

# **Kin, Class, and Identity**

**Lecture at Cornell University,  
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# Thanks

- FMS, Satya, Linda, Paula, ...
- Great interdisciplinary work is being done by this group.
- Thanks to Dominick for the opportunity of participating today.
- A lot of this work is available in Microfoundations, Causation and Method, and on my webpage at UM-D.

# Four themes

- There is exciting and innovative work occurring within the social and historical sciences, and it has something to offer humanists.
- One important line of thought, within philosophy and methodology of social science, is the position of causal realism. “seek out causal mechanisms” for outcomes and patterns.
- The micro-foundations thesis: an understanding of what social phenomena are, and how agents and structures bring about outcomes
- A beginning of treatment of “social identity” from the perspective of causal realism and microfoundations

# The approach ...

- The perspective I will adopt here takes up one of the challenges that Satya Mohanty, Paula Moya, and others present within the context of the “post-positivist realism” approach to minority studies and literary theory (Moya and Hames-Garcia 2000): to be realist about social identities. These authors proposed that we should pay close attention to the social and historical mechanisms through which identities are transmitted and embodied. Social identities are embedded in people’s ideas, habits of mind, and schemes of thought; and they emerge as the result of a series of experiences and social institutions. So the challenge is to identify some of the main social mechanisms through which common identities are formed, maintained, and transmitted within various groups over time.

# Relevance of good social science research to humanities

- Today a focus on some ideas about social methodology--I hope pertinent to your concerns
- Both humanities and social sciences face something of a crisis! New thinking is needed.
- What is the connection? Literature explores specifics of historically given values, “interior” surfaces; and powerful clues to social relations

# Relevance of good social science research to humanities

- The connections work in both directions. Literature and critics provide new tools for understanding and interrogating social identities and mechanisms
- Critics can learn as well from good, boundary-breaking thinking in the areas of social and historical research
- ⑩ The central role of narrative in embodying, developing, and reproducing identities—individually and socially

# Examples ...

- a powerful example from the social sciences: James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*
- An example from literary studies: Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*

# Philosophical consideration of the social sciences

- A careful and sensitive exploration of the conceptual and epistemic issues that arise in constructing knowledge of social and historical phenomena.
- Not “pure” philosophy
- Careful attention to good, imaginative and rigorous social inquiry. Pay attention to “best practice”; see between the lines.
- These are surprising and difficult issues, and the old answers (naturalism, unity of science, positivism) don’t illuminate.
- “New” philosophy of history

# Rigorous social and historical theories of identities

- a method for exploration of social and historical knowledge: look to the most gifted practicing historians and social scientists
- Theories of specific identities—or something else, akin to “biographies”?
- Thompson, Scott, Tilly, Bloch

# Causal realism

- My general thesis--and one that is gaining ground among philosophers of social science:
- Social explanation requires discovery of the underlying causal mechanisms that give rise to outcomes of interest.
- Social mechanisms: concrete social processes
- Social explanation does not take the form of “inductive discovery of laws”
- It also casts some doubt on the most general theories; it looks instead for specific causal variation.
- Variety, contingency, alternative pathways

# Microfoundations model

- a specific thesis within the philosophy of social science:
  - Claims about “macro”-level phenomena require hypotheses about the underlying local circumstances of purposive agents whose choices bring about the macro-outcome.
  - Agents within structures; structures embodied in the states of individuals
  - Pure structural causation and functional arguments are precluded.
  - “Methodological localism” -- Identify the mechanisms at the local level!

# Examples of microfoundations for popular politics

- material factors, interests, organization, solidarity, leadership
- An implication: a simple theory of class doesn't adequately analyze collective action.
- Another: we can expect a diverse range of outcomes—as Tilly documents and as is evident in Chinese history.

# 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.
- Example: Mancur Olson, failures of collective action
- Prisoners dilemma arguments

# Institutional logic explanations

- An “institutional logic” explanation attempts to bring “structure” and “agent” together. It explains how a set of institutions create incentives, powers, and constraints for agents--and explains how an aggregate outcome results from agents acting within those incentives, powers, and constraints.

# Collective action and social behavior

- separate uncoordinated individual actions constitute much of social phenomena--e.g. traffic patterns.
- Strategic behavior--which may be competitive or cooperative--has received much attention.
- The category of “collective action” is particularly important: action where individuals act out of regard for shared purposes, and attempt to coordinate their actions with others.

# The rational-choice approach; deliberative agency

- “Individuals are purposive, goal-directed, and rational”
- their behavior can be understood by understanding their purposes, goals, and beliefs
- surprising outcomes can be explained by features of beliefs, purposes, and decision-making rules.

# Identity politics theories

- “Individuals are motivated by their collective affinities-- religious, sexual, kinship, national”
- identity features make collectivity and solidarity substantially more effective.
- Identities are generative of behavior / action
- Primordialists; constructed and imagined.

# Why are identities problematic?

- The powerful example of “structural” history
- Subjective, plastic, hard to observe or measure
- limited historical “traces”--e.g. Richard Cobb on sans-culottes
- Bloch on the diffusion of agricultural knowledge/technique

# Mentalite of the French Revolution

- “If you want to understand the French Revolution, he argues, strike out for the uncharted wilderness constituting the revolutionary "Mentalité." The historiographical frontier is not to be found in statistical tables, economic models, computer print-outs, or social systems, but in the lost mental world of obscure persons like Marie Besnard. Cobb is the only person to have explored this territory. For a quarter of a century, he has tracked down revolutionary "wildmen" ("enragés"), counterrevolutionary crackpots, neighborhood militants, primitive anarchists, and all the varieties of eccentric humanity that he could find in the labyrinthine ways of France's archives.

# Mentalite of the French Revolution

- “Cobb must have logged more hours in more French archives than any other historian, and he has done it with passion, not Guggenheims, living down and out in Paris and sustained by what Johan Huizinga (another great historian of mentalités) called "the impulse toward the past"—the exaltation at opening a dossier that had been closed for centuries and at coming into contact with vanished humanity.” (Darnton review)

# What is an identity?

- An identity is a set of self-understandings, norms, and ideas possessed by a person; that hang together as a cluster in a group at a time; and that lead members of that group to identify and act as such.
- An identity is a *concrete psychological reality*: moral framework, social ideology, affinities and allegiances, worldview, emotions, norms and values. Each of these can be investigated in substantial detail.
- An identity has much to do with *narrative*: the stories we tell to say “who we are,” the stories we tell about who “our” people are. These narratives are flexible and influential for our actions and choices, and the actions in turn fold into the continuing narrative.

# Identity ...

- The various components of identity can be culturally variable; so identities can be diverse and historically plastic. The fact of human cognitive and moral plasticity has large implications. Individuals and communities can rewrite the code.
- There are important similarities in these sets in individuals in a time and place, because of common experiences, common institutions, and common historical settings. Putting the point over-simply: individuals develop through the experiences they have with people and institutions; commonalities in these experiences should give rise to common features of mentality.

# Identity ...

- Some of these similarities correspond to common experiences of oppression (race, gender); others are durable but arbitrary traditions of taste and practice (Alsatian, Breton).
- There are significant variations in each of these ensembles of identity elements across individuals, across time, across culture, and across group. For example, among “millenarian White Lotus adherents” in Qing North China there are important differences in the mix of values, the relative strength of some of the values, and the presence or absence of other cultural features. Thus there is no “essential White Lotus identity,” but rather a cluster of similarities among rural Buddhist people in the region. Likewise, “communist peasants”

# Identity ...

- Group identities supervene upon facts about individuals, and consist in nothing more. This is the individual-level fact: that individuals have a set of attitudes, beliefs, norms, and self-ascriptions that have the characteristics of a “group or ethnic identity”; it is in these individual facts that the group identity consists.
- An identity is to some extent motivational or behavioral: persons sharing an identity have some common motives; some level of preparation for cohesive action; and a common set of assumptions about the world that encourages similar behavior. This is what makes mobilization around ethnic groups a feasible strategy for political activity.

# Identity ...

- These complexes of values, beliefs, and traditions influence action and behavior (e.g., traditions of solidarity among miners), so identities can have significant historical effects.
- The role of identity in creating qualities of sociality—altruism and other-concern, loyalty, solidarity and fairness—is crucial for social behavior. These qualities differ consistently across communities and across time. These social action features derive from both theories of how things work and from norm and value assumptions.

# Identity ...

- The self-referential aspect of identity is important for the explanation of behavior and agency. If I am a Welsh miner and I learn that “miners stick together,” my own character may take on this feature—even if I also have the capacity for timidity. Thus the identity I come to possess in turn affects the development of my individual personality, which in turn influences my dispositions to behavior.

# How do identities feature into historical outcomes?

- Hidden transcripts (James Scott)
- a basis of solidarity--potential
- repertoires of action (Charles Tilly)
- a basis of trust and mutual understanding

# The causal role of “identities”

- To avoid: simple formulations like “peasants support the monarchy,” “Hindus hate Muslims”, “workers are proto-revolutionary”
- “class consciousness,” “norms and values”
- What are the causal foundations are that reproduce and sustain this cluster of items?
- What are some of the normative/coercive elements that gain consent around the behaviors associated with the identity?
- relationship between the individual and a social network of interaction among people bearing this identity

# The causal processes that constitute identities

- Here concrete, careful, and surprising social science and historical investigation is called for
- social theories of “social development”
- evaluation of identity-shaping institutions: family, church/mosque/temple
- during childhood development through which the person absorbs values, cognitive frameworks, worldviews, and dispositions

# The causal processes that constitute identities

- Each individual arrives at a durable set of values, cognitive frameworks, narratives, and assumptions of commonsense through routine processes of socialization.
- A normal human raised in typical social settings will internalize values, worldview, assumptions, through routine processes of cultivation, socialization, and language learning.
- But this process is not deterministic or mechanistic.

# Institutions of identity formation

- Institutions shape and propel the development of the social psychology of the individuals— young and mature—who pass through them.
- Important instances include
  - family,
  - schooling,
  - religious institutions,
  - youth networks,
  - military,
  - and media.

# Common circumstances

- individuals develop their identity elements in highly common circumstances—work, race, sexuality, geography, urban landscape, rural circumstances, language.
- And they do so in interaction with each other in ways that reinforce identity elements.
- Visible and invisible codes of conduct encourage and sanction a variety of forms of behavior for people in various of these groupings—with effects both on external behavior and internalized norms and expectations.

# Common experiences

- The common experience of discrimination, coercion, and domination creates a social psychology for members of these groups that influences worldview, norms, and self-expectations.
- The fact of racialized treatment of people based on racial attributes creates another set of identity-forming elements of social psychology for members of visible racial groups.

# Common experiences

- The fact of discrimination and unequal treatment, the fact of the threat of racial violence for non-conforming members of racial groups—has evident effects on the social psychology of members of groups defined in these terms.
- How identities function as causal mechanisms in collective action

# **Marxist theory of class behavior**

- rational self-interest; material basis of identity
- class consciousness: Marx, Thompson

# A comment about “social practices”

- Many similar characteristics
- Not “conscious”
- Artifacts permit tracking over time and space
- Practices allow us to document innovation and diffusion of innovation

# Closing ...

- Social identities are historically important
- They show remarkable variation across people, places, times
- We can understand their workings better by having a better understanding of the social mechanisms that produce and reproduce them
- Great historians and social scientists can add much to the humanist's understandings of social identities.