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The Irreducibility of Cultural Structures

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The Irreducibility of Cultural Structures

by William H. Sewell, Jr.

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I entirely agree with Daniel Little's major conclusions. Analytical sociology, even in its rational choice version, can afford real insight into and causal explanation of social processes – from the perspective of historical sociology, I would offer the example of Ivan Ermakoff's *Ruling Oneself Out* as a brilliant example [Ermakoff 2008]. Little also is right to affirm the philosophical soundness of analytical sociology's insistence on "microfoundationalism" – its claim that social processes always "depend on the actions and thoughts of individual actors" and that any serious sociological methodology must recognize this truth. But he is equally right to deny the validity of analytical sociology's "reductionist impulse." Although it is true that social action necessarily relies on the conduct of individual agents, it is definitely not the case that the only way to explain social action is to "analyze" such action into the rational, or even the purposive, action of individual actors and then aggregate these individual actions into social facts. There are also, as Little correctly asserts, "meso" or "macro" social facts that can be shown to cause other social facts – whether micro, meso, or macro. Little cites examples of sociological work (by, for example, Kathleen Thelen, Andrew Abbott, Michael Mann, or George Steinmetz) that is fully persuasive but that does not proceed by means of aggregating individual actions into supra-individual social facts.

Although I agree with Little, it seems to me that his account of meso and macro causation remains potentially vulnerable to critique from the analytical sociologists' position. They could respond that scholars like the above, in spite of the high quality

of their work and the general persuasiveness of their arguments, have in effect abbreviated their explanations by tacitly assuming a set of individual-level processes that are in fact necessary to truly account for the claimed causal connections. From the point of view of analytical sociology, such work could be said to provide nothing more than highly plausible hypotheses that must be investigated methodically by “analytical” research if they are to rise to the level of properly scientific sociological explanations. Indeed, I think that Little’s sketch of how organizations exert causal powers easily lends itself to such an analytical sociological interpretation. He states that we should think about the causal powers of organizations at two levels – “what they do (their meso-level effects) and how they do it (their micro-level sub-mechanisms).” This seems to imply, as the analytical sociologists would insist, that the meso-level effects are in fact *accomplished* by the micro-level (that is, individual-actor-based) sub-mechanisms.

To counter this kind of argument, we need to demonstrate the existence of causally important meso or macro level social facts whose constitutive units are *not* purposive individual actors. Little, I think, gestures toward such social facts when he notes the importance of “context” in explaining “things like the emergence of fascism or the occurrence of witch crazes,” but he fails to develop a convincing argument about their nature or importance. I would say that the social facts Little references rather vaguely as “context” are cultural structures. These structures are composed not of individual persons but of apprehensible and meaningful *symbols* of various kinds – words, practices, images, linguistic rules, ritual gestures, feelings, traditions, and the like. Cultural structures provide people with the moral and practical maps they use to navigate their world. Any adequate sociological inquiry therefore must, either explicitly or implicitly, take into account the symbolic structures present in the social setting being studied. After all, we can have no clear idea what motivates the individuals claimed by analytical sociologists as the elementary units of their explanations unless we can specify the cultural structures that shape their moral notions and their perceptions of the world.

In spite of the rise of cultural sociology over the past three decades, it remains all too common for sociological studies to grossly under-specify the cultural structures within which social actions take place. This tendency is particularly common, although certainly not universal, among practitioners of rational choice, who often blithely assume that the interest-maximizing individual posited by neo-classical economic theory can safely be assumed universal. As I see it, the underlying methodology for identifying and specifying cultural structures is what I have called “paradigmatic explanation” [Sewell 2005, 331, 359-360]. What paradigmatic explanation does is to construct a model of the codes or paradigms that make possible the meaningful

actions observed by the social scientist. Meaningful actions are, of course, ubiquitous: as Clifford Geertz [1973, 91] memorably remarked, they are “as public as marriage and as observable as agriculture.” The trick is to work back from the observed actions to a specification of the codes or paradigms that make them meaningful. A wide variety of specific methodologies have been developed for this purpose – textual analysis, ethnography, Bourdieu’s field theory, ethnomethodology, and sociolinguistics, to mention only a few. But however the paradigms or codes are arrived at by the investigator, their ontological character is clear:

1. They are transpersonal. They exceed any person or collectivity of persons.
2. Their fundamental units are not individuals but meaningful actions, words, gestures, etc., together with semiotic rules for their combination.
3. Although they may characterize the thoughtways or feeling structures of some collectivity of individuals, they are available for copying or transposition by individuals or groups who are not members of the prime collectivity.
4. Although they are certainly influenced by the actions of particular individuals and collectivities, they escape the control of any specific individuals or collectivities.
5. Their development over time is shaped by their use by persons and by collectivities, but also by the logics built into their semiotic structures.

In my opinion, the fundamental role of these cultural structures in the shaping of all social life demonstrates the utter falsity of analytical sociology’s claim to have found the royal road to truth. Indeed, it is impossible to construct any adequate sociology that fails to recognize the profound causal powers of these meso and macro cultural structures.

References

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Abstract: The clearest examples of causally significant meso and macro structures that cannot be reduced to individualist microfoundations are cultural structures. Recognizing the specific character of cultural structures as a necessary component of social action would considerably strengthen Daniel Little's argument.

Keywords: Cultural structures, microfoundations, symbols, causation, paradigms.

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