Causal Mechanisms in Comparative Historical Sociology

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Historical sociologists are commonly interested in providing causal explanations of large historical outcomes: revolutions, social contention, state formation, the spread of religious ideas, and many other sorts of phenomena. Often these research efforts depend on the Millian idea, “same cause, same effect,” which unfolds into a theory of causal inquiry based on methodical comparison of cases (Goldthorpe 1997; Kiser and Hechter 1991; Lichbach and Zuckerman 1997; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003; Ragin 1987, 1998; Skocpol and Somers 1979; Goldstone 2003; Mahoney 1999). This approach is contrasted to the quantitative methodologies of causal analysis that depend on discovery of correlations among variables in large datasets. Neither approach gives sufficient weight to the contingent and conjunctural character of social causation, however, so each is a blunt instrument for uncovering causal relations within historically given social circumstances. There is good recent work in philosophy of social science on social mechanisms, which converges with some very original and useful work on methodology of comparative research coming from within the historical social sciences. Here I will make the case that the discovery of historically specific causal mechanisms is feasible, rigorous, and explanatory. Second, it will be argued that it is possible to provide a rigorous interpretation of the “metaphysics” of social causal mechanisms, working
through the structured circumstances of choice of socially constructed actors. This approach makes good use of the new institutionalism, in that the new institutionalism emphasizes the causal powers and differentiating influences of specific institutional arrangements. This approach provides an alternative to a narrowly empiricist search for governing social laws or generalizations as the basis for social explanations. But equally it represents an alternative to idiographic narrative. The paper will attempt to establish the coherence and plausibility of the social-mechanism approach to research and explanation in historical sociology.

A range of causal questions

Consider a range of causal questions that have arisen within historical and comparative sociology.

- What causes ethnic violence (Horowitz 1985)?
- What caused ethnic violence in Rwanda?
- What caused twentieth-century revolutions (Wolf 1969)?
- What caused the Nicaraguan revolution?
- Why did revolution unfold as it did in the Canton Delta in 1911 (Hsieh 1974)?
- What factors enhance the likelihood of successful democratization (Przeworski 1991; Przeworski et al. 1996)?
- What causes urban residential segregation (Schelling 1978)?
- What causes political corruption (Klitgaard 1988)?
- What factors explain the success or failure of anti-corruption reforms (Klitgaard 1988)?
• What factors explain the East Asian economic miracle (Vogel 1991)?
• Why are there more violent crimes per 1000 in the US than Western Europe?
• Why was the political party of labor more successful in the UK than the US (Przeworski 1985)?
• Why is infant mortality significantly lower in Sri Lanka than Brazil or Egypt (Drèze and Sen 1989, 1995)?
• Why do millenarian cults occur in the post-colonial world (Adas 1979)?
• Why was agricultural technology stagnant in late imperial China (Elvin 1973)?
• Why are rural people more politically conservative than urban people?
• Why do social tastes and styles change as they do (Lieberson 2000)?
• Why did the name “Joshua” lose frequency in the United States in the 1990s (Lieberson 2000)?
• Why did the New England Patriots win the 2003 Super Bowl (Lieberson 1997)?
• Why did the political culture of corporations remain powerful among French workers in the 19th century (Sewell 1980)?
• Why did the heavy wheeled plough diffuse in the geographical pattern that it did in medieval France (Bloch 1966)?

It would be entirely possible to structure a year-long seminar around the dimensions of causal inquiry that are implied by these questions. And we can learn a great deal about causal inquiry by reflecting briefly on a number of these examples—which I will not do
today. There is a common thread among these examples, in that each question directs inquiry towards the question, “What are the causal conditions that give rise to a given social or historical outcome?” But there are a number of important differences among these examples as well. Some are about a category of outcome (“twentieth-century revolution” or “ethnic violence”), whereas others are about a historically specific outcome (the Nicaraguan revolution, the Rwandan genocide, the 2003 Super Bowl). Some are about large and publicly salient events, structures, and mentalities (states, revolutions, political cultures); others are about small-scale and unnoticed social characteristics (the frequency of first names).

This paper focuses on two central ideas: that social causation is constituted by concrete causal mechanisms linking one set of social circumstances to another, and that social inquiry needs to be designed in recognition of this fact. Two central conclusions are key: that it is possible to provide “theories at the middle range” of some causal mechanisms that occur in multiple social and historical settings—which can be used to explain similarities and contrasts among broadly comparable historical outcomes; and that it is possible to identify concrete and historically specific causal mechanisms at work in large sociological processes (single-case causal analysis)—which then provides a basis for explaining the large sociological outcome or condition.

Causal realism for historical sociology

I maintain that social explanation requires discovery of the underlying causal mechanisms that give rise to outcomes of interest.¹ Social mechanisms are concrete social

¹ (Little 1991, 1998). Important recent exponents of the centrality of causal mechanisms in social explanation include (Hedström and Swedberg 1998), (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), and (George and Bennett 2005). George and Bennett offer careful analytic treatment of how the causal mechanisms
processes in which a set of social conditions, constraints, or circumstances combine to bring about a given outcome. On this approach, social explanation does not take the form of “inductive discovery of laws”; the generalizations that are discovered in the course of social science research are subordinate to the more fundamental search for causal mechanisms and pathways in individual outcomes and sets of outcomes. This approach casts doubt on the search for generalizable theories across numerous societies. It looks instead for specific causal influence and variation. The approach emphasizes variety, contingency, and the availability of alternative pathways leading to an outcome, rather than expecting to find a small number of common patterns of development or change. The contingency of particular approach can be developed into specific research strategies in the social and historical sciences. Volume 34, numbers 2 and 3 of Philosophy of the Social Sciences (2004) contains a handful of articles devoted to the logic of social causal mechanisms, focused on the writings of Mario Bunge. (Steel 2004) provides a philosophically rigorous assessment of several features of the mechanisms approach and directs particular attention to the claim that discovery of mechanisms is necessary for successful causal explanation. One specific interpretation of the idea of a social mechanism is formulated by Tyler Cowen: “I interpret social mechanisms … as rational-choice accounts of how a specified combination of preferences and constraints can give rise to more complex social outcomes” (Cowen 1998:125). The account offered in this article is not limited to rational choice mechanisms, however.

2 The recent literature on causal mechanisms provides a number of related definitions: “We define causal mechanisms as ultimately unobservable physical, social, or psychological processes through which agents with causal capacities operate, but only in specific contexts or conditions, to transfer energy, information, or matter to other entities” (George and Bennett 2005). “Mechanisms are a delimited class of events that alter relations among specified stets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). “Mechanisms … are analytical constructs that provide hypothetical links between observable events” (Hedström and Swedberg 1998).

3 Authors who have urged the centrality of causal mechanisms or powers for social explanation include (Sørensen 1998), (Harré and Secord 1972), (Varela and Harre 1996), (Cartwright 1983), (Cartwright 1989), Salmon (Salmon 1984), and (Dessler 1991). In their important volume devoted to this topic, Hedström and Swedberg write, “The main message of this book is that the advancement of social theory calls for an analytical approach that systematically seeks to explicate the social mechanisms that generate and explain observed associations between events” (Hedström and Swedberg 1998). Jack Goldstone expresses this method in his analysis of the explanation of revolutions: “In making my argument … that population growth in agrarian bureaucracies led to revolution, I did not proceed by showing that in a large sample of such states there was a statistically significant relationship between population growth and revolution…. Rather, I sought to trace out and document the links in the causal chain connecting population growth to revolutionary conflict” (Goldstone 2003).

4 An important expression of this approach to social and historical explanation is offered by Charles Tilly: “Analysts of large-scale political processes frequently invoke invariant models that feature self-contained and self-motivating social units. Few actual political processes conform to such models. Revolutions provide an important example of such reasoning and of its pitfalls. Better models rest on plausible ontologies, specify fields of variation for the phenomena in question, reconstruct causal sequences, and concentrate explanation on links within those sequences” (Tilly 1995:1594).
pathways derives from several factors, including the local circumstances of individual agency and the across-case variation in the specifics of institutional arrangements—giving rise to significant variation in higher-level processes and outcomes.\textsuperscript{5}

This approach places central focus on the idea of a causal mechanism: to identify a causal relation between two kinds of events or conditions, we need to identify the typical causal mechanisms through which the first kind brings about the second kind. What, though, is the nature of the relations that constitute causal mechanisms among social phenomena? I argue for a microfoundational approach to social causation: the causal properties of social entities derive from the structured circumstances of agency of the individuals who make up social entities—insti tutions, organizations, states, economies, and the like. So this approach advances a general ontological stance and research strategy: the causal mechanisms that create causal relations among social phenomena are compounded from the structured circumstances of choice and behavior of socially constructed and socially situated agents.

Before turning to more specific analysis, let us review briefly how causal realism fits into contemporary philosophy and methodology of science. One of the most original voices within contemporary philosophy of science—particularly on the topic of the interpretation of causal claims—is Nancy Cartwright. Cartwright places real causal mechanisms at the center of her account of scientific knowledge. As she and John Dupré put the point, “things and events have causal capacities: in virtue of the properties they possess, they have the power to bring about other events or states” (Dupré and Cartwright

\textsuperscript{5} McAdam et al. describe their approach to the study of social contention in these terms: “We employ mechanisms and processes as our workhorses of explanation, episodes as our workhorses of description. We therefore make a bet on how the social world works: that big structures and sequences never repeat themselves, but result from differing combinations and sequences of mechanisms with very general scope. Even within a single episode, we will find multiform, changing, and self-constructing actors, identities, forms of action and interaction” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001: 30).
Cartwright argues, for the natural sciences, that the concept of a real causal connection among a set of events is more fundamental than the concept of a law of nature (Cartwright 1989), (Cartwright 1995). And most fundamentally, she argues that identifying causal relations requires substantive theories of the causal powers (capacities, in her language) that govern the entities in question. Causal relations cannot be directly inferred from facts about association among variables. As she puts the point, “No reduction of generic causation to regularities is possible” (Cartwright 1989 : 90). The importance of this idea for sociological research is profound; it confirms the notion shared by many researchers that attribution of social causation depends inherently on the formulation of good, middle-level theories about the causal properties of various social forces and entities.6

An important sociological argument that combines an emphasis on quantitative rigor with the search for mechanisms comes forward in the writings of Aage Sørensen (Sørensen 1998). Sørensen summarizes his position in these words: “Sociological ideas are best reintroduced into quantitative sociological research by focusing on specifying the mechanisms by which change is brought about in social processes” (Sørensen 1998 : 264). He argues that sociology requires better integration of theory and evidence, and argues that quantitative research comes closest to achieving the scientific aims of sociology. Central to an adequate explanatory theory, however, is the specification of the mechanism that is hypothesized to underlie a given set of observations. “Developing theoretical ideas about social processes is to specify some concept of what brings about a certain outcome—a change in political regimes, a new job, an increase in corporate

6 Margaret Morrison provides an insightful critical discussion of Cartwright’s treatment of capacities and singular causes; (Morrison 1995).
The development of the conceptualization of change amounts to proposing a mechanism for a social process” (Sørensen 1998: 239-240). Sørensen makes the critical point that one cannot select a statistical model for analysis of a set of data without first asking the question, what in the nature of the mechanisms we wish to postulate to link the influences of some variables with others? (Sørensen makes a methodologically crucial point when he argues that standardized regression coefficients in a linear regression model do not measure the relative weight or causal importance of the variables that occur in the model; (Sørensen 1998: 245). Rather, it is necessary to have a hypothesis of the mechanisms that link the variables before we can arrive at a justified estimate of the relative importance of the causal variables in bringing about the outcome.)

The sociologist Mats Ekström echoes this view of the primacy of causal powers in sociological explanation. Drawing upon his careful analysis of Weber’s methodological writings, Ekström emphasizes what he calls a “generative” conception of causality. He links this conception to the writings of Harré (Harré and Madden 1975), Bhaskar (Bhaskar 1975), and others; and he argues that “the essence of causal analysis is instead the elucidation of the processes that generate the objects, events, and actions we seek to explain” (Ekstrom 1992: 115). Here again we find the anti-positivist position leading to the conclusion that causal realism is a better basis for sociological research than competing Humean approaches to causation.

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7 Hedström paraphrases this aspect of Sørensen’s view in these terms: “Basing the empirical analysis on substantive models of social processes brings to the foreground an important question about the role or primary aim of the empirical analysis. The outcomes we observe in society are doubtless the result of a multitude of different processes. A useful theoretical model typically explicates the core mechanisms of one or some of these processes” (Hedström 2003).
These methodologists and philosophers combine in support of several points. First, they support the idea that the presupposition of causal reasoning is the presence of a causal mechanism; so the researcher may be well advised to spend effort on trying to identify the unseen causal mechanism joining the variables or conditions of interest. And second, it suggests a variety of ways of using available evidence to test or confirm a causal hypothesis: examine conditional priorities, test for necessary and sufficient conditions, examine correlations and regressions among the variables of interest. Causal realism insists, finally, that the empirical evidence put forward must ultimately be assessed in terms of the credibility of the causal mechanisms that are postulated between cause and effect.8

It is worth noting that emphasis on causal mechanisms has several salutary effects on sociological method. It takes us away from uncritical reliance on standard statistical models just noted (Sørensen). But it also may take us away from excessive emphasis on large-scale classification of events into revolutions, democracies, or religions, and toward more specific analysis of the processes and features that serve to discriminate among instances of large social categories. Charles Tilly emphasizes this point in his arguments for causal narratives in comparative sociology (Tilly 1995). He writes, “I am arguing that regularities in political life are very broad, indeed transhistorical, but do not operate in the form of recurrent structures and processes at a large scale. They consist of recurrent

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8 For an extensive and fair view of the salience of causal explanation in sociology, see (Abbott 1998). Abbott provides an admirable analysis of the itinerary of “causalism” through the development of sociology and the historical social sciences. He offers an interpretation of “causal explanation” for the social sciences that does not reduce to correlation, association, general laws, inductivism, or positivism.
causes which in different circumstances and sequences compound into highly variable
but nonetheless explicable effects” (Tilly 1995 p. 1601).9

**Methodological localism**

In order to have a satisfactory theory of causation for a given realm, we need to have
a good understanding of the ontology of this realm. How do things work among entities and
processes of this sort? This requires that we improve upon the theory of social ontology that
we currently possess. For the social and historical sciences, this question comes down to
this: What do we mean by “the social world”? What are “actors,” “social behavior,” “social
groups,” “social life,” “social organization,” “social structure,” or “society”? And how does
causation work among things of this nature?

I offer a social ontology that I refer to as “**methodological localism**” (Little
forthcoming). It affirms that there are large social structures and facts that influence social
outcomes, but it insists that these structures are only possible insofar as they are embodied in
the actions and states of socially constructed individuals. With individualism, this position
embraces the point that individuals are the bearers of social structures and causes. There is
no such thing as an autonomous social force; rather, all social properties and effects are
conveyed through the individuals who constitute a population at a time. Against
individualism, however, methodological localism affirms the “social-ness” of social actors.
ML denies the possibility or desirability of characterizing the individual pre-socially.
Instead, the individual is understood as a socially constituted actor, affected by large current
social facts such as value systems, social structures, extended social networks, and the like.

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9 Other sociologists take the opposite approach and argue that general sociological theory provides the basis
for identifying generalizable causal mechanisms across cases (Kiser and Hechter 1991), (Kiser 1998). On
this stance, the only sociological interest in causal inquiry is in the discovery and validation of hypotheses
about generalizable causal mechanisms linking factors and structures to outcomes.
In other words, ML denies the possibility of reductionism from the level of the social to the
level of a population of non-social individuals; rather, the individual is constituted by social
facts, and the social facts are constituted by the current characteristics of the persons who
make them up. Furthermore, ML affirms the existence of social constructs beyond the
purview of the individual actor or group. Political institutions exist—and they are embodied
in the actions and states of officials, citizens, criminals, and opportunistic others. These
institutions have real effects on individual behavior and on social processes and outcomes—
always mediated through the structured circumstances of agency of the myriad participants in
these institutions and the affected society. This perspective emphasizes the contingency of
social processes, the mutability of social structures over space and time, and the variability of
human social systems (norms, urban arrangements, social practices, …).

This amounts to a fairly limited social ontology. What exists is the socially
constructed individual, within a congeries of concrete social relations and institutions. The
socially constructed individual possesses beliefs, norms, opportunities, powers, and
capacities. These features are socially constructed in a perfectly ordinary sense: the
individual has acquired his or her beliefs, norms, powers, and desires through social contact
with other individuals and institutions, and the powers and constraints that define the domain
of choice for the individual are largely constituted by social institutions (property systems,
legal systems, educational systems, organizations, and the like).10 Inevitably, social
organizations at any level are constituted by the individuals who participate in them and
whose behavior and ideas are influenced by them; sub-systems and organizations through
which the actions of the organization are implemented; and the material traces through which

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10 (Hacking 1999) offers a critique of misuses of the concept of social construction. This use is not
vulnerable to his criticisms, however.
the policies, memories, and acts of decision are imposed on the environment: buildings, archives, roads, etc. All features of the organization are embodied in the actors and institutional arrangements that carry the organization at a given time. At each point we are invited to ask the question: what are the social mechanisms through which this institution or organization exerts influence on other organizations and on agents’ behavior?

The mutability and variety of social institutions—and therefore the inappropriateness of an essentialist view of “capitalism”, “city”, or “clientelism”—follows from a universal feature of human social agency. At any given time agents are presented with a repertoire of available institutions and variants (along the lines of Tilly’s point about a repertoire of strategies of collective action or Bourdieu’s analysis of social practice; (Tilly 1986), (Bourdieu 1977)). The content of the repertoire is historically specific, reflecting the examples that are currently available and that are available through historical memory. And the repertoire of institutional choices for Chinese decision makers was significantly different from that available in early modern Europe (Wong 1997). The looseness of social organization emphasized in this account derives from the human ability to imagine new forms of social interaction; to innovate socially and collectively; to defect from social expectations. As a result, we get differential degrees of fit between individual action and “structures,” “institutions,” and “norms”; we get a regular propensity to “morphing” of higher-level structures. Agents create institutions; they support institutions; they conform their behavior to the incentives and inhibitions created by institutions; they defy or quietly defect from norms; they act opportunistically or on principle; ... Therefore it is a serious
metaphysical error to “reify” social structures: to attribute timeless and unchanging properties to them.\textsuperscript{11}

This methodological-localism approach has numerous intellectual advantages: it avoids the reification of the social that is characteristic of holism and structuralism, it abjures social “action at a distance,” and it establishes the intellectual basis for understanding the non-availability of strong laws of nature among social phenomena. It is possible to offer numerous examples of social research underway today that illustrate the perspective of methodological localism; in fact, almost all rigorous social theorizing and research can be accommodated to the assumptions of methodological localism. But a particularly strong example is to be found in the literature associated with the “new institutionalism”—a body of work that attempts to locate the social effects of particular institutional arrangements (Brinton and Nee 1998). The efforts to identify the causal mechanisms associated with popular politics and mobilization in the work of Charles Tilly and his colleagues represent another good example (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001).\textsuperscript{12} And in fact, most of the works by comparativist researchers who are sometimes characterized as structuralist are in fact compatible with the approach of methodological localism, including Skocpol and Tilly.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} Some scholars are turning their attention directly to the question, how do institutions change? Kathleen Thelen’s contribution is a valuable start on this question (Thelen 2003). “Despite the importance assigned by many scholars to the role of institutions in structuring political life, the issue of how these institutions are themselves shaped and reconfigured over time has not received the attention it is due” (Thelen 2003).

\textsuperscript{12} “Our book shifts the search away from general models like rational choice that purport to summarize whole categories of contention and moves toward the analysis of smaller-scale causal mechanisms that recur in different combinations with different aggregate consequences in varying historical settings” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001).

\textsuperscript{13} Examples of theories and analyses contained in current comparative and historical social science research may be found in (McDonald 1996) and (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003). Many of these examples illustrate the fecundity of the approach to social analysis that emphasizes the “socially constructed individual within a concrete set of social relations” as the molecule of social action. See also (Sewell 2005) for a treatment of historical change that is compatible with this approach.
Causal mechanisms and microfoundations

What is the nature of the causal relations among structures and entities that make up the social world? What sorts of mechanisms are available to substantiate causal claims such as “population pressure causes technological innovation,” “sharecropping causes technological stagnation in agriculture,” or “limited transport and communication technology causes infeudation of political power”? What are the causal mechanisms through which social practices, ideologies and systems of social belief are transmitted? How are structures and practices instantiated or embodied, and how are they transmitted and maintained? Do causal claims need to be generalizable? How do historians identify and justify causal hypotheses?

The general nature of the mechanisms that underlie sociological causation has been very much the subject of debate. Several broad approaches may be identified: agent-based models and social influence models. Significantly, both these approaches are consistent with the ontology of methodological localism. The former follow the strategy of aggregating the results of individual-level choices into macro-level outcomes; the latter attempt to identify the factors that work behind the backs of agents to influence their choices. (Sørensen refers to these as “pull” and “push” models; (Sørensen 1998).) Thomas Schelling’s apt title *Micromotives and Macrobehavior* (Schelling 1978) captures the logic of the former approach. Local motives aggregate into large-scale sociological phenomena, with sometimes highly unpredictable results deriving from locally purposive behavior. Jon Elster has also shed light on the ways in which the tools of rational choice
theory support the construction of largescale sociological explanations; (Elster 1989).\textsuperscript{14}

The “social influence” approach (the “push” approach) attempts to identify socially salient influences such as race, gender, educational status, and to provide detailed accounts of how these factors influence or constrain individual trajectories—thereby affecting sociological outcomes. Factors at this level too need to be disaggregated into effects on individual agents, along with an account of how these effects aggregate to higher-level sociological patterns.

The general answers I propose as a theory of social causation flow from the perspective of methodological localism. Social structures and institutions have causal properties and effects that play an important role within historical change (the social causation thesis). They exercise their causal powers through their influence on individual actions, beliefs, values, and choices (the microfoundations thesis). Structures are themselves constituted by individuals, so social causation and agency represent an ongoing iterative process (the agency-structure thesis). Finally, I argue for a \textit{microfoundational} approach to social causation: the causal properties of social entities— institutions, organizations, states, economies, and the like—derive from the structured circumstances of agency of the individuals who make up those entities, and from nothing else (Little 1989). There are no causal powers at work within the domain of the social that do not proceed through structured individual agency. And hypotheses concerning social and historical causation can be rigorously formulated, criticized, and defended using a variety of tools: case-study methodology, comparative study, statistical study, and application of social theory. (See (Little 1998) for further exposition of these remarks.)

\textsuperscript{14} Emirbayer and Mische provide an extensive review of the current state of debate on the concept of agency; (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Other significant contributions concerning the role of agency in sociological explanations include (Reed 1997) and (Shilling 1997).
The microfoundations thesis holds that an assertion of an explanatory relationship at the social level (causal, functional, structural) must be supplemented by two things: knowledge about what it is about the local circumstances of the typical individual that leads him to act in such a way as to bring about this relationship; and knowledge of the aggregative processes that lead from individual actions of that sort to an explanatory social relationship of this sort.\(^{15}\) So if we are interested in analysis of the causal properties of states and governments, we need to arrive at an analysis of the institutions and constrained patterns of individual behavior through which the state’s purposes are effected. We need to raise questions such as these: How do states exercise influence throughout society? What are the institutional embodiments at lower levels that secure the impact of law, taxation, conscription, contract enforcement, and other central elements of state behavior?\(^{16}\) And if we are interested in analyzing the causal role that systems of norms play in social behavior, we need to discover some of the specific institutional practices through which individuals come to embrace a given set of norms.\(^{17}\)

The microfoundations thesis requires that we attempt to discover the pathways by which socially constituted individuals are influenced by distant social circumstances. There

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\(^{15}\) We may refer to explanations of this type as “aggregative explanations.” An aggregative explanation is one that provides an account of a social mechanism that conveys multiple individual patterns of activity and demonstrates the collective or macro-level consequence of these actions. Thomas Schelling’s *Micromotives and Macrobehavior* (Schelling 1978) provides a developed treatment and numerous examples of this model of social explanation.

\(^{16}\) An excellent recent example of historical analysis of Chinese local politics illustrates the value of this microfoundational approach: “But the villages were not totally out of the government’s reach; nor was the subcounty administration necessarily chaotic, inefficient, and open to malfeasance. In fact, during most of the imperial times, the state was able to extract enough taxes to meet its normal needs and maintain social order in most of the country. What made this possible was a wide variety of informal institutions in local communities that grew out of the interaction between government demands and local initiatives to carry out day-to-day governmental functions” (Li 2005 : 1).

\(^{17}\) “Explanations of social norms must do more than merely acknowledge the constraining effects of normative rules on social action. Such explanations must address the process that culminates in the establishment of one of these rules as the common norm in a community. One of the keys to the establishment of a new norm is the ability of those who seek to change norms to enforce compliance with the new norm” (Knight and Ensminger 1998 : 105).
is no action at a distance in social life; instead, individuals have the values that they have, the styles of reasoning, the funds of factual and causal beliefs, etc., as a result of the structured experiences of development that they have undergone as children and adults. On this perspective, large social facts and structures do indeed exist; but their causal properties are entirely defined by the current states of psychology, norm, and action of the individuals who currently exist. Systems of norms and bodies of knowledge exist—but only insofar as individuals (and material traces) embody and transmit them. So when we assert that a given social structure causes a given outcome, we need to be able to specify the local pathways through which individual actors embody this causal process. That is, we need to be able to provide an account of the causal mechanisms that convey social effects.

If this microfoundational view is correct, then there is no such thing as autonomous social causation; there are no social causal mechanisms that do not supervene upon the structured choices and behavior of individuals. The mechanisms through which social causation is mediated turn on the structured circumstances of choice of intentional agents, and nothing else. This is not equivalent to methodological individualism or reductionism because it admits that social arrangements and circumstances affect individual action. For it is entirely likely that a microfoundational account of the determinants of individual action will include reference to social relations, norms, structures, cognitive frameworks, etc. This means that social science research that sheds light on the individual-level mechanisms through which social phenomena emerge have a foundational place within the social sciences: rational choice theory, theory of institutions and organizations, public choice

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18 Hedström and Swedberg endorse this position in their exposition of social mechanisms: “A corollary to this principle states that there exist no such things as “macro-level mechanisms”; macro-level entities or events are always linked to one another via combinations of situational mechanisms, action-formation mechanisms, and transformational mechanisms” (Hedström and Swedberg 1998).
theory, analytical Marxism, or social psychology. What these fields have in common is a commitment to providing microfoundations for social explanations.

On the methodological-localist approach, the causal capacities of social entities are to be explained in terms of the structuring of preferences, worldviews, information, incentives, and opportunities for agents. The causal powers or capacities of a social entity inhere in its power to affect individuals’ behavior through incentives, preference-formation, belief-acquisition, or powers and opportunities. The micro-mechanism that conveys cause to effect is supplied by an account of the actions of agents with specific goals, beliefs, and powers. Social entities can exert their influence, then, in several possible ways.

- They can alter the incentives presented to individuals.
- They can alter the preferences of individuals.
- They can alter the beliefs of individuals. (constraints on knowledge; ideology)
- They can alter the powers or opportunities available to individuals. (social structures and institutions)
- They can confer power on some agents relative to other agents

Plausible examples of institutions, structures, or practices that have causal properties might include—

- Forms of labor organization: family farming, wage labor, co-operative labor
• Surplus extraction systems and property systems: taxation, interest, rent, corvée labor

• Institutions of village governance: elites, village councils

• Commercialization: exchange, markets, prices, subsistence cash crops, systems of transportation and communication

• Organized social violence: banditry, piracy, local militias

• Extra-local political organizations: court, military, taxation, law

• Systems of collective water resource management

In each instance it is straightforward to sketch out the sorts of microfoundations that would be needed in order to discern the causal powers of the institution: the direction of individual behavior within these arrangements and the aggregate patterns of social change that are likely to result. The result of this line of thought is that institutions have effects on individual behavior (incentives, constraints, indoctrination, preference formation), which in turn produce aggregate social outcomes.

Social causal ascriptions thus depend on common characteristics of agents (e.g., the central axioms of rational choice theory, or other theories of practical cognition and choice). I would assert, then, that the most basic foundations for social causal explanation are stories about the characteristics of typical human agents within specific institutional settings. The causal powers of a particular social institution—a conscription system, a revenue system, a system of democratic legislation—derive from the incentives, powers, and knowledge that these institutions provide for participants. Social entities thus possess causal powers in a derivative sense: they possess characteristics that affect individuals’ behavior in simple,
widespread ways. Given features of the common constitution and circumstances of individuals, such alterations at the social level produce regularities of behavior at the individual level that eventuate in new social circumstances. $S_1 \Rightarrow \{\text{structured environment of individual choice}\} \Rightarrow S_2$.

The idea that a social entity has causal powers suggests that the constitution of the entity is such as to lend necessity to certain transitions and not others. Is there a relation among social states of affairs that conveys necessity? What features of social life would support such a judgment? What connections between states of affairs are available that would provide an interpretation of social necessity? Elsewhere I use the idea of a "logic of institutions" to attempt to capture the idea that a set of social circumstances brings about certain types of outcomes (Little 1986). I describe an institutional-logic explanation as an analysis that is concerned with determining the results for social organization and development of an entrenched set of incentives and constraints on individual action (Little 1986 : 34). Given the stylized arrangements described in the explanans, we can expect the outcome. I maintain that this is the sole form of necessity that can be discerned among social phenomena. Note, however, that the necessity that attaches to an institutional logic is solely grounded in the intentionality of the agents whose actions are affected by the arrangements under scrutiny. The explanatory force of an institutional logic depends fundamentally on facts about individual agency.

**Examples of “social mechanisms”**

It is useful to offer a deliberately heterogeneous list of social processes that have served as hypotheses about social mechanisms in the social sciences:
• Freerider problems undermining effective collective action (Olson 1965)
• Logic of prisoners’ dilemma explaining defection of Catholic villages in colonial Vietnam (Popkin 1979)
• The market mechanism as an explanation of price equilibria among independent producers, traders, and consumers
• Sørensen’s model of the mechanisms of career and income (Sørensen 2001)
• Practical cognition errors underlying common forms of social action (Kahneman and Tversky)
• Political entrepreneurship as a mechanism leading to ethnic conflict (Kohli 1990)
• The pre-famine mechanism (Sen 1981)
• “Stereotype threat” as a mechanism underlying black-white performance gap (Steele and Aronson 1995)
• The “ratchet effect” as a mechanism of change in social tastes (Lieberson 2000)
• Pattern of recruitment into a labor union as a mechanism of union radicalism (Kimeldorf 1988)

Consider a few examples of plausible social-causal explanations. Transport systems have the causal capacity to influence patterns of settlement; settlements arise and grow at hubs of the transport system. Why so? It is not a brute fact, representing a bare correlation of the two factors. Instead, it is the understandable result of a fuller description of the way that commerce and settlement interact. Agents have an interest in settling in places where
they can market and gain income. The transport system is the structure through which economic activity flows. Proximity to the transport system is economically desirable for agents: they can expect rising density of demand for their services and supply of the things they need. So when a new transport possibility emerges—extension of a rail line, steamer traffic farther up a river, or a new shipping technique that permits cheap transportation to offshore islands—we can expect a new pattern of settlement to emerge as well.

Consider, for a second example, Robert Klitgaard’s treatment of efforts to reduce corruption within the Philippine Bureau of Internal Revenue (Klitgaard 1988). The key to these reforms was implementation of better means of collecting information about corruption at higher levels of organization and administration. This innovation had a substantial effect on the probability of detection of corrupt officials, which in turn had the effect of deterring corrupt practices. This institutional arrangement has the causal power to reduce corruption because it creates a set of incentives and powers in individuals that lead to anti-corruption behavior.19

A third example of social explanation that illustrates the importance of disaggregating social processes onto underlying conjunctions of agency and structure, and the contingency of the social causal processes that result, is found in a large literature on the study of social movements. The literature on “political opportunity structures” emphasizes the contingency of mobilization of social movements depending on the array of opportunities that exist at a given time. Sidney Tarrow summarizes the approach in these terms: “Rather than focus on some supposedly universal cause of collective action, writers in this tradition examine political structures as incentives to the formation of social movements” (Tarrow 1996 : 41).

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19 Similar examples of arguments about the logic of power relations in pre-modern societies may be found in Mann (Mann 1986).
The openness to contingency characteristic of this approach parallels the approach to contentious politics offered in (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001).

Concluding observations

We can come to several concluding observations.

- Social entities exercise causal powers through their capacity to affect the choices and behavior of the individuals who make up these entities, and through no other avenue.

- Social processes should be expected to demonstrate a significant level of contingency, path-dependency, and variability, given the multiple types of causal mechanisms, institutional variations, and features of individual agency that come together to bring about a given outcome.

- We should not expect to discover strong “social laws” or governing social generalizations across social phenomena and settings. Instead, the most we should expect are the exception-laden regularities that derive from “common structures of agency” in multiple social settings.

- It is possible to offer valid and justified causal explanations of singular events, by discovering through historical and empirical research the traces of the causal mechanisms that brought about these events.

- A central intellectual role for empirical theories in the social sciences and social psychology—“theories of the middle range”—is the formulation of descriptions of typical causal mechanisms in social circumstances of “socially situated agents”.

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• It is difficult to discern a valuable intellectual role for sweeping social theories intended to apply to all social settings: theories of class, state, race, kinship, … Instead, we should recognize the contingency and variability of the social world, and look rather to contextually defined social relations and the causal mechanisms that derive from them.

• The search for causal mechanisms complements two other important forms of social research and inference: statistical analysis of covariance and “method of difference” approaches to comparative research. In each of these methodologies, it is desirable to have empirically supported hypotheses about underlying causal-social mechanisms that establish the causal correlations that are asserted.
References


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