Introduction

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Why should we introduce the notion of "analytical sociology" into the field of sociology, and why should it be linked to the concept of "mechanism"?

I do not believe there to be any great need to introduce new paradigms into a discipline already encumbered with so many antagonizing trends, schools and paradigms. Analytical sociology should not therefore be seen as a manifesto for one particular way of doing sociology as compared with others, but as an effort to clarify ("analytically") theoretical and epistemological principles which underlie any satisfactory way of doing sociology (and, in fact, any social science). The social sciences already command a considerable stock of substantive descriptions and explanations; and some of the alternatives to these are either redundant, or resistant to proof, even false or imprecise, quite regardless of their status with respect to one or other established paradigm. Analytical sociology should seek to define a set of sound epistemological and methodological principles underlying all previously established and reliable sociological findings. The aim of analytical sociology is to clarify the basic epistemological, theoretical and methodological principles fundamental to the development of sound description and explanation.

The recurrent use of the term "analytical" in sociology derives mainly from the accepted notion of "analyticity," designating a division into basic elements, the difficulty being in the determination of these clear-cut basic elements, since such division is not universally accepted – recently the notion of "holism" has been associated with a refusal to accept such a separation (see, for example, Demeulenaere 2000; Descombes 1996). For instance, the constitutive elements of a belief cannot be precisely separated in the same way that two actors can be isolated from one another. Even when we separate one actor from another, the fact that his beliefs depend to a great extent on previously acquired knowledge means that he cannot be completely separated from the environment in which such knowledge has been acquired. This is

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why any attempt to separate these elements must coincide with epistemological reflection on the relevance of such an "analytical" enterprise. The most important aspect of the analytical approach should be to clarify the strategy by which we endeavour to separate and conceptualize different elements entering into descriptions and explanations of the social world, so that we might understand their mutual relationships, and in particular the causal links existing among them.

The use of the notion of "analyticity" relates first of all to emphasis upon the idea that any description or explanation necessarily involves separate "elements" to be considered in respect of their specificity, status and role. This separation leads on to an elucidation of the manner in which they are reciprocally articulated, and in particular are said to "cause" one another. This is why the "mechanism" issue is necessary to any explanation. Whenever we start explaining "why" something happens, beyond mere description, we are necessarily led to introduce some type of causal linkage of elements that in turn raises the question of mechanism. Analytical sociology is impelled in this way toward the study of mechanisms and their functioning. Emphasis on the notion of mechanism corresponds to an evaluation of the proper role of causal linkages in the social sciences. But as we shall see later in this introduction, there are many mutually antagonistic views of the notion of causality, its role in sociological explanation, and its relation to the notion of mechanism. One aim of this volume is to clarify the relationships arising between these various uses and conceptions.

Where does this notion of analytical sociology come from? It is common to find the use of the adjective "analytic" in the social sciences, emphasized to a greater or lesser degree. Among the major theorists, Talcott Parsons is notable for development of the notion of an "analytical" approach in sociology. His aim was to discover and isolate abstract features of the social world (see Fararo 1989, and also Chapter 5 in this volume, for an overview of Parsons' contribution to the ideal of analytical theory in sociology; Fararo himself uses the notion of "analytical action").

But more recently, and in a different manner, the term has been reintroduced into social science literature and also given broader scope. This was in the book edited by Peter Hedström and Richard Swedberg and published in 1998 with the title *Social Mechanisms*, and whose subtitle was: *An Analytical Approach to Social Theory*. Peter Hedström subsequently published an important short book called *Dissecting the Social. On the Principles of Analytical Sociology* (2005). This book is a systematic exposition of what can be called analytical sociology. A handbook was then published outlining a general program of research (Hedström and

Bearman 2009). A synthesis had previously appeared in Italian, out-lining the principal features of such a trend (Barbera 2004). Moreover, several papers have now addressed the key issues of this new move-ment. It has prompted vigorous debate at an international level (Manzo 2010).

   This volume presents a collection of chapters dealing with central issues raised by some of the most important authors in this movement. This does not mean that all the contributors consider themselves to be part of a single movement; nor that this movement is a perfectly uni-fied school united by common and consistent beliefs. The idea is to discuss and clarify the main issues involved in such an enterprise from an epistemological, methodological and theoretical viewpoint. The book is not a manifesto either pro or contra analytical sociology and the use of mechanisms: it is an attempt to reflect upon the key issues involved and in particular the use of the notion of causality in socio-logical explanation.

Analytical sociology and methodological individualism

Since social theory is still very often associated with scholars who have defined principles and theories, we can start by evoking the theorists who can be included in a list of "analytical thinkers":

1. First, some classical authors, such as Tocqueville (Hedström and Edling 2009) or Merton (Hedström and Udéhn 2009) are consid-ered in retrospect by current analytical sociologists to exemplify analytical sociology in principle. More generally, any classical author who has advanced a convincing explanation of social phenomena with a clear understanding of the social mechanisms at work can in retrospect be considered an analytical sociologist. It is important to note that Boudon (1998), for example, has consistently sought to reconsider the work of mutually opposing authors so that he might demonstrate a deeper underlying unity in their arguments.

2. Second, Hedström considers some of the most important writers of modern social science – Schelling, Coleman, Boudon and Elster – to be the contemporary founding fathers of analytical sociology. Since these four authors are commonly presented (or have presented themselves) as "methodological individualists," the link between methodological individualism and analytical sociology has to be addressed. Both Boudon and Elster have accepted the label of "ana-lytical sociologists" by publishing papers in books seeking to define analytical sociology, the present collection included. By contrast,

there are those such as Arthur Stinchcombe who, while contribut-
ing to the theory of social mechanisms, do not appear to be direct
participants in the movement.
3. Finally, many contributors to books such as the present one can be
seen to either support the movement, be interested in its core issues,
or associate themselves with its main debates.

Whatever the case may be, there is a clear connection between the trad-
ition of methodological individualism (MI) and the rise of analytical
sociology (AS). The four contemporary authors Hedström considers to
exemplify this approach are usually classified as methodological indi-
vidualists. Critics of AS include those who are equally critical of MI.
Therefore, the question of the link that exists between the two move-
ments is to be analyzed.

The two core ideas behind MI, first expressed by John Stuart Mill and
Carl Menger, and subsequently by Weber, can be expressed very simply:

1. Social life exists only by virtue of actors who live it.
2. Consequently a social fact of any kind must be explained by direct
reference to the actions of its constituents.

These two simple propositions remain central to the analytical
approach; we therefore have to address the problem of the relationship
between MI and AS. This section is directed to a brief exposition of
the problem.

To sum up the main features of MI I will begin with a foundational
quotation from one early proponent of the approach. MI can be shown
to be at variance with the principles claimed for current analytical soci-
ology or, conversely, can be shown to be substantively similar to and
continuous with these principles.

According to this principle, the ultimate constituents of the social world are
individual people who act more or less appropriately in the light of their dis-
positions and understanding of their situation. Every complex social situation,
institution or event is the result of a particular configuration of individuals,
their dispositions, situations, beliefs, and physical resources and environ-
ment. There may be unfinished or half-way explanations of large-scale social
phenomena (say, inflation) in terms of other large-scale phenomena (say, full
employment); but we shall not have arrived at rock-bottom explanations of
large-scale phenomena until we have deduced an account of them from state-
ments about the dispositions, beliefs, resources, and interrelations of individ-
uals. (Watkins 1957, 1959: 505)

Taking this early statement as a simple example of a definition of what
MI sought to be, it can be said that it is generally oriented to three major
misunderstandings; that is, not objections regarding its relevance, but

criticisms arising from misconceptions regarding what defenders of MI generally stated in their writings. I will later argue that an emphasis on AS is a way of avoiding such misconceptions, and generating a broader consensus concerning what "good social science" should be.

The first of these misconceptions is the claim that MI is "atomistic." This assertion goes back to an old dispute between nineteenth-century economists (in particular Menger (1996 [1883]) who first developed this notion of atomism) and advocates of sociology or the social sciences who insisted that individuals were never isolated, but were instead dependent on their social environment, which environment was often called a "structure" (although this is a notion open to many interpretations). Granovetter (1985) famously restated this criticism of "atomism" in order to introduce the idea of an "embedded" actor. However, it should be clear in the quotation from Watkins that there is no intrinsic link between MI and atomism. As Homans puts it:

> The position taken makes no assumption that men are isolated individuals. It is wholly compatible with the doctrine that human behavior is now and always has been social as long as it has been human. (Homans 1967: 59)

Hence two positions are compatible with the aim of methodological individualists, and both can be derived from Watkins' quotation:

1. Actors depend, in their behavior, on interrelation with others, the resources they possess, and the institutions in which such behavior evolves.
2. Beliefs and motives are founded upon knowledge and on norms which are both social in this sense, and which are not of their own making. Therefore actors evolve in a cultural and social environment, defining their objectives and representations in terms of this environment. Accordingly, a reference to "rock-bottom" explanations does not imply "atomistic" or non-social actors, but instead evokes "dispositions, beliefs, resources and interrelations of individuals" as opposed to macro-social laws. Watkins does go on to write that MI should be contrasted with "holism," which is itself contrasted with a "rock-bottom" explanation:

> On this latter view, social systems constitute "wholes" at least in the sense that some of their large-scale behaviour is governed by macro-laws, which are essentially sociological in the sense that they are *sui generis* and not to be explained as mere regularities or tendencies resulting from the behaviour of interacting individuals. (Watkins 1957, 1959: 505)

It should be clear that the refusal to adopt a macro-law perspective does not in any sense imply the assumption of non-social actors. The

rejection of macro-laws is not at all equivalent to a refusal of the "social-ness" of actors. Macro-laws and desocialized individual atoms are not alternatives. There is therefore absolutely no reason that MI should be seen as a device separating actors from their environment, reducing explanation to "individual" features or actors and consequently annihi-lating any reference to their environment. There is a tendency to con-fuse individual actors with dissocialized actors.

On the contrary, this environment has to be taken into account if we are to understand "individual" actions. We can cite Homans again here:

Sociologists do not often realize that they pursue two related, but often dis-tinguishable subjects for empirical research. Most sociologists pursue one far more often than they do the other; a few pursue both. The first, which I shall call *individualistic* sociology, is concerned with the way in which individuals in interaction with one another create structures, and the second which I shall call *structural* sociology, is concerned with the effects these structures, one created and maintained, have on the behaviour of individuals or categories of individ-uals. In the empirical propositions of the former, the behaviour of individuals is treated as the set of independent variables and the characteristics of the structures as the set of dependent ones. In the latter the process is reversed: the structures are treated as the set of independent variables and the behaviour of individuals as the set of dependant ones. (Homans 1984: 341)

The combination of these two approaches can be called "structural indi-vidualism" (Udéhn 2001; Wippler 1978). Any serious attempt to reflect on a social situation should deploy both in turn. Their combination is in some respect illustrated by Coleman's famous "boat" (1986, 1990). It remains a central aspect of analytical sociology. I will however come back later to this difficult and central issue of the opposition between macro and micro levels, an issue which has been revived within MI and analytical sociology.

A second frequent misrepresentation of MI is to assume it to be utili-tarian. Clearly, some authors in the MI tradition have, more or less explicitly, held utilitarian positions – for instance, Homans (1967), Coleman (1990) or Hechter and Opp (2001) amongst others. But some major theorists reject such an association (Boudon 2001, or Elster 2009 for instance). The appeal of utilitarianism derives from the dif-ficulty of understanding any action not oriented to gaining some kind of advantage (from the point of view of the actor). In this sense, even suicide is a remedy for a life gone wrong. But this notion of an "advan-tage" is imprecise, open to many varied and contrasting constructions. Whenever we try to define in a more precise way the exact content of utilitarian motives we encounter a dilemma: either they are specified

narrowly, and so then quite plainly do not correspond to the broad range of human motives; or they are so loosely specified that they cover all individual preferences (rooted in social contexts), the notion of utility then losing its own specificity and becoming redundant, since any kind of preference becomes part of a utility function (Hollis 1994; Sen 1977). We should not therefore reduce MI to a narrow version of utilitarianism, whether from a descriptive viewpoint (since many authors do not support such a position) or from a normative viewpoint, since this dilemma stands in the way of any such reduction.

Another misunderstanding follows on from this: the conflation of MI with a narrow form of "rational choice" theory. This involves four different problems:

1. First, the very definition of the notion of "rational" behavior is at issue. What exactly should this notion of rationality imply: perfect information? Transitivity of preference orders? Intentionality? The choice of solution to a problem? All of these are widely debated, and there is no clear consensus on the meaning of rationality. Nevertheless, since MI authors constantly emphasize individual actions, we must take into account the intentional dimension of action, and also therefore its link with the notion of rationality.

2. Second, the normative dimension of rationality can be perceived as a problem in need of elimination from scientific discourse. Homans (1987) for instance argued that it was unnecessary to introduce such normative concepts into sociology or psychology. However, it is also possible to argue that, since human behavior is intrinsically normative, normative concepts should necessarily be central to any scientific analysis of such behavior. Weber was well-known for adopting this position. Normativity and the way in which actors deal with it must itself be explained, since the world, and individual action in particular, has normative features. As Joseph Raz puts it, "the core idea is that rationality is the ability to realise the normative significance of the normative features of the world, and the ability to respond accordingly" (Raz 2000: 35).

3. Third, there is the problem of the link between intentional action (purposive action) and emotion; this has been most notably discussed by Elster (1999). Whenever we stress the possibility of irrational behavior we need to consider – beyond simple description or normative assessment of irrational behavior – the conditions under which an actor is likely to act as either a rational or an irrational actor. Not everybody indulges in wishful thinking; hence the difficult question from the standpoint of rationality is

understanding why some act in a rational manner whereas others
do not. A related question is whether wishful thinking has to be
opposed to rational decision-making, since it might appear to be
supported by some form of evidence.

4. Finally, the problem of habit on the one hand, and of creativ-
ity on the other, can be added to the above (Gross 2009); for it
should seem obvious that people very often act on the basis of
unreflecting habit. Should this be treated as a challenge to a the-
ory of intentional action, or be on the contrary integrated into it?
In my view, emphasizing habit or creativity should not lead us to
a radical break with the idea of intentional actions, since habits
are often presented as pragmatic solutions to problems. But this is
clearly an issue for a debate. Similarly, emphasizing actions instead
of actors (Abbott 2007) does not significantly alter the problem
of interpreting the way in which action occurs, and should be so
interpreted.

The third major misunderstanding about MI stems from the very
notion of individualism. To what exactly does it correspond? As I said
above, the core simple idea of MI is that there is no social life with-
out so-called "individuals" being its motivating agents. The word
"individuals" is clearly misleading here. It should not mean that these
agents are separated from their environment, or that they necessarily
act on the basis of "selfish" motives. Is there nevertheless an add-
itional, specifically "individual" dimension of the actors that should
be taken into account whenever an explanation is provided? It seems
to me that two different things should be simultaneously stated. They
appear to conflict, but they can be reconciled by stratifying the level
of analysis.

First of all, referring to individual actors does not necessarily imply a
reference to strictly naturalistic pre-social (and in this sense "individu-
alistic") motives. For instance, in Schelling's famous example (1978),
the actors' preferences for a relatively mixed neighborhood are given as
social preferences regarding individuals. They could be significantly
different. Culture should not therefore be seen to be absent from
micro-level explanations. It is not because we refer to "individual"-
level explanations that culture, in all its richness and complexity, is set
to one side. Bearman *et al*.'s (2004) study of the sexual and romantic
networks of adolescents in a midwestern American high school refers
to a set of norms necessary to an understanding of the adolescents'
choices, although these norms are not actually articulated by these
adolescents. The principal norm is one prohibiting "from a boy's point

of view, that he formed a partnership with his prior girlfriend's current boyfriend's prior girlfriend" (Hedström and Bearman 2009). This norm permits explanation of the network structure under consideration, but is not explained in itself. It clearly has a cultural dimension (we are not, for instance, in a situation where sexual relationships between boys and girls are forbidden outside marriage, but at the same time relations are obviously not completely free). Therefore, any reference to a "micro" level, or to a so-called "individualistic" level, does not necessarily entail that "culture" is set aside. By contrast, when Coleman illustrates the micro level of analysis by using Weber's famous example, citing the manner in which actors endorsing Protestant values are led to specific economic attitudes, he clearly introduces a cultural dimension at the micro level. There is therefore no necessary opposition between individualism and the "socialness" of the actor (Little 2009: 163), since the notion of individuals can encompass a variety of cultural features.

That said, reference to a variety of cultural settings should not necessarily be the last word in social scientific explanation. Culture and its norms should also be treated as social facts to be explained, and not treated as something beyond the scope of further investigation (Mantzavinos 2005). The norms that constitute culture, varying significantly from one context to another, can themselves be seen to be enigmas in need of elucidation. In so doing, we have to move toward more universal motives and forms of actions which, combined with particular settings, can explain the prevalence of certain types of norms in certain situations. There is always a pressure in the social sciences to find, behind the existence of cultural and social diversity, some common features of human behavior which allow us to explain this diversity. It is not an easy task, and it may often fail, but the logic of such an effort depends upon the identification of relatively stable motives and attitudes so that we might understand the real variety of diverse motives and attitudes. In so doing, we inevitably tend to presuppose a kind of "human nature" representing general features of the species. These can therefore be called "individual" (although this is a rather misleading term), insofar as every human being globally reflects these general features of the human species, even if all singular individuals do not actually resemble each other and do display different features. These common features of human action are not necessarily non-social, since, for instance, the ability to find solutions to problems involves cooperation and discussion. Another explanatory move can lead to infra-individual causal determination, beyond conscious intentional actions (Chapter 3, in this volume).

From methodological individualism to analytical sociology

Does analytical sociology differ significantly from the initial project of MI? I do not really think so. But by introducing the notion of analytical sociology we are able to make a fresh start and avoid the various misunderstandings now commonly attached to MI. AS retains the core MI idea (that all social events depend on so-called "individual" actions which are responsible for the realization of social phenomena), but puts to one side all the misconceptions attached to "individuals," while also focusing attention on the complexity of those theoretical, epistemological and methodological issues involved in sociological explanations, and in particular that of the causality linking social events.

Since all social life involves "individual" actors, and any explanation of the social world requires reference to their actions, analytical sociology turns on a remodeled theory of action, having two main dimensions.

First, a redefinition of the general features of action constituting social life, irreducible to some narrow form of rational action. Hedström has proposed a so-called Desire–Belief–Opportunity theory of action, which can be derived from Hume's theory of motivation as developed by the analytical tradition of philosophy. It can be found for instance in the work of Elizabeth Anscombe, described by Mark Platts in the following terms:

> Miss Anscombe, in her work on intention, has drawn a broad distinction between two kinds of mental states, factual belief being the prime exemplar of one kind and desire a prime exemplar of the other … The distinction is in terms of the direction of fit of mental states with the world. Beliefs aim at the true and their being true is their fitting the world; falsity is a decisive failing in a belief, and false beliefs should be discarded; beliefs should be changed to fit with the world, not *vice versa*. Desires aim at realisation, and their realisation is the world fitting with them; the fact that the indicative content of a desire is not realised in the world is not yet a failing in the desire, and not yet any reason to discard the desire; the world, crudely, should be changed to fit with our desires, not vice versa. (1979: 256–7. Quoted in Smith 1994: 111–12)

The problem of normativity arises when a distinction between belief and desire is developed, since a belief has no normative strength of its own. The introduction of normative beliefs (or "besires") thus creates conceptual problems (Smith 1994). Sociology cannot afford to ignore discussion of these in the literature of analytical philosophy, for seeking explanation of social norms (and beliefs regarding those norms) implies reflection on their source, or their normativity (Dancy 2000).