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Analytical Sociology is a Research Strategy

by Christofer Edling

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Analytical sociology comes with a grand ambition to reform sociology. Over the last fifteen years this ambition grew from offering “an analytical approach to social theory” [Hedström and Swedberg 1998] into clarifying the principles that underlie “any satisfactory way of doing sociology” [Demeulenaere 2011]. This is no weak claim. These fundamental principles are outlined, detailed, and criticized with care and deep insight in Daniel Little’s paper *Analytical sociology and the rest of sociology*. Little finds that some of the universal claims for how to do sociology stand up to his scrutiny, whereas others are clearly at odds with a substantial body of sociology that Little, and many, many others, would consider core contributions to our understanding of social phenomena (by the way, Little’s systematic summary of these contributions in itself make his paper a highly rewarding read).

There is one aspect of analytical sociology that I do not particularly care for, and that is the idea that analytical sociology is a master plan for sociology, as explicated in its extreme form in the quotation from Demeulenaere. I can see why making strong claims might serve a purpose, both to increase internal cohesion and to attract external attention. However, I find the proposal that there is only one road ahead for sociology to be extraordinary chauvinistic. I also find such a suggestion difficult to digest for the obvious reason that science is evolving and therefore there can be no one way of going about it in the first place, and in the second place, we need history to tell us what was a good idea and what was not. We can do no more, and should not aim to do more, than give it our best shot, given our convictions and constrained

by time and place. I am being sluggish on purpose. But in essence, I am in agreement with Little's conclusion that "the idea that analytical sociology represents a uniquely best research strategy for sociology should be questioned" (although in contrast to mine Little's arguments are elaborate and elegant). I am convinced that if we wish to contribute to enlarge our understanding of societies and social life we should rather produce sociology than tell other sociologists how they should produce sociology. Unfortunately, analytical sociology contains an element of the latter.

As much as I admire and agree with Little's systematic dissection of analytical sociology's bombastic self-righteousness, I am interested in analytical sociology from the perspective of empirical social research. Because I was student at Stockholm University when Peter Hedström and Richard Swedberg prepared their volume on *Social Mechanisms*, I have a biased understanding of the context in which their work was carried out; the context that also constituted the stepping stone for Hedström's contributions to analytical sociology. As I recall, it was part of an important critique both of the lack of theoretical underpinning in much survey-based quantitative sociology at the time and of sociologically void descriptions presented under the label qualitative sociology. The driving force for Hedström and Swedberg was to try and bridge sociological theory and research; it was a reminder that one important way of understanding the social world is to be able to explain it. Although their views on social theory came to take different expressions over time, the link between theory and research has remained central in how both understand the theoretical enterprise. Dissatisfaction with the "lack of integration between sociological theory and sociological research" is the motivating force for Hedström's recent book on analytical sociology [Hedström 2005, 143], and in a newly published paper Swedberg [2012, 1] argues that "theorizing can only be successful if it is done in close unison with observation." Given this background it is hard for me to regard analytical sociology as anything more than a proposal for how to bridge the gap between theory and research. By most standards, it is a very impressive proposal, and to my mind, it is as such a bridge that analytical sociology can make a difference.

According to Little's summary, the first central idea of analytical sociology is that "social outcomes need to be explained on the basis of the actions of individuals". This is also how far he is willing to go along with the universal claims of analytical sociology, agreeing that sociological theory must make claims about individual agency. The analytical sociology standard, set by Hedström and Swedberg in 1998, is to refer to Coleman's 1986 diagram at this point, the so-called "boat" or "bathtub." The point being, in the context of analytical sociology, that all sociological explanation should be based on individual social action and interaction. This was certainly one of Coleman's key arguments in the 1986 paper, and in his *Foundations of Social Theory*;

to bring the individual back in. But there is another equally important point that really defines the foundation for Coleman's sociology, and which is explicit in Hedström's writings on analytical sociology. Even though Coleman argues for a strong rational choice foundation, he is also explicit about the fact that at its core sociology is a science about the behaviour of social systems, i.e., "a system of action" [Coleman 1986, 1332]. For others who work within a rational choice paradigm broadly defined, this distinction is not so clear. Consider for example the interesting list of puzzles that open Elster's *Explaining Social Behavior* [Elster 007] with its strong focus on individual action (but that admittedly range from gamblers' beliefs to suicide rates). Social behaviour is not defined, but as one would guess from Elster's work the concern is almost exclusively individual action and not so much the dynamics of system behaviour.

As Rydgren and I have suggested, and as argued by Little, there is a tendency for analytical sociology to get stuck at the micro-level of individual action and with elaborations of a narrow conception of intentional social action [Rydgren and Edling 2010]. This is somewhat surprising, given Hedström's [2005] insistence that the goal of analytical sociology is to identify the social mechanisms that are causally related to macro-level change. If we agree with Coleman and Hedström that macro-level change is the sociological explanandum *par excellence*, then it makes sense to define social action in highly simplified and abstract terms. Coleman borrowed from micro economics, whereas Hedström has a preference for the so-called "Desires-Beliefs-Opportunities" model (henceforth DBO). Only with an abstract model of social action do we have the freedom to identify causal factors that lie outside the individual, i.e., the social mechanisms that tell us under what social conditions individual desires, beliefs, and opportunities shift, change, and differ. It also makes sense to leave it at that: The beauty of the DBO-model as a core of analytical sociology is not that it tells us a great deal about the human psyche, but that as a heuristic it directs our attention to the social context, away from the individual. This parallels the use of utility maximization as a model of man in economics, which in a similar way draws attention to the functioning of the market. The advantage of the DBO-model is that it is simple, intuitive, and easy to grasp. It is also far less restrictive than rational choice theory, although rational choice is a subset of DBO. The DBO-model strikes a perfect balance between realism, generality, and precision that render it useful as a building block for constructing social theory. If you are willing to accept DBO as a proxy for what makes an individual act, you are happily off theorizing almost any macro-level correlation in a minute. It is worth noting what Demeulenaere [2011] and Little point out, namely that even though DBO play centre stage in *Dissecting the Social*, it can be replaced by other competing or complementary theories of ac-

tion without jeopardizing the program of analytical sociology. As long as the theory of action serves the theorist by suppressing the complexity of individual action in favour of the complexity of social action systems, then many theories of action will do.

I do not think that analytical sociology should ever aspire to become the new logical positivism. Little convincingly demonstrates that even if it would ascribe to such aspirations, it could not meet the standards of a universal script for sociology. As Hedström and Bearman [2009, 4] put it, “analytical sociology is a strategy for understanding the social world.” Some sociologists would be happy if more of us subscribed to this strategy. Few would argue that it is *the* strategy. It is one of many strategies to understand the social world, and as such it is an important strategy with fine potential, rooted in a long and fruitful sociological tradition.

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Abstract: Analytical sociology is a methodological strategy aimed at refining theoretically informed empirical social research. Given the central assumption that the role of sociology is to explain macro level phenomena, analytical sociology makes pragmatic use of abstract models of social action and interaction, such as the DBO-model. The realization that it is not a philosophy or a psychology, nor a universal theory of the social, implies that it is by actually explaining social phenomena that analytical sociology will make a name for itself.

Keywords: Analytical sociology, social mechanism, action, social action system, explanation.

Christofer Edling is Professor of Sociology at Lund University, with previous positions at Jacobs University Bremen, Stockholm University, and Uppsala University. His current research is oriented towards the intersection between sociological theory and method with a focus on social network analysis. He is the co-editor of *Sociological Insights of Great Thinkers* (Praeger 2011).