoke statements about the causal characteristics of organizations in expla-

nations of more complex social processes” (p. 212). On this reading, there

are not only stable micro-level mechanisms as postulated by methodological

individualists like Peter Hedström and Thomas Schelling, but also “meso-

level causal mechanisms” that are about meso-micro and meso-meso causal

links (p. 214). According to Little (p. 213), while “meso-level social entities

do indeed have causal powers that can legitimately be invoked in social expla-

nations,” it is preferable not to assume that macro concepts are the bearers

of social powers. This is because it is hard to find macro-level regularities,

i.e., stable macro-level features (p. 146). However, he also believes that “large

social factors” can be regarded sometimes as “causes” (pp. 215–216).

In Little’s view, another important difference between methodological

individualism and methodological localism is about action and its presup-

positions. The latter approach, unlike the former, insists on the inherent

“social-ness” of the individual “who is both socially constituted and socially

situated” (Little, 2014, p. 56). Actors are “embedded” within a set of local,

space-variable, “social relations and institutions that create opportunities and

costs for them” (ibid.). Moreover, their ways of thinking and acting “are them-

selves the products of a lifetime of local social experiences,” namely, “the

mechanisms of socialization” (ibid., pp. 56–57). Methodological localism

opposes “much social science theorizing” because the latter “depends on

an over-simple theory of the actor, often involving the Aristotelian ideal of

means-end rationality” (ibid., p. 57). Micro-foundations are crucially impor-

tant for explanation: Social phenomena “depend ultimately” on “actors whose

actions and thoughts make them up,” but actors must be conceived as socially

embedded in the sense clarified above rather than in abstract and atomistic

terms (ibid., p. 58). According to Little (ibid., p. 61), the social sciences need

a more complex and “nuanced” model of action than the Cartesian, utili-

tarian, and instrumental one proposed by the rational choice theory. Instead

of conceiving of the individual as always acting “on the basis of a calculation

of costs and benefit” it is necessary to take into account the normative influ-

ence of the social environment as well as the fact that the presuppositions of

action can be “improvisational,” “habitual,” and largely subconscious, that is

only vaguely understood by the individual (ibid., 67–73).

**Little**: I would like to begin by thanking you, Professors Bulle and

Di Iorio, for engaging with me on these important and difficult issues

concerning the ontology of the social world. Your questions are probing and

insightful, and you have made me realize that there are some areas of unclarity

that have arisen in my own views on “individualism,” microfoundations, and

actor-centered sociology over the forty years that I have been writing about

these ideas. Before turning to your specific questions, I would like to begin

with a very brief outline of my current understanding of these ideas.

The most fundamental idea at work throughout these decades is what

we now call “ontological individualism”—the idea that the social world

depends on the actions, thoughts, mentalities, and interactions of individual

actors. There is no social “stuff ” that is independent of the actions, thoughts,

and interactions of individual actors. Ontological individualism differs from

methodological individualism because it does not presume that social expla-

nations must proceed from facts about individuals to facts about the social

world; it is not a “reductionist” or “generativist” doctrine about social expla-

nation; instead, OI is agnostic about the direction and nature of causal powers

and mechanisms at work in the social world (beyond the ontological fact

that they are ultimately embodied in individual actors). My view of the role

of microfoundations in social explanation has evolved significantly over the

years. At the time of writing The Scientific Marx (1986), I took the view

that claims about social-level properties and causal powers should be accom-

panied by some sort of account of the microfoundations of those properties

and powers—the pathways through which actions and interactions among

individuals lead to the postulated social facts. I came to believe in the 2000s

that this requirement was too strict and failed to correspond to the practice

of many convincing sociological and historical explanations; further, it ruled

out by fiat the possibility that intermediate-level social entities (organizations,

normative systems) might have stable causal powers of their own. I, there-

fore, relaxed my formulation of the microfoundations requirement to the idea

that “the researcher must be confident that microfoundations exist, but does

not need to provide them as part of an explanation.” In this formulation,

the requirement of microfoundations is equivalent to ontological individ-

ualism. The idea of emergence is plainly relevant to this discussion, since

anti-individualist theorists sometimes maintain that “social facts are emer-

gent” relative to individual-level facts. I have tried to distinguish sharply

between weak emergence (“the properties of the ensemble are different from

the properties of the components”) and strong emergence (“the properties of

the ensemble are independent from the properties of the components and

cannot be derived from them”). I recognize that social facts, structures, and

other social arrangements are “weakly emergent,” but they are not strongly

emergent. Finally, I endorse the idea introduced by Jerry Fodor (1974) about

the special sciences concerning “relative explanatory autonomy”: a researcher

in biology, psychology, or sociology can investigate a range of phenomena at

the supra-component level (supra-molecular, supra-neurophysiological, and

supra-individual) without needing to reduce the claims he or she advances to

the underlying level. For the social sciences, this means that one can consis-

tently maintain ontological individualism and the reality and durability of

some social–causal properties (e.g., organizational tendencies, institutional

logics, interactions of systems of norms).

In short, I don’t regard my position as embracing “methodological indi-

vidualism.” I prefer the terms “ontological individualism,” “actor-centered

sociology,” and “methodological localism.” Methodological individualism

is distinct from ontological individualism because it is reductionist, and

because it stipulates that explanations should be generativist in the sense

described above: they should proceed from an account of the circumstances

and motivations of the actors to a derivation of the social outcome to be

explained. Methodological localism asserts that we cannot understand indi-

vidual actors without having some knowledge about their “social constitu-

tion”—the cognitive, affective, and normative frameworks they have absorbed

through their histories of social development—and we cannot understand the

actions of socially constituted individuals without having knowledge of their

“social situation”—the specific constraints, incentives, disincentives, powers,

resources, and behaviors of other actors within which they choose to act.

Now, let me turn to your specific questions.

**Bulle and Di Iorio**: Professor Little, the view that methodological individ-

ualism is flawed because it is a non-systemic approach that assumes that the

social sciences should use solely a vocabulary referring to individual prop-

erties and provide exclusively explanations in terms of these properties is

widespread. It seems to us that this reductionist interpretation of method-

ological individualism is unwarranted in the light of the history and practice

of the social sciences. First, no methodological individualist conceives his/

her approach in terms of a linguistic reductionism that prohibits the use of

certain words and predicates, namely those that refer to non-individual prop-

erties. Second, many advocates of methodological individualism like Menger,

Simmel, Popper, Hayek, Coleman, and Boudon highlight that systemic anal-

ysis is necessary and inevitable in the social sciences and that macro and

meso structural properties affect the micro-level (sometimes these authors

depict the relationship between macro and micro factors in terms of mutual

influence or circular causality: consider, for example, Hayek’s interpretation

of the market in terms of a complex system and Popper’s theory of the

three worlds and their reciprocal influence). Third, there are no examples of

empirical explanation provided by methodological individualists that do not

involve the use of a vocabulary that refers to systemic social properties. Reduc-

tionist explanations in the sense of non-systemic explanations seem simply

impossible to achieve.

Could you clarify why you regard methodological individualism as a non-

systemic approach?

**Little**: I do not use the concept of “system” very often, so perhaps I can

rephrase your question slightly and talk about social structures and meso-

level social entities. My point about the limitations of strict methodological

individualism is that individuals are always involved in “structural and institu-

tional arrangements” (which you might refer to as “systemic”), and therefore

we need to be able to invoke those involvements in explaining collective or

social ensemble outcomes. This is not equivalent to what Hedström (2005)

refers to as “structural individualism” because the analytical sociologists tend

to look at the structural factors as exogenous and fixed; whereas I see them as

interdependent with the actions and interactions of the individuals involved.

This is the “socially embedded” part of methodological localism. Individuals

are also “socially constituted” with ideas, mental frameworks, norms, prac-

tices, and habits that they have gained through the process of culturation and

socialization. My basic point, then, is that the actors who make up a bank,

a labor union, or a racial group are not pure purposive agents; rather, their

current situation and their practical cognition are informed by antecedent

social influences that have impacted them through proximate mechanisms

(family, work environment, schooling, television, …). But in every case, the

“social influences” of structures, ideologies, knowledge frameworks, etc., are

conveyed through interactions with other socially constituted actors who

make up the local school, labor union, activist social organization, etc.

I should also say that defining or refuting methodological individualism

as a doctrine has not generally been a priority for me. In particular, I

am not invested in the question of whether methodological individualism

presupposes the idea of a “pre-social” individual (atomism), though Hobbes,

Menger, and JS Mill seemed to make that assumption (Mill’s version of the

idea was that the science of psychology should allow us to infer the laws

of sociology). Economists and game theorists come close to this view, in the

sense that they define the agent’s purposiveness in terms of a preference struc-

ture and an assessment of risks and benefits of various possible actions. And

as Joseph Heath argues in his article on methodological individualism in the

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Heath, 2020), Popper himself was prone

to a form of psychological reductionism in his arguments for methodological

individualism. An important component of my own advocacy of an “actor-

centered sociology” is emphasis on the fact that actors cannot be reduced to

a short list of abstract and general characteristics (utility functions, satisficing

rules, …). Instead, we need a rich theory of the actor to explain most real

and complex social outcomes.

I agree with your point that social scientists who make use of the idea

of methodological individualism today are not concerned with a semantic

or terminological point—“use only terms definable in terms of individual

psychological states.” Rather, they are concerned with a claim about the

logic of social explanation—“explain social outcomes as the aggregate conse-

quence of individual actions.” That said, the most insistent advocates of

methodological individualism have often made quite stringent assumptions

about what an individual-based explanation can postulate about the indi-

vidual’s mentality. Often the assumptions about the actor that are made by

researchers committed to methodological individualism are extremely thin

and abstract—narrow economic rationality, portable across all social and

cultural contexts. This assumption is shared by economists, game theorists,

and some rational-choice political scientists.

The more important point that distinguishes methodological individu-

alism from other views of social science is a particular view about expla-

nation—the idea that social outcomes must be explained as the aggregate

outcome of individual-level actions. In this respect, methodological indi-

vidualism is a variant of reductionism: the task of the social scientist is to

demonstrate how social features can be “reduced” to facts about the individual

actors who constitute them. Here, “A is reduced to B” means demonstrating

how the properties of A can be fully explained by reference to the properties

of things at the B level. This “bottom-up” model of explanation precludes

a very large volume of excellent sociological research about meso-level enti-

ties—organizations, institutions, systems of norms, racial and gender systems,

and the like. Methodological individualism serves to inhibit and discredit

research done at this meso-level.

In the past decade or so, when I have treated microfoundations and onto-

logical individualism, I have been most concerned to work out an idea about

how the social world works, and how we should try to explain its dynamics

and outcomes. This idea combines the thesis of ontological individualism

and the idea of what I came to call “methodological localism.” This view

expresses the assumptions of an actor-centered approach to social explana-

tion by suggesting that actors are socially constituted and socially situated .

And second, I have argued for a pluralistic approach to social causation

involving lateral and descending social causes (meso-meso causation) as well

as ascending causes from the micro- to the macro-levels. This means rejecting

an important implication of James Coleman’s theory of sociology, expressed

in his “boat” diagram, which is a view that has also become a defining feature

of much analytical sociology: that explanations of the macro must always

take the form of a deduction of the higher level fact from information about

behavior at the micro level. This is the generativist model (Epstein, 2006) that

underlies much of analytical sociology and the methodology of agent-based

models. The explanatory maxim is: “Derive the macro from the micro.” The

idea of microfoundations is something like a “bridge” analysis, through which

we link the macro-level properties of a social ensemble to the intentions

and interactions of the individuals who constitute that ensemble. To provide

microfoundations is to demonstrate how the actions of the individuals aggre-

gate to the social property under study. As noted above in my preliminary

remarks, my adherence to the requirement of the “strong microfoundations

principle” has changed. In The Scientific Marx (1986), I held that social expla-

nations needed to be grounded in microfoundational accounts of the ways in

which individuals brought about the outcomes (perhaps unintentionally). In

more recent years, I have come to recognize that this principle is too strong;

instead, we need simply to be assured that a microfoundational account exists,

without being obliged to provide that account. I like the analogy with mate-

rials science and the causal properties of metals: we do not need to deduce

the properties of an alloy of steel from fundamental physics in order to have

good causal explanations of collapsing bridges.

It is of course true that a narrow generativist account is entirely feasible

for some specific kinds of social outcomes, and constitutes a perfectly legiti-

mate social explanation. This is the ascending strut of Coleman’s boat, and it

underlies the rationale for agent-based models as a kind of social explanation.

My critique of methodological individualism as a comprehensive doctrine is

simply that I reject the view that all adequate social explanations must take

this logical form (from lower level to derivation of higher-level properties),

or tracing out the rising strut of Coleman’s boat. Instead, I advocate for the

idea of actor-centered conceptions of social structures within the theory of

“ontological individualism.”

**Bulle and Di Iorio**: Let’s focus on a specific aspect of your reductionist

interpretation of MI. You hold the individual/society relations in MI to be

comparable to the reductionist approach of the mind in the mind-brain

identity thesis. It seems to us that this comparison is unfair in relation to

MI where individuals are immediately situated at a social level, without the

distinction of two levels of manifestation of individual and social phenomena.

As Gustav Ramström (2018, p. 372) notes in this regard, one cannot compare

the relationship between mental phenomena and neural activity with that

between social phenomena and the individual actions underlying it. Espe-

cially, in the social case, the relationship between individual actions and social

phenomena is inferred from these very actions by the observer (i.e., a “riot”

revolt) and does not involve empirically two different phenomena as in the

neural/mental distinction.

Can you comment on this?

**Little**: I don’t really think the analogy of “neurophysiological level/

mental level” is helpful for philosophy of social science, beyond noting

a parallel between ontological individualism and physicalism. I prefer the

analogy between the social world—composed of social actors—and metals—

composed of fundamental particles. We don’t need to provide a mathematical

model of the micro-physical characteristics of the muons that make up parti-

cles in order to have a good and empirically informed material science. And

likewise, we don’t have to decompose the national United Auto Workers

union from its headquarters in Detroit to its locals around the country to

the social networks and communication pathways through which Detroit-

based executives influence particular actions in Toledo local 000 in order to

have a good sociology of the UAW worker in a Toledo engine plant.

Ramström’s (2018) point seems to be that there is only a nominal differ-

ence between a macro-level description and a micro-level description of the

same set of occurrences. Can we empirically or observationally distinguish

between the social event—the unfolding and dynamics of a specific riot—

from the actions, thoughts, and dispositions of the individuals who make it

up? Are individuals analytically separable from riots in anything like the way

that functioning neurons are analytically separable from the performance of

mental arithmetic? His article seems to suggest that there is only a perspectival

difference between a riot and a collection of riotous individual actors.

This view casts doubt on the reality of levels in the social world altogether.

I considered this idea under the rubric of a “flat social ontology” (Little,

2016), but came to the conclusion that adequate social explanation requires

analysis of causal properties of entities like value systems, organizations, insti-

tutions, labor unions, and social movements—each of which have their own

constitution at the level of interactions of individual social actors. It is hard

to dispute that social things like kinship systems, business firms, and armies

have stable and knowable characteristics that can be studied empirically, and

therefore we shouldn’t adopt an ontology that excludes legitimate topics for

empirical research. The relationship between a social description of a social

event “mob attack on tax office” and a myriad of individual descriptions of

actions in the same setting—“Alice forces a door,” “Bob breaks a window,”

Charles shouts abuse at tax official”—doesn’t seem as direct or transparent in

many other instances of social dynamics. There is a reality to the riot over

and above the actions of the various individuals; this is one of the very inter-

esting things we can learn from McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, Dynamics of

Contention (2001). Moreover, Ramström seems to be off the mark in judging

that “micro-structural” properties are not relevant in the social sciences. if

Alice, Bob, and Charles are involved in a resistance-oriented online chat

group, whereas David, Edward, and Francis are not, this fact is pertinent

to the unfolding of the tax riot. (This is part and parcel of the idea of

methodological localism: the particular social interactions of the actors make

a difference to the social outcome). Further, many social dynamics are the

unintended and unperceived consequences of individual actions. The failure

of a rail strike because of a lack of critical mass of participation is analytically

separable from the individual calculations made by potential strikers who

want the strike to succeed but who weigh private costs against public bene-

fits and choose not to participate. It was a genuine discovery when Mancur

Olson reconstructed the public goods/free-rider problem at the individual

level—even though it was well known that collective actions often fail even

when they serve the interests of the vast majority of a given group.

**Bulle and Di Iorio**: We would like to raise a point in defence of

Ramström’s argument, which we think underlines an essential problem.

Maybe there is a misunderstanding. Ramström does not say that microstruc-

tural properties (relative to the individuals and their interactions) are not

relevant for the social sciences, but that social phenomena do not have

macro-phenomenal expressions and are based on the observation of micro

circumstances. The problem is that there is a widespread confusion in the

literature between the analytical approach of methodological individualism

that considers the micro and macro levels to be relative theoretical constructs

(in the sense that the “social” level refers to sets of individuals and their inter-

actions and the “individual” level implies properties of social nature) and the

empiricist approach of science that is couched in terms of observable levels of

composition (which was developed, for example, by the neopositivists). The

latter approach argues that, from an empirical standpoint, there are social

properties that are clearly distinct from the microstructural properties.

Let’s focus now on a new topic. In your opinion, methodological indi-

vidualists fail to understand that, while a micro-foundation is in principle

always available, it is not always necessary. You stress, for example, that

since some kinds of organization may present system-level properties that are

stable over different contexts and whose micro-level presuppositions are at

least schematically already known and understood, we can invoke the causal

characteristics of these organizations in explanations of more complex social

processes without implementing a micro-foundation.

It seems to us that your view that micro-foundation is not always necessary

is compatible with methodological individualism. As argued by Raymond

Boudon (1998a, p. 173), this approach is micro-foundationalist in the sense

that it requires “explanations without black boxes.” Since there is nothing left

unexplained in the example above, the explanation seems to us individualist.

In The Foundations of Social Theory, following Popper, Coleman (1990 p. 5),

highlights that in his book “there is no implication that for a given purpose

an explanation must be taken all the way to the individual level to be satis-

factory. The criterion is instead pragmatic: the explanation is satisfactory if it

is useful for the particular kinds of intervention for which it is intended. This

criterion will ordinarily require an explanation that goes below the level of

the system as a whole, but not necessarily one grounded in individual actions

and orientations.”

From the standpoint of the analysis of scientific practice, methodological

individualists conform to the principle that it is useless descending to the

micro-level if what happens at this level is already known or it is common-

sensical. Their insistence on the role of micro-level mechanisms must be

regarded more as a criticism of deterministic explanations in terms of holistic

macro-factors than as the idea that it is always necessary to descend to the

micro-level.

Can you provide some further comments on this topic?

**Little**: I’m a bit concerned that your liberalized defense of methodological

individualism deprives the doctrine of its force as a guide to social research

and explanation. It would appear that almost any empirically supported

sociological investigation can be claimed as conforming to methodological

individualism, properly construed. But I disagree with that, because I believe

that MI is committed at its core to the idea that social explanation must

proceed from micro to macro. And I would observe that there is a great

volume of excellent sociological research that does not conform to that model

of explanation. Could a view that systematically explained international poli-

tics purely based on a formal model of a “multi-polar world” be called

“methodological individualist?” Could a Marxist theory of modes of produc-

tion that derives the collapse of feudalism from the system-level properties of

the feudal mode of production alone be called methodological individualist?

My answer intuitively is “no.” Both these claims reject completely the idea

that explanation must proceed from the properties and interactions of the

components to the characteristics of the ensemble or structure.

Now one might say that these are bad examples precisely because the expla-

nations are completely divorced from the situation and actions of individual

actors. So, consider a concrete example. Kathleen Thelen (2004) remarks

upon the resilience of various meso-level political and economic institu-

tions in different countries, including institutions providing for skilled labor

training. And she attributes this resilience and persistence to features of the

political institutions of the countries under study. This is a meso–meso causal

claim. I believe that it is fairly straightforward to sketch out an indication

of what the microfoundations of this claim might look like. But this is not

at all a part of Thelen’s research project. Rather, she remains at the level of

meso-level social structures and forces to explain features of other meso-level

structures. So, confidence in the availability of microfoundations is secure;

but the argument surely is not one that methodological individualists would

embrace.

None of these examples embodies the “explanatory order” commitment

that I believe is key to the doctrine of methodological individualism:

explain social outcomes based on the properties of the components of those

outcomes.

Rather than finding ways of construing methodological individualism as

being compatible with meso-meso explanations, I believe that we are better

served by simply endorsing the view that the fundamental requirement is that

of ontological individualism: all social properties are somehow created by the

actions and interactions of the socially constituted, socially embedded indi-

viduals who make them up. So, at the most abstract level, we must affirm

that “it must be scientifically possible to demonstrate how the properties of

the individuals give rise to the social properties observed”. But all this estab-

lishes is that “microfoundations must be in principle possible” (the “weak

microfoundations thesis”). In order to be confident that this condition is

satisfied in a prospective social explanation, we need to have some idea of

how the microfoundations might work. But we are not required to provide

them, and there is nothing deficient about an explanation that proceeds from

those social properties (properly supported by empirical evidence) to the

feature of another social arrangement we wish to explain. I accept that some

social features can be explained in this micro- to macro-way, but I do not

believe that all social features must be so explained. In particular, I hold that

both descending and lateral causal explanations are possible (meso-micro,

macro-meso, and meso-meso).

**Bulle and Di Iorio**: Let us try to clarify our view. We agree with Raymond

Boudon, who regarded the concept of MI as defining the research prac-

tice of a large number of social scientists because they often explain human

phenomena as either intentionally or unintentionally resulting from under-

standable reasons (Boudon & Bourricaud, 1990, pp. 11–17). For Boudon,

this practice was implemented from the beginning of the empirical social

sciences and even scholars like Marx and Durkheim, who in some of their

writings clearly endorsed a holistic methodology, often provided individualist

explanations (ibid.). There are refined variants of this individualist explana-

tory logic as well as more simplistic and atomistic ones. In any case, it

seems to us that the view that methodological individualism as understood

by its theorists assumes that causality is only micro–macro is falsified by

some historical evidence. Consider, for example, Mises’ and Hayek’s anal-

ysis of the way in which the price structure, which is an emergent effect

that unintentionally results from countless bits of distributed information,

affects the global structure of production (Hayek, 1948, 1973; Mises, 1981).

This analysis is related to the idea that prices retroact on the micro-level,

imposing constraints on agents’ freedom of choice. In analyzing the relation-

ship between the price structure and the structure of production Mises and

Hayek point out that taking into account the detailed motivations of the

agents whose actions produce this relationship is impossible. The fact that

millions of people interacting in a market are involved in economic exchanges

is understandable in terms of common sense: they typically share the willing-

ness to make profits and satisfy their needs. However, the presuppositions of

their actions cannot be known in detail by the economist: for example, the

reason why a particular individual needs to buy a drill at time x on day y

can only be known to this individual. The market dynamics are characterized

by complexity, which means that they are based on the use of a heteroge-

neous distributed information that is related to particular circumstances of

time and place. On the contrary, if the presuppositions of the actions that

produce a particular phenomenon are homogeneous, do not quickly change

and can be known in detail—think of Weber’s historical analysis of the rela-

tionship between the stable reasons of the Calvinist entrepreneurs and the

emergence of capitalism in Northern Europe—the phenomenon under inves-

tigation is simple. The study of market coordination in terms of complexity,

which is related to the assumption that the presuppositions of the market are

dynamic and unknown, is an implementation of a variant of methodological

individualism, that, according to Hayek (1973), is as old as economic science.

Because of market complexity, Mises’ and Hayek’s analysis of the relationship

between the price structure and the structure of production does not focus

on micro-level dynamics. These two scholars acknowledge that the market

presupposes the typical, i.e., shared, and understandable willingness of indi-

viduals to be involved in economic exchanges, but their analysis is mainly

about the relationship between two emergent or macrosystemic phenomena.

However, they consider their approach an implementation of methodolog-

ical individualism because they do not assume that the economic agents are

remote-controlled by holistic social factors that unconsciously and mechan-

ically control their actions. In other words, these two Austrian economists

reject the realist ontology of collective concepts and do not reduce economic

dynamics to environmental determinants. In defining their methodology

Mises and Hayek never argued that the social explanations mandatorily

require a detailed and full understanding of micro-level interactions.

**Little**: This is a useful clarification of methodological individualism. I

would paraphrase your point in terms of the idea of microfoundations. To

say that “changes in the price structure [the price of natural gas relative

to labor, let’s say]” leads to “change in the production process [substitu-

tion of labor-intensive processes for natural-gas powered processes]” is a

macro-macro causal claim. But this claim remains faithful to the premises

of methodological individualism because it is straightforward to provide

the microfoundations at the level of consumers and nature (price struc-

ture) and production managers (production process) that explain why change

in price structure leads to change in production process. In a nutshell,

rational production managers will minimize costs of production by substi-

tuting a lower price input for a higher price input in the production process.

Therefore, the macro-entities have fully individualistic microfoundations.

**Bulle and Di Iorio**: Let’s move to a new topic. In Varieties of Social

Explanation, you link methodological individualism to three different, and

interrelated, claims, ontological (social entities are logical compounds of

individuals), semantic (social concepts refer only to individuals and their

relations and behavior), and epistemological (higher level regularities are

to be reduced to lower level regularities), all three of which imply your

interpretation of MI as essentially justified by the ontological constituents

of the social world. Moreover, you distinguish three major methodological

approaches in the social sciences: causal, rational-intentional, and interpre-

tive . Methodological individualism does not appear at this level of the great

metatheoretical approaches. Its status is not clearly defined in this respect.

Let’s focus on this point.

Causal and interpretative dimension of MI. You associate the perspective

developed by Max Weber with the interpretive approach. The close links

between his interpretive approach and the tradition of methodological indi-

vidualism are well known, but you do not discuss these links since MI for

you represents something else. This is surprising because the tradition of MI

involves interpretive sociology. Raymond Boudon, in order to account for

this, recalls in various places that Max Weber saw in “methodological indi-

vidualism” the basic principle of what he called “comprehensive sociology,”

taking up Weber’s letter to Robert Liefmann in 1920 (quoted in Roth, 1976,

p. 306): “sociology…can only be pursued by taking as one’s point of depar-

ture the actions of one or more (few or many) individuals, that is to say,

with a strictly ‘individualistic’ method.” These Weberian individuals are social

actors integrated in institutions and social structures, let’s not come back to

that. The point is that Weberian comprehensive (or understanding) sociology

is based on MI and that, as such, the great approaches you distinguish find

through MI a joint realization: interpretation refers to the intentions, or even

the motivations of social actors, and the latter is held to be the “causes” of

actions in Weber. Of course, these causes involve situational analysis and

do not engage any determinism. On this subject, you point out that “the

mechanisms that link cause and effect are typically grounded in the mean-

ingful, intentional behavior of individuals,” which, as you know, is a principle

derived directly from MI.

Rational-Intentional dimension of MI . Sometimes, you seem to equate MI

with rational choice, especially the utilitarian model of action, and whereas

you discuss classical examples of MI explanations such as those of Mancur

Olson, Thomas Schelling, game theorists, etc., you do not mention this

link in Varieties. The individualist tradition includes non-utilitarian, non-

instrumental, and non-Cartesian theories of rationality. From the standpoint

of MI, sometimes the individuals act on the basis of utilitarian and clear

reasons, sometimes, they act on the basis of non-utilitarian reasons that,

depending on the case, may or may not be vague and non-demonstrative

in the sense of Perelman’s New Rhetoric, but that are still the causes of action.

For us, MI does not represent a reductionist epistemological approach

justified by the ontological constituents of the social, but participates in the

three major explanatory approaches you consider, and especially has deep and

extensive links with Weber’s interpretive approach.

We wonder in the end whether your idea of MI might not represent a

mere philosophical construct, discussed mainly by social science philosophers,

but never really implemented. If not, do you have specific examples of social

science work that falls under MI as you describe it?

**Little**: In the SEP article on methodological individualism mentioned

above, Joseph Heath (2020) describes methodological individualism in these

terms: “[MI] amounts to the claim that social phenomena must be explained

by showing how they result from individual actions, which in turn must

be explained through reference to the intentional states that motivate the

individual actors.” I believe this is the most common understanding of the

doctrine of methodological individualism, and it is—in this formulation—

a view of the nature of explanation and reduction. Social outcomes must be

explained on the basis of facts about the intentional states of individual actors.

The ontological thesis about individuals and social facts is not methodolog-

ical individualism, but rather ontological individualism. The latter view leaves

it open what social explanations should look like; all it requires is that the

explanations we offer should be compatible with their being embodied in the

actions, intentions, and interactions of individual actors. It is my view that

the large theories in sociology offered by figures like Durkheim, Weber, Marx,

and others are generally compatible with ontological individualism—even

though they disagree about the nature of social explanation.

As a philosopher of social science, my primary concern is to focus on

how best to “understand society” (which includes both causes and mean-

ings), and how to avoid various apriori slips that lead to bad social research.

This is the reason I think it is important to always keep in mind the idea

of an “actor-centered social world” and an actor-centered sociology. It helps

us avoid the error of reifying social structures (like modes of production or

markets), and to recognize the inherent heterogeneity and plasticity of the

social world. Because people make history, but within circumstances not of

their own choosing, there will always be variations, path-dependencies, adap-

tations, unintended crises, and the like; and it is incumbent upon sociologists

and historians to use their research methods to discover some of the partic-

ular pathways and factual/social circumstances that lead to one outcome or

another. This approach to social and historical inquiry is inherently pluralistic,

encompassing as it does meanings, cultural frames, institutional constraints,

educational arrangements, and artifactual and environmental conditions.

Neither Marx’s theories of the economic structure, nor Weber’s idea of

meaning-seeking individuals, nor Durkheim’s ideas about moral conscience

can serve as the basis of general theories of social order and change—because

inherently, there can be no such general theories.

Return for a moment to Kathleen Thelen’s account of the stability and

change of skilled-labor training institutions in Britain and Germany. Thelen’s

account takes political and economic factors in both countries as important

causal influences on the nature of these institutions, without taking the effort

to show how individual-level workers, politicians, and business owners played

various n-person games in supporting or undermining the existing set of

institutions. But her account is plainly compatible with an actor-centered

understanding of the politics and institutional arrangements of both coun-

tries—as well as the contingency and path-dependence of the shape that those

institutions eventually took.

A core assumption in strict MI is that individual actors have an orderly

basis for action (rational preferences, habits, cultural practices, meanings,

…), and that a good social explanation must take the form of a deriva-

tion of the explanandum from the aggregated actions of these individual

actors. It is, in its purest form, the generativist paradigm (Epstein, 2006).

As such, it is not inherently rational-choice, economistic, game-theoretic, or

intepretivist. Whatever one’s theory of the actor, narrow MI requires that

we explain social outcomes as the aggregate (often unintended) outcome of

actors carrying out their action framework in specified circumstances. So I

agree with the thrust of your question: MI can be associated with interpreta-

tive approaches (Weber), rational-choice or economistic approaches, or even

Marxist approaches to explaining the social world. My persistent source of

disagreement has to do with the direction of causation that is postulated by

MI: whereas methodological individualism postulates that causation proceeds

from ensembles of purposive actors upward to higher level social structures,

I maintain that causation flows in all directions—upward, downward, and

laterally.

**Bulle and Di Iorio**: Regarding the causal role of social entities, it is inter-

esting to evoke the sociology of Emile Durkheim, whom you (1991, Varieties)

present as a “committed social holist,” which you interpret to mean “a critic

of methodological individualism.” Durkheim does not, of course, refer to the

MI approach, which was still not well known under this name, and seems

to ignore Weberian sociology. Durkheim, however, openly opposes psychol-

ogism in The Rules of Sociological Method , as well as introspective methods

in the social sciences. Durkheim’s approach, opposed to psychologism and to

any form of methodological reductionism, is not wholly incompatible with

MI as understood in the sociological tradition that is the subject of this hand-

book. If we take Joseph Agassi’s (1975, p. 145) definition of methodological

holism (opposed to MI) as an approach in which individual ends and deci-

sions are created by social forces, or Boudon’s (2007, 46; 75) as an approach

that explains individual behavior by forces that are external to individuals,

then Durkheim cannot be called a holist in this sense, especially with regard

to his non-doctrinal work. He holds individual motivations to be socially

constrained and conditioned, but not in a deterministic sense, since in that

case they could not be challenged. More precisely, recourse to the meaning of

action for the actor in MI is not opposed to the idea that our actions are on

the whole normatively performed by our social learning. In this respect, the

question of meaning is not at once problematic, provided that it may become

so when a problem arises for the social actor. Durkheim explains in different

places that when faced with problems or contradictions, the mind awakens

and puts into question received ideas. Moreover, according to Durkheim, the

social environment that is the source of learning is composed, in addition

to material objects, of all the products of the human mind, which Popper

will define as World 3, and of people who represent the active factors of

social transformations, which is compatible with MI. You even recognize

that his analysis of the causes of suicide is “fully consistent with method-

ological individualism” Boudon (1998b), in his Studies in Classical Sociology

notes that Suicide constitutes an application of the understanding method-

ology as defined by Weber (p. 119ff ), with the implementation of a Simmel/

Weber type of abstract psychology (cf. also Boudon 1989 on the analysis of

correlations between suicide cycles and economic cycles).

Your recognition of the conformity of the Durkheimian analysis of suicide

with MI seems to us to reveal a non-reductionist conception of MI that

contradicts the way you formally define it. Can you clarify this point?

**Little**: You are right that my view of Durkheim’s social ontology has shifted

since 1991. I no longer regard Durkheim as a social holist, but rather as

a sociologist who insists on the relative explanatory autonomy of the social

world.

In fact, I take the view that Durkheim’s theories are fully compatible

with—in fact, affirmative of—the premises of ontological individualism,

though not methodological individualism. As argued above, ontological indi-

vidualism does not imply reductionism. Durkheim’s supposed holism is

actually an artifact of his stringent insistence on the separateness of soci-

ology as a science. I believe it is plain in Rules of Sociological Method (1982)

that he endorses the core principle of ontological individualism: “Yet since

society comprises only individuals it seems in accordance with common sense

that social life can have no other substratum than the individual conscious-

ness. Otherwise it would seem suspended in the air, floating in the void”

(Durkheim, 1982, p. 39). There is no fundamental ontological separation

between the “social fact of French politesse ” and the psychological realities of

French individuals. The individuals are shaped by their formative immersion

in these rules as instantiated by their elders, and in turn, go on to shape the

behavior of others. Durkheim makes this clear in his comments about educa-

tion: “Moreover, this definition of a social fact can be verified by examining

an experience that is characteristic. It is sufficient to observe how children

are brought up. If one views the facts as they are and indeed as they have

always been, it is patently obvious that all education consists of a continual

effort to impose upon the child ways of seeing, thinking and acting which he

himself would not have arrived at spontaneously” (Durkheim, 1982, p. 53).

This is precisely what is intended by the phrase “socially constituted,” and the

individual-level mechanisms through which social consciousness is conveyed

to the child are evident. (Note that Steven Lukes appears to agree with this

assessment in his introduction to Rules (Lukes, 1982, p. 17).)

What Durkheim insists upon is about the “autonomy” of social facts. This

is a claim about what we would now call “emergence”—that some properties

of the social ensemble are distinct and separate from the properties of the

individuals who make it up. But this view too is compatible with ontological

individualism. It is uncontroversial, from an actor-centered perspective, that

there are large historical or social forces that are for all intents and purposes

beyond the control of any of the individuals whom they influence. The fact

that a given population exists as a language community of German speakers

or Chinese speakers has an effect on every child born into that population.

The child’s cognitive system is shaped by this social reality, quite indepen-

dently from facts about the child’s agency or individuality. The grammar of

the local language is an autonomous social fact in this context—even though

it is a fact that is embodied in the particular cognitive systems and actions

of the countless individuals who constitute this community. This point is

equally true when we turn to systems of attitudes, norms, or cognitive systems

of thinking. This fact reflects the iterative nature of social processes: individ-

uals incorporate local mores, they reproduce those mores in their own mental

frameworks and actions, they sometimes create innovations in those mores,

and the next generation absorbs the successor locally instantiated system of

mores.

**Bulle and Di Iorio**: Now that the differences in our conceptions of MI

are clear and that it is also clear that, for us, methodological localism and MI

are more epistemologically related than you acknowledge, we would like to

discuss what we consider the real differences between these metatheoretical

approaches. The concerns in the first place are the question of the causal

power of structures as opposed to their causal role which is fully put into

consideration by MI. More precisely, for MI the influence of social structures

on action exists, but it is indirect because it is mediated by the interpretative

skills of the actors.

You write: “I believe that it is perfectly legitimate to attribute causal powers

to meso-level social structures [at the level of groups and organizations] […]

Political institutions exist - and they are embodied in the actions and states

of officials, citizens, criminals, and opportunistic others. These institutions

have real effects on individual behavior and on social processes and outcomes

- but always mediated through the structured circumstances of agency of

the myriad participants in these institutions and the affected society” (Little,

2012b, p. 139; p. 144; 2016). And you write that the theory of microfoun-

dations warns against “magical thinking” in the social sciences, preventing us

from considering that social entities can have causal powers and structures of

their own.

Nevertheless, sometimes you seem to attribute a direct causal power of

social structures to the incorporation, by individuals, of rules and norms

through procedures of inculcation and enforcement, entailing that social

actors are “brought to comply with the rules and norms (to some degree)”

and that the causal power of structures can be treated without the media-

tion of individual actions and interpretations. This causal action may thus

be qualified as “embodied,” like the Bourdieusian habitus, which refers to

dispositions of action underlying normatively regulated social actions that

escape the possibilities of conscious control by social actors. This is consistent

with your defence of a “new pragmatism” emphasizing habits and practice,

and your frequent reference to the notion of “mentality,” which suggests

psychological or moral dispositions, habits of mind, rendering the conscious

“meaning” of action without any real interpretative interest. To illustrate

this “incorporation” of structures, let us borrow an example from Talcott

Parsons’ structuro-functionalism. A social role corresponds, writes Parsons,

to an “internalized object of the actor’s personality”: “When a person is fully

socialized with respect to the system of interaction, it is not as true to say

that the role is something the actor ‘has’ or ‘plays’ as it is to say that it is

something he is.” The process of socialization tends in this way to make

the needs of the social system defined in terms of roles, and the orienta-

tions of individual personalities defined in terms of motivations, coincide.

One knows of course the numerous sociological theories having recourse to

types of embodied structures, culturalisms, structuralisms, neo-Marxisms, etc.

But you do not seem to be a supporter of this type of explanation based on

dogmatic interpretative postulates.

Can you clarify in which sense individual habits of mind can be caused

by social structures in a way that cannot be mediated in principle by the

interpretative skills of individuals? Can you also provide some examples of

social structures that cause the individual habits of mind in this mechanical

way? You seem to think that sometimes the influence of social structures on

individuals cannot be accounted for through an ideal–typical approach that

regards human action as necessarily related to the (either implicit or explicit)

understandable meaning that social actors attach to it. Is this correct?

**Little**: I’m not entirely sure I understand the question clearly. Let’s take

the subjective actor first. I do affirm that actors are “subjective”—that is,

they are purposive, norm-sensitive, meaning-seeking, and affective making

use of specific cognitive resources to arrive at a plan of action. Actors embody

subjectivity and choice. If the question postulates that actors have embodied

governing “scripts” from surrounding ideological/normative fields—“Protes-

tant ethic,” “bourgeois rationality,” “patriarchal domination,” …, and that

their actions are not chosen but mechanically determined by these scripts,

then I would demur. This is not to deny that individual mentalities are shaped

and influenced by the ambient ideologies, value systems, and stylized schemes

of action within which they develop; that is quite obviously true. What I deny

is the idea of ideology as an “iron cage” from which the actor cannot escape.

Like James Scott in Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts

(1990), I would argue that the young person raised within Italian capitalism

can nonetheless develop a critical perspective on property and domination.

He or she is influenced by the dominant ideology; but other influences are

also present, and the individual actor has a capacity to reflect critically about

the assumptions about the social world that she will accept, question, or

reject. And the question of how to either accept or reject those assumptions

is itself an active choice—to doff the cap to the landlord, to make quiet fun

of the landlord’s uncouth behavior, or to engage in a bread riot. I find E.P.

Thompson’s Making of the English Working Class (1966) to be an exemplary

approach to ideology and class.

Let me turn to your very good question about how “structures” influence

personal identities and mentalities in ways not chosen or even recognized

by the individual. Let’s take the example of gender identity and the fashion

industry. The fashion industry and commercial enterprises like department

stores in the 1950s in America arrived at very specific standards of female

and male fashion and attractiveness. Whenever girls and women would visit

Macy’s department store they would be immersed in examples, both blatant

and subliminal, about what a woman should look like and how she should

behave. The color of clothing, the body type to which clothing was best

suited, the use of cosmetics—all of these standards of “being an attrac-

tive woman” were written into the experience of shopping. Further, there

were specific causal influences leading to this genderized treatment of the

public; marketing specialists had deliberate strategies for selling products and

maximizing revenues that turned on marshalling these cues. This gender-

ized experience was repeated on television and movies and in the behavior of

other men and women, and had unchosen effects on the gender identity of

girls and women. Similar examples could be given concerning racial identity,

rural identity, or even criminal identity (as Diego Gambetta demonstrates in

Codes of the Underworld: How Criminals Communicate ). We could consider

different examples taken from literature, from the Odyssey to the 1952 film

High Noon, that were influential in shaping Greek and American ideas of

masculine courage.

**Bulle and Di Iorio**: Let’s discuss more precisely the distinctions between

MI and methodological localism with regard to the rationality of individ-

uals. A fundamental difference is that you are not systematically concerned

with the meaning of action for the social actor, which is made clear by

your recourse to a new pragmatism, and to psychological principles that

do not necessarily rely on the conscious activity of individuals and refer,

for example, to habits and mentalities. You (2011) specify that “mech-

anisms through which social identities and mentalities are transmitted,

transmuted, and maintained are varied; inculcation, imitation, and common

circumstances are central among these,” which are processes that do not

engage the reflection of individuals. And, even if you write that “ulti-

mately, all social phenomena are the result of agents acting for their

own reasons,” this recognition has for you an ontological and not a

methodological value. In your presentation of methodological localism on

your blog (https://understandingsociety.blogspot.com/2008/11/what-is-met

hodological-localism.htmethodologicallocalism), a formula that summarizes

methodological localism is “the ‘molecule’ of all social life is the socially

constructed and socially situated individual, who lives, acts, and develops

within a set of local social relationships, institutions, norms, and rules […]

the individual is formed by locally embodied social facts, and the social facts

are in turn constituted by the current characteristics of the persons who make

them up.”

What is, in the end, the meaning of agency in methodological localism?

Is the individual in question completely penetrated by the “social” (what-

ever that may be) or does he keep a minimum of autonomy, of distance

from the social of which he is an active stakeholder? Or to say it in a more

direct way: is the individual in question absorbed and formatted by the social

which pre-exists him, or does he take part in the construction of the social

which builds him? What is his capacity to distance himself from his “social

construction?” This is a question about the relationship between agency and

structure that has been much discussed, but which cannot be answered in

a way that is methodologically vague. This indefiniteness in methodological

localism seems to us to support the forms of methodological or causal holism

that we mentioned earlier, but in a roundabout and unacknowledged way.

Are we wrong?

**Little**: It is true that methodological localism is “indefinite,” in the sense

that it is not a specific empirical analysis. It is rather a mid-level ontological

picture of the social world. It implies, among other things, that we make a

huge conceptual mistake when we make general statements such as: “Islam in

America is a patriarchal force in the Muslim community,” “Southerners are

white-supremacist,” or “university professors are liberals indoctrinating their

students.” These statements are all faulty because they assume homogeneity

whereas heterogeneity is the rule. To know how Islam works in America,

we need to consider a range of connected Muslim communities (Dearborn,

Chapel Hill, Los Angeles, Denver), and study each as a connected network

of believers, Imams, students, parents, etc., to know how racial attitudes have

proliferated from the Jim Crow period to the present, we need to study

specific locales, from Lowndes County to Asheville. What we will find in

each case is heterogeneity, conveyed by specific local institutions, leaders, and

neighborhood activists who have influenced, transformed, and transmitted

a set of practices and values. And there will be variation across each of these

kinds of groups across different regions and cities. So methodological localism

is “definite” in a particular sense: it recommends that the researcher should

study the local, community-level mechanisms and institutions through which

a value system is conveyed and changed. And it is anti-holist in a specific

sense as well: it casts doubt on the idea that there are “ruling” aggregate-level

structures that determine local arrangements, beliefs, and behaviors. Rather,

we must always work to trace out the pathways of influence that extend

from “national” organizations to regional and local organizations, down to

individual members of various communities.

My view of what we need in a “theory of the actor” is fundamentally

richer than what is offered by rational choice theory, neoclassical economics,

or analytical sociology. Here are some questions that I proposed that can

help clarify what is needed in a theory of the actor; fundamentally, it

means we need to consider meanings, emotions, loyalties, commitments,

purposes, plans, thought processes, heuristics, modes of reasoning, knowledge

frameworks, and learning … (Understanding Society 10/28/2011).

1. How does the actor represent the world of action—the physical and

social environment? Here, we need a vocabulary of mental frameworks,

representational schemes, stereotypes, and paradigms.

2. How do these schemes become actualized within the actor’s mental

system? This is the developmental and socialization question.

3. What motivates the actor? What sorts of things does the actor seek to

accomplish through action?

4. Here too, there is a developmental question: how are these motives

instilled in the actor through a social process of learning?

5. What mental forces lead to action? Here, we are considering things like

deliberative processes, heuristic reasoning, emotional attachments, habits,

and internally realized practices.

6. How do the results of action get incorporated into the actor’s mental

system? Here we are thinking about memory, representation of the

meanings of outcomes, regret, satisfaction, or happiness.

7. How do the results of past experiences inform the mental processes leading

to subsequent actions? Here, we are considering the ways that memory and

emotional representations of the past may motivate different patterns of

action in the future.

Different theories of the actor provide different answers to these questions.

Most notable in this listing of questions is the attention that is given to the

importance of cognitive and cultural aspects of the actor’s frame, and the

important degree to which these features are socially and historically specific.

Once again, thank you, Nathalie and Francesco, for the thoughtful analysis

that you have offered of the domain of social ontology in which we all share

an interest, and the very interesting and stimulating questions that you have

formulated.

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