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Presentation

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Presentation

by Filippo Barbera *and* Marco Santoro

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Since the publication of *Social Mechanisms. An Analytical Approach to Social Theory* [Hedström and Swedberg 1998] the idea of an “analytical sociology” (AS) has grown and diffused through the international sociological community. To offer an overall assessment of analytical sociology, “*Sociologica*” has asked nine scholars of different intellectual orientation and differently engaged with the AS movement to comment on a long paper by Daniel Little, professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan-Dearborn and professor of sociology at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, and a renown expert in the philosophy of the social sciences, about the potentials and shortcomings of this would-be new brand of sociology.

Daniell Little’s paper argues that the programme of AS brings sharp focus to fundamental issues in sociology as a scientific discipline, offering a clear paradigm of how sociological explanations ought to proceed, from individual actors to social outcomes. Little, however, also highlights limitations of the approach as a general framework for *all* sociological research – possibly the major claim AS practitioners make. In order to uphold his point, the author surveys recent high-quality research by a number of sociologists and other social scientists trying to demonstrate that often their explanations do not conform to the aggregative model advocated by AS. Finally, philosophical arguments – including a brief description of an approach to social ontology referred to as “methodological localism” – are provided by Little to justify the claim that we can attribute relative explanatory autonomy even to meso-level social structures.

Several points have emerged in the debate spurred by the paper: i) the problem of microfoundations; ii) the issue of causation; iii) the integration of theory and research; iv) the theory of action; v) the role of cultural structures. As it usually happens when the nature and scope of sociological ideas is addressed, the authors take different paths in discussing these issues, and their diagnoses are equally diversified. For instance, the use of the so-called Desires-Beliefs-Opportunities (DBO) model as a microfoundation of sociological explanation is considered as both too closely linked to the rational choice model and not close enough to that (allegedly) general model. Still, it is argued that DBO theory uses an intentionalist folk psychology that is unable to account for the complexity of habitual, preconscious, and rule-guided actions, and, at the same time, that DBO theory is not incompatible with a focus on habits and rules. Being one of the main critical foci of Daniel Little's paper, meso-level causation is often at the centre of the discussion. Again, very different arguments have been proposed against Little's idea, from the argument that really generative mechanisms can be found only at a micro-level, to a less individualistic oriented stance according to which meso-level structures, including cultural ones, have genuine explicative properties. It must be added that these issues refer to well-known and widely debated problems in current social theory, and that AS is a good place like any other – but maybe better than others for its focus on rigor and explicitness – to address them.

Other papers offer a less customary standpoint on AS *qua* sociology, namely they consider – in a sociology of knowledge's perspective – analytical sociology as an intellectual movement and/or a would-be theory-group which is looking for its place in the international sociological field through both epistemic and rhetorical, or even politico-academic, devices. This second path may be understood as the mean through which the theoretical, methodological and empirical results of analytical sociology are weighted up. Is the core content of AS really an innovation? Or does it just repeat old points in a new fashion – even without clearly acknowledging the whole range of its sources and predecessors, as well as viable alternatives? What really has analytical sociology to offer to sociological theory and research? How much is AS able to cope with the current globalization of sociological knowledge, and the rise of alternative discourses in the social sciences coming from the non-Western world? Different answers can be found in the papers, ranging from “a lot” to “some” to “nothing.”

Daniel Little takes a middle position between the two extremes: it is true that many things do not work in AS *in the terms AS practitioners like to claim*. But AS has also good ideas and stimuli to give to sociology as a discipline, especially when its ideas and stimuli are integrated in a larger, more varied field of theoretical and epistemological possibilities. The discussion is open, and “*Sociologica*” invites its readers to participate.

References

Hedström, P., and Swedberg, R.

1998 *Social Mechanisms. An Analytical Approach to Social Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.