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Comment on Andrew Abbott/3

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Comment on Andrew Abbott/3

by Tommaso Vitale

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As usual, Andrew Abbott helps social scientists to improve their approach to empirical work, suggesting witty remarks on sensitive aspects of social theory. His paper considerably encourages us to advance and fill the gap between social theory and empirical research. Glad of this opportunity to dialogue with Abbott, I will stress my comments in the form of questions, trying also to open some new heuristic suggestions. A point, the latter, that we know Abbott [2004] is particularly keen about.

On Micro-foundations and Interaction Mechanisms

The mechanism position proposed by Hedström and Swedberg [1998] combines different foundational principles: the analytical idea of dissection, the pursue of explanation, an orientation towards abstraction and a strong reference to a theory of action. Surely, the Hedström and Swedberg position is not the only one in social sciences that valorises an explication based on mechanisms. Another well-known research program that makes reference to (generative) mechanisms is the “contentious politics” approach launched by Douglas McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly [2001] and largely influential in political studies. On the whole, explanation by mechanisms does not necessarily involve either an individualistic perspective or a micro-founded one [Ballarino 2005]. The distinctiveness of the Hedström and Swedberg position is to be deeply influenced by the work of James Coleman, i.e. to situate itself within methodological individualism.

Abbott prefers to underline and criticise the place and relevance of rational choice in the mechanism position, and to dig into the advancements of methodological individualism that the Hedström and Swedberg proposal implies. However, it seems to me that Abbott does not fully recognise that Hedström and Swedberg develop methodological individualism *to better take into account structural constraints* [Hedström 2005]. Following the well-known Coleman's Boat schema, the Hedström and Swedberg proposal aims not to cancel supra-individual dimensions from explanation processes but to underline the impossibility of casting an explanation *without recurring also* to some form of causality enacted by interactions at a micro level [Barbera 2004].

On the Relational Character of the Explanatory Process

There is certain panoply of relational approaches. Let us first consider the relational position of Pierre Bourdieu. The affinity and differences with the paradigm built by Pierre Bourdieu are acknowledged and well documented by Abbott [2003] himself. If we look at Abbott's works on profession [Abbott 1988] or on the history of sociology [Abbott 2001a], we see how he insists "on what happens at the frontiers between different bodies of expertise" [Dezalay 1992, 38]. In a different way, in Bourdieu's relational sociology, especially after the turning point represented by *La distinction* [Bourdieu 1979], the key concept of "field" is a "given thing, changing in the mechanical, structural manner produced by the successive oppositions" [Abbott 2005a, 7]. Bourdieu's relational theory has become increasingly static, lacking the possibility of history, "the degree to which all structures, however small or large, must ford the desperate waters of the present on their way into the future" [*ibidem*].

On the contrary, the relational position outlined by Abbott in this paper, and highly developed in his successive works [2001b; 2003; 2007] tries to sum and combine two possible meanings of the adjective "relational": structural and interactional. Abbott does this in a very distinctive way. As he explicitly says in the paper, the relational view implies "that the meaning of an action is comprehensible only when it is situated in social time and place". In this sense, Abbott's relational view focuses on the meaning of an action and takes for granted that it is not absolute: it emerges from its relations with other actions.

Notably, for Abbott the meaning of an action is defined 1) temporally, within sequences of events [Abbott 1992], and 2) structurally, as he says in the paper, as a "vertex in a synchronic ensemble of actions". We can say that, according to Abbott, interactions allow to articulate and bring together structure and temporality, which

was exactly the missing point in Bourdieu's theory of fields. The clever example of college choice plainly proves it.

This is a very important result for sociological theory. However it seems to me that in Abbott's works the search for interaction and identity is coupled with the risk of missing an important element that, conversely, was strongly stressed in Bourdieu's work. In my opinion, in Abbott's paper the hard side of the social world, made by power relationships between actors, and obviously among cliques, is not completely emphasised. I am sure that, at least partly, this is partly accountable to the fact that length of this paper does not allow to present all the levels of analysis arguably developed by Abbott [on this point, see for instance Abbott 2005b]. Partly, however it also depends on the fact that some points are underdeveloped in Abbott's view.

Let us briefly consider the main example that Abbott offers us. I completely agree with Abbott's argument: college choice is not just a matter of individuals making decisions: college choice is "a language by which cliques talk to cliques." Of course, Abbott clarifies that when people create their identities via college choice, they do "not have completely free hands in the process." This implies that analysis should begin by describing the social structure of choices, then it should try to understand the situational conditions in which a clique attains the capacity to affect, shape and/or determine the choices of its constituents.

My main criticism is that Abbott does not elaborate a language that distinguishes the different kinds of devices that support and structure interaction. In fact, I guess that to reinforce and refine relational explanations we have to consider what are the "tests" actors face up to, and deal with within the configuration of interactions. I think that for the relational view it could be useful to look at the approach developed in 1999 by Boltanski and Chiapello [and, beforehand, by Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991]. This approach comes to my mind simply because it is one of the most eminent attempts to escape from the limits of Bourdieu's tradition, exactly on the points singled out by Abbott himself.

On Legitimacy

Let us consider interactions as supported by tests where people confront themselves and their identities, deciding who they want to be, who they want affiliate with and who they want to distinguish from. Following this definition, we can say that interactions, and also interactions among cliques, can be institutionalised. A test is a

kind of situation that performs an order among participants, like a school entry test that produces a hierarchy of admission.

As Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello [1999] said, a test is always a test of strength. Yet a test can be considered to be legitimate as long as strengths are being measured according to the tenets of the particular order of worth within which it falls [Boltanski and Thévenot 1991; Stark 2000]. A legitimate test must always test something that has been already defined, presenting itself as a *test of something*: for example, in college a history testing device is arranged to verify the knowledge of history and not to call upon the use of any other kind of strength (social capital, reputation, family belonging, economic capital, beauty, and so on).¹ By contrast with a legitimate test, “it is acceptable in a test of strength to mobilize any and all kinds of strength. Nothing is specified beforehand. Anything goes, as long as it is crowned with success. In a legitimate test, on the other hand, everything is not possible” [Boltanski and Chiapello 2005].² In this formulation, tests of strength and legitimate tests should not be constructed as standalone entities which exist in opposition to one another. There is a continuum between the two, leading to a situation in which tests are seen as being more or less fair [Boltanski, Chiapello and Vitale 2007].

It seems to me that the main contribution of Boltanski and Chiapello’s approach is to force us to re-introduce a sensibility into legitimacy processes when we construct our explanations. In my opinion, there is something missing both in mechanism and in relational positions: it is the problem of legitimacy, as Max Weber posed it. Legitimizing processes are not stressed in analytical approaches. Methodological individualism expelled the issue, its reference to Weber as founding father notwithstanding. Moreover, most relational views refer to Simmel without considering his position on legitimacy. Generally speaking, reflection on legitimacy seems to be debarred from approaches that look directly at patterns of activity, as Abbott [1992; 1995] says, moving “from causes to events,” and involving methods aimed at structural patterns,

¹ Whereas people have to face a legitimate test, actions are publicly judged by other people, basing upon certain explicit and acknowledged principles of equivalency [Boltanski and Vitale, 2006], many of which are legally enforced. These judgment criteria are orders of worth, kind of social *conventions* that transcend the confrontational situation [Borghi and Vitale 2006]. In my judgment this implies that such conventions can be envisaged regardless of the specific situations in which they are acted out. This is a typical structuralist position (structuralist *à la* Lévi-Strauss) that I am not sure Abbott will admit, even if his development of a “lyrical sociology” [Abbott 2007] seems to go, surely with important differences, in the same direction.

² During tests of strength, the forces acting on the situation are completely immanent, depending on local circumstances, and this does not require anyone to make a judgment. No external social convention is mobilised and relationships among actors are flows which require just a limited amount of reflexivity. Precisely, it is not necessary referring to some equivalency convention to legitimise (or to criticise) a particular social order.

on the one hand, and aimed at regularities in processes, on the other. The result is an inclination to view almost only the instrumental side of social interaction. In the mechanism position, Coleman and his theory of social norms is emblematic: the normative dimension of interaction is reduced to a question of control over the actions of others. Empirical research on legitimating processes becomes a field only for political scientists or for what Raymond Boudon [2002] labels “expressive sociology.”

In my opinion, the relational position (as well as the mechanism position) would gain substantially if it were to import the theme of legitimacy and to elaborate it, simply to overcome some of the aporias that the well-known Weber definition left unresolved. I deem reflecting on legitimacy as a way to include the institutional dimension of structured interactions or, in other words, to take into account the ways in which interactions are structured and supported by (more or less) legitimate devices. At the same time, I see mulling over legitimacy as a path to take into account tests of strengths and power asymmetries. Finally, I believe it is a means to multiply heuristics on how to empirically study and theoretically elaborate the relation between structure and action – notably to describe structure starting from action and activity rather than from static data.

I recognise that this theory is just one particular way to include legitimacy into a relation position. I however think that it is useful to point out some general thoughts about Abbott’s paper. If we look at the different kinds of tests that sustain and structure interactions, it could be easier to carry out two delicate theoretical operations: 1) a better articulation of micro and macro levels of analysis – because focusing on the institutional dimension of tests allows one to pass from a situational analysis to a macro level of analysis; 2) a better articulation of the relationships between interaction, identity seeking, and legitimating processes. I prefer not to enter into the first one, which is not a concern of Abbott’s paper and which is already well known. The second one is more significant. In the next paragraph I will try to stress the importance of considering different kinds of test that support interaction to better analyse identity seeking in relational explanations.

Interaction, Legitimate Devices, and Identity Politics

Going back to the example of college choice, it seems to me that what is most important for Abbott is the articulation between a relational configuration and what he defines “identity politics”. Abbott talks of identity politics referring to the relational articulations of different identity processes circumscribed, at its boundaries, by hints of rational constraint. My point is that the recognition that the ways in which

people interact are structured by devices with different degrees of legitimacy *allows to better articulate these identity processes*.

Sometimes, in Abbott's paper, there is the risk of falling into a voluntaristic vision of identity choice. I know that this is not Abbott's position, and that in all his works he always rejects it, but I assume it is a recurring temptation in the construction of a relational explanation. Abbott explicitly says "that identity is largely made by making meaningful connections and disconnections between self and various other groups." But, at same time, it is very difficult to develop some kind of methodology without falling into a voluntaristic approach to individual choice. In Italy we are well aware of this kind of problems thanks to the works of Alberto Melucci [1996] and Alessandro Pizzorno [2007].

In my judgment, considering different degrees of tests' legitimacy permits to better acknowledge how these "meaningful connections and disconnections" give birth to various configurations: 1) being (individually or collectively) chosen to obtain recognition and distinguish themselves; 2) being obtained by legitimate test; 3) being imposed by tests of strength which deny recognition (what is usually called the reification of an identity); 4) being a combination of these three. Developing similar kind of distinction can help to articulate relational positions and to strive "making interaction primitive."

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Mechanisms and Relations

Abstract: Reacting to the original papers outlining the importance of “social mechanisms,” this paper contrasts two views of the social process, the mechanist and the relational. In the sources here analyzed, the mechanist perspective is largely based on methodological individualism and generally presupposes rational, or at least intentional, action. A fundamental assumption of this approach is that the meaning of an action is given in itself. The relational view by contrast holds that the meaning of an action arises only from its relation to other actions, both temporally and structurally. The relational view takes not actors but interaction as primitive and focuses on the scene (context) of action rather than the intentions of actors. The paper investigates these differences by examining the Elsterian mechanisms of “endowment” and “contrast,” both theoretically and through the example of application of students to institutions of higher education in America.

Keywords: legitimacy, relational explanation, identity, institution, convention.

Tommaso Vitale is an assistant professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Milan – Bicocca. His main areas of interest are political sociology (political and associative participation; urban movements and conflicts); public policy (ethnic minorities policies, mainly gypsy; learning and innovation in social policy; local development and multilevel governance); social theory (methodological structuralism). Among his recent publications: *Le convenzioni del lavoro, il lavoro della convenzioni* (Milan, 2007, with V. Borghi); *In nome di chi? Partecipazione e rappresentanza nelle mobilitazioni locali* (Milan, 2007); *Alla prova della violenza. Introduzione alla sociologia pragmatica dello stato* (Rome, 2007).