Levels of the Social

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The frame

We can characterize "the social" from the concrete level of individuals in specific

relations, to the global structures and institutions that constitute the modern world system—

with many stops in between. Social phenomena can be analyzed through a wide variety of

contrasts: individual versus institutional, face-to-face versus anonymous, local versus distant,

economic versus political, experiential versus structural, immediate versus nested, and many

other dimensions of contrast. Do these distinctions represent different *levels* of social

phenomena? Are there distinguishable levels of organization within the domain of the

social—perhaps from "close to the actor" to "distant", simple to complex, or from concrete to

abstract? How do familiar objects of social science investigation like systems of norms,

social networks, local social units, families, labor organizations, practices, organizations,

institutions, and political or economic structures fit into these questions of level within our

conception of the social? And how about causation? Can we assert causal connections from

one level to another? Do high-level social structures have causal powers? Do they have

effects on local behavior and local institutions? The task for this paper is to consider how to

think rigorously about these levels within the social and within social science

conceptualizing.

The issue of "levels" within the social can be formulated from several complementary perspectives:

- **Ontology**: what are social entities composed of?

- **Explanation**: do social explanations need to "reduce" to facts about the actions of individuals?

- **Causation**: do "higher-level" social entities have causal powers?

- **Inquiry**: at what level should (a given style of) social inquiry focus its efforts at descriptive and explanatory investigation?

- **Description**: are there "level" requirements or constraints on social description?

- **Generalization**: are there higher-level "types" of social entities that recur in different historical and social settings?

The issues discussed here are important in their own right; but they are even more important because social science research needs some fresh thinking about the definition of the object of social science inquiry and the nature of social science explanation.[1] Too many areas of social science research are motivated by bad analogies with the natural sciences; too many social scientists make facile assumptions about "social structures" in analogy with "physical structures"; and too many work on the assumption that the goal of social science research should be the discovery of generalizations across types of social phenomena: wars, revolutions, regime types, cities, or classes of people. Clear thinking about these

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[1] Concerns about the most basis assumptions underlying contemporary social science research have been raised by (George and Bennett 2005), (Lieberson 1987), (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), (Rabinow 2003), (Steinmetz 2004), (Steinmetz 2005), (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2004), and numerous contributors to (McDonald 1996) and (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003).

fundamentals—the nature of the social; the degree of hierarchy that may exist among social phenomena or structures; and the relations between structured human agency and social outcomes—can help frame our thinking more effectively as we formulate social science research objectives.[2]

This may seem to be a "tired" question, invoking old debates about methodological individualism and holism. I would like to frame the issues here in ways that open new and more fruitful insights. The social sciences have to some extent settled into stereotyped assumptions about the methods and character of social science knowledge. We need to seek out a methodology and ontology that are well suited to the intellectual challenges of the social sciences, given what we know about the social realm. We often make the mistake of reification of social phenomena, and we sometimes go in for a naive naturalism that offers bad analogies with the ordering of "natural" phenomena. Fresh thinking about the subject matter and ontology of the social can allow us to formulate more insightful forms of social research and theory.[3]

The general topic of social levels has been addressed from the perspective of several philosophical theories about social facts. The simplest view is the theory of methodological individualism: the view that social facts and assertions must be reducible in principle to facts and assertions about individuals. Central proponents of methodological individualism include the Austrian school of economics, many economists, and some political scientists.[4] Methodological individualism is one version of a requirement of "inter-level reductionism"

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[2] Lieberson offers equally deep criticisms of the effort to model social science research on the natural sciences; (Lieberson 1987).
[3] Fresh approaches to the topic of relations across levels of social life have been offered in the past decade. Essays in (Alexander 1987) provide a broad discussion of these issues, as do several contributions in (Lichbach and Zuckerman 1997), (McDonald 1996), and (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003).
[4] See (Weber 1968 : 13), (Popper 1957), (Watkins 1968) for primary expressions of the position. (Lukes 1973) and (Miller 1978) offer philosophical criticisms of the position.

that has also been important in biology and psychology; reductionists hold that patterns or laws at a higher level of organization must be reduced to a set of laws at the lower level (for example, descriptions of the workings of the human cognitive system should be reduced to facts about neurophysiological organization of the brain). On this approach, we should replace higher-level concepts with lower-level concepts, and we should explain higher-level outcomes as the result of the workings of lower-level processes. The theory of supervenience offers a related but less restrictive view regarding social ontology and explanation: social entities are dependent upon facts about individuals, but it is not necessary to reduce statements at the social level to equivalent statements couched in the language of individuals.[5] The theory of supervenience may be summarized under the slogan: Properties at level A supervene upon properties at level B if and only if there is no difference at level A without a difference at level B. Each of these theories gives some form of primacy to facts about individuals, deriving from the obvious truth that social phenomena are constituted by the actions and mental states of individuals.

There is another perspective on social life that doubts the availability or legitimacy of higher-level social structures, under the slogan of pursuing "local knowledge." This approach is most associated with the discipline of anthropology, but some historians and sociologists also adopt the perspective.[6] On this approach, the task of social research is to discover the features of local life and interaction that are found in a given location. There are

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[5] See Yaegwon Kim's exposition of this concept (Kim 1984, 1993); (Kim 2005).

[6] Clifford Geertz makes extensive use of this phrase (Geertz 1983), but many other social investigators share elements of the perspective. See, for example, James Scott's treatment of local knowledge in *Seeing Like a State* (Scott 1998). Marcus and Fischer represent the ethnographic preference for localism in these terms: "A jeweler's-eye view of the world is thus urgently needed, and this is precisely where the strength and attractiveness of cultural anthropology reside at the moment. … Anthropology's distinctive method of research, ethnography, has long been focused precisely on problems of the recording, interpretation, and description of closely observed social and cultural processes" (Marcus and Fischer 1986 : 15). But Marcus

no higher-level social facts or structures; there is only the ensemble of local relationships and actors in direct interaction with each other. This approach characterizes the work of social scientists who pursue highly localistic studies: local histories, local ethnographies, and local sociological studies. Institutions are invoked only to the extent that local actors perform roles in these institutions.

Opposed to this group of individual-centered views of social entities and explanations is a family of views that assert primacy or independence for social entities and structures. Durkheim's social holism is an instance of this approach; Durkheim asserts that there are social forces and conditions that exert their influence independent from the individual's states of mind. Individuals are influenced by large social facts rather than determining large social facts (Durkheim 1964). This approach implies that social properties are "emergent": they are qualitatively distinct from the properties of individuals, and they emerge only at a certain level of population or complexity. Structuralism asserts that social structures have causal powers that are independent from the actions and states of mind of individuals; social causation is in some sense autonomous from the states and actions of individuals. Social structures are thought to be persistent entities with stable causal properties over time. Examples of enduring social structures might include the absolutist state (Anderson 1974), the Protestant ethic (Weber 1930), the modern world system (Wallerstein 1974), or global trading regimes (Bhagwati 2004). Some versions of Marxism depend on this view (Althusser and Balibar 1970), (Hindess and Hirst 1975), and intimations of this assumption are found in the historical sociologies of Skocpol, Tilly, and Wallerstein ((Skocpol 1979), (Tilly 1984), (Wallerstein 1974)). Holist and structuralist theorists maintain the autonomy and

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and Fischer go on to argue for the need to "represent the embedding of richly described local cultural worlds in larger impersonal systems of political economy" (77).

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independence of social constructs and structures; if they recognize the role that individuals play in "embodying" the structure, they insist on the interchangeability and causal insignificance of these individuals. (A sand dune consists of trillions of grains of sand; but no individual grain of sand influences the shape of the dune.)

There is a third perspective on the question of social levels that is more compelling than either of these extremes of individualism and holism. I refer to the third perspective as "methodological localism," and it is designed to capture the elements of truth involved in both individualism and structuralism. This perspective 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, the moderate 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. 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, …).

The "localism" that is part of the ML position brings social explanation back to the individual, in that it affirms that we must be able to offer "microfoundations" for the pathways by which these socially constituted individuals are influenced by distant social circumstances. There 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.

This 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, as I will argue below, 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). 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.[7]

An example: a farming village

We may begin our inquiry into the question of social levels with a stylized example. Imagine a Chinese farming village consisting of several hundred families. These thousand persons have a dense set of face-to-face social relationships with each other: familial, religious, economic, political, and agricultural. They participate in labor-sharing practices with each other, they gossip about each other, they participate in rituals of life and death together, they buy and sell products from each other, they possess religious and ethnic identities, they sometimes mobilize as bandit gangs or militia organizations in times of stress. These persons also have long-distance relationships with other persons (urban kin, for example) and with governmental institutions (the tax system, political registration system, legal system). Their daily lives are affected by regional, national, and international

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[7] 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

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institutions—grain markets, transportation systems, mass media, institutions of party and state, the institutions of the global trading system. Some are followers of heterodox religious movements with regional and national scope (perhaps the Falun Gong or White Lotus societies). Their life circumstances are affected by both local relationships (a generous landlord, an over-zealous official) and by regional or national networks and institutions (governmental, economic, cultural). So the social reality of the village is multiple and multi-layered: multidimensional, local, distant, personal, anonymous, …

Social science investigators can bring a series of questions into play when they become interested in the village. They may seek to describe some aspects of social life in the village: "What is the standard of living of smallholding peasants and how has it changed in the past 20 years?" They may ask questions about the lived experience of persons in the village: "How do relations of class and patriarchy affect the daily experience of villagers?"; "How have attitudes towards citizenship and equality changed over the past 20 years?" They will ask causal questions: "How has the rising level of private Chinese investment affected labor opportunities in the village?"; "How has China's reproductive policy affected the demography of the village?" They may ask comparative questions: "How do conditions in this village compare to other villages in other regions in China (or in other parts of the country or the continent)?" They may ask questions concerning the links between the village and more distant places: "What is the nature of long-distance credit networks connecting the village to distant cities?" "How are party cadres disciplined, motivated, and controlled by the party bureaucracy?"

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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.

So reflection on the nature of social phenomena and social science can begin in this microcosm without excessive narrowing. Within this example we can immediately see topics of research for practitioners of all the traditional social science disciplines: ethnography, economics, economic history, political science, geography, demography, sociology, and neo-institutionalism. And we can identify different aspects of local life and experience that perhaps correspond to the disciplines: agriculture, trade, religion, social networks, family, inequality, education and mass media. These are "zones" of social activity that can be singled out for systematic study and inquiry by specific disciplines. We can note as well that these segments of social activity are not sharply segregated; so when the farmer cultivates or harvests, he or she may be simultaneously acting economically, culturally, cooperatively, religiously, and fiscally.

There are two stylized forms of isolation that are **not** found in this description. There are no "socially unadorned atomized individuals" in this story; rather, these villagers are fully engaged in a dense network of social relationships, connections, and constraints. But likewise, the village itself is no isolated locus of social activity, but is instead linked inextricably to more distant social forces, institutions, and organizations (government, trading system, religious networks, globalization, off-shore communities, …).

This example suggests several important clues about the layers, levels, and strata of social phenomena. It alerts us to questions about social ontology—the variety of social entities to which we refer in social analysis. The example refers to a variety of social formations and systems at a variety of levels (region, administrative hierarchy, system nestedness, …): the multiple social relationships, institutions, networks, and structures within which people live and act. These social formations are complex agglomerations, bringing

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together the actions and purposes of large numbers of other persons. The social formation is often embedded within a material structure—road networks, government buildings, collections of published regulations and laws. Further, the example provides a microcosm for an understanding of structure and agency; individuals living and acting according to their own purposes, within a set of constraints and conditions that influence their choices. Third, the example draws our attention to the poles of stability and dynamism that so commonly characterize social life: institutions, practices, and traditions that persist and constrain agents, but that change over time as a result of both local and contextual developments.

The example invites us to ask about the composition of social constructions—what they are made up of. What does the "county government" consist in? What constitutes the "periodic market system" for produce, grain, and other commodities? How is the "provincial government and administration" composed, and how does it exert influence in the village? The example also invites us to ask about the mechanisms of social causation that are invoked in the example: how distant social formations exert influence affairs locally—how "the state" influences settlement patterns and collects taxes; how the White Lotus movement influences local people; or how international grain markets influence the local standard of living.

Several extreme, and incorrect, points of view might come forward in response to this example. First, it might be maintained that "all social phenomena are face-to-face and local." On this perspective, the social reality represented in the example is exhausted by a description of the local, lived social relationships that occur among the villagers, and the sporadic contact they have with outsiders. However, this approach is plainly incorrect, in that the village is lodged within a larger political, economic, and natural environment, and these supra-local factors influence and constrain the choices that are made by persons in the

village (a point made forcefully by Jean Comaroff in her excellent ethnography of the Tshidi of South Africa; (Comaroff 1985); see also (Marcus and Fischer 1986 : 77 ff.)). Moreover, the networks of relationships within which villagers operate extend far beyond the village: to the region, the nation, and to off-shore Chinese communities, for example. So "ultra-localism" is a bad description of the nature of the social. Regional, national and international factors permeate and influence social life and agency in the village.

At the other extreme, some might maintain that "social structures" exert an impersonal and pervasive causal power essentially independent from the agency of participants; so local affairs are controlled or programmed by the needs and imperatives of the state, national economic development, or the global economy. This approach is a form of reification—the attribution of causal powers to entities without an understanding of the mechanisms through which those powers are expressed. We need to know how the state succeeds in imposing policies, collecting taxes, and maintaining order at the local level; and this requires an analysis of the connective institutions and organizations through which the state's will is expressed, transmitted, transformed, and deployed locally. So "ultra-structuralism" is also a bad description of the nature of the social. (The insights of the "new institutionalism" represent a response to exactly this concern: an account of the mechanisms through which distant structures and organizations succeed or fail in influencing local behavior (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Brinton and Nee 1998).)

Our example gives a textured illustration of what we mean by the question of "levels of the social"; there are social relations and structures invoked in this example that are intuitively "lower-level", intermediate, and "higher-level"; there is composition of social institutions (local village political authority nested within provincial or national political

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institutions); and there are distant social structures that influence outcomes and actions within the village. So our challenge is to shed some light on how these levels are knit together; how actions and circumstances at one locus have effects at other loci; how subordinate institutions are governed or regulated by higher-level institutions; and whether there are grounds for distinguishing across levels of the social, even provisionally and approximately. In short, we are led to ask how the large and loose network of forms of social organization and causal influence hang together.

It is with respect to this fluid domain of social phenomena, things, structures, agents, ideas, and organizations, that we can ask the question: are there levels of the social? It is a truism that social items are composed of individuals and facts about individuals; does this point have implications for the issue of the levels of social phenomena? Are social formations arrayed in some hierarchical fashion, with some items being "higher level" than others? And what, if anything, can we say about the causal processes that tie these social processes and formations together?

What is the "social world"?

Let us advance our exploration of our topic by asking about the constitution of social entities, and considering whether there are features of the constitution of the social that conform to the idea that some social facts are lower or higher than others. What do we mean by "the social world"? What are "actors," "social behavior," "social groups," "social life," "social organization," "social structure," or "society"? These are inherently open-ended questions, because the "social" itself is open-ended. But we can begin with a few simple premises. The social realm includes **persons** involved in intensional relationships with each other; persons whose beliefs, values, purposes, and ways of thinking have been shaped by

exposure to social relationships and institutions (prior and ongoing); and persons whose actions have effects on the actions and mental states of other persons. Persons are socially constituted; they engage in social acts; and they have effects on social outcomes through their action and inaction. Second, the social includes **organizations and institutions** (governments, armies, labor unions, bandit gangs), which can be described more concretely (the persons who constitute the corners and connectors of the organization) or more abstractly (the rules and modes of functioning that characterize the organization). The social includes as well **social structures** (states, trading systems, international regimes); systems of **ideas, practices, norms, and values**; and large **factors** of human interaction (race, gender, class, sexual identity). And the social culminates in groups of individuals who possess **population characteristics**: for example, income, life expectancy, occupation, religion, degree of solidarity, …

This account begins with the socially constituted person. Human beings are subjective, intentional, and relational agents. They interact with other persons in ways that involve competition and cooperation; they form relationships, enmities, alliances, and networks; they compose institutions and organizations; they create material embodiments that reflect and affect human intentionality; they acquire beliefs, norms, practices, and worldviews; and they socialize their children, their friends, and others with whom they interact. Some of the products of human social interaction are short-lived and local (indigenous fishing practices); others are long-duration but local (oral traditions, stories, and jokes); and yet others are built up into social organizations of great geographical scope and extended duration (states, trade routes, knowledge systems). But always we have individual

agents interacting with other agents, making use of resources (material and social), and pursuing their goals, desires, and impulses.

To start, then, we may say that the social has to do with the phenomena and patterns that result from agents' behavior when that behavior is oriented to, or generated by, the actions, intentions, constraints, and states of other agents. The social has to do with *social development*—the construction of the agent through processes of socialization—and *social action, interaction, and aggregation*: behavior, choice, and agency in which the actor considers the effects, actions, purposes, and states of other agents. This definition directly encompasses features of behavior such as cooperation, competition, altruism, and aggression. It includes teams, friends, opponents, enemies, and competitors. Is there any human action that is purely non-social? We might think of Robinson Crusoe; but this is not a real human circumstance. And we might think of ordinary, every-day self-affecting actions—eating, drinking, smoking, reading, gardening. But it is hard to say that these actions are purely pre- or non-social, since our tastes and preferences are socially formed, we learn to garden from others, our actions are constrained by law and custom, and the use of language is inherently social. We might say that these actions are socially situated, constructed, or constrained— even if they are not oriented toward the actions of others. So almost all human action is social—socially oriented, socially embedded, or socially constructed (through socialization and education).

So far we have emphasized the socially situated individual. But social action takes place within spaces that are themselves socially structured—by the actions and purposes of others, by property, by prejudice, by law and custom, and by systems of knowledge. So our account needs to identify the local social environments through which action is structured

and projected: the inter-personal network, the system of rules, the social institution. The

social thus has to do with the behaviorally, cognitively, and materially embodied reality of

social institutions. An institution, we might say, is an embodied set of rules, incentives, and

opportunities that have the potential of influencing agents' choices and behavior.[8] An

institution is a complex of socially embodied powers, limitations, and opportunities within

which individuals pursue their lives and goals. A property system, a legal system, and a

professional baseball league all represent examples of institutions. (See (Brinton and Nee

1998), (North 1990), (Ensminger 1992), and (Knight 1992) for recent expositions of the new

institutionalism in the social sciences.) Institutions have effects that are in varying degrees

independent from the individual or "larger" than the individual. Each of these social entities

is embodied in the social states of a number of actors: their beliefs, intentions, reasoning, and

histories. Actors perform their actions within the context of social frameworks represented as

rules, institutions, and organizations; and their actions and dispositions embody the causal

effectiveness of those frameworks. And institutions influence individuals by offering

incentives and constraints on their actions, by framing the knowledge and information on the

basis of which they choose, and by conveying sets of normative commitments (ethical,

religious, interpersonal) that influence individual action.

These social institutions are thought to be more impersonal, more independent from

specific individuals, and more sustained over time, than the fleeting patterns of everyday

social face-to-face interaction. But persistent social systems and structures too depend on the

social states of actors: their beliefs, memories, purposes, patterns of reasoning, and face-to-

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[8] "Institutions are the humanly devised constraints that structure human interaction. They are made up of
formal constraints (for example, rules, laws, constitutions), informal constraints (for example, norms of
behavior, conventions, self-imposed codes of conduct), and their enforcement characteristics. Together
they define the incentive structure of societies and, specifically, economies" (North 1998 : 247).

face social relationships. The world trading system *circa* 1850 depended on actors (sea captains, port officials, banking officers, sailors, company directors), organizations (the East India trading company, treaty organizations, the British Navy), and states designed to permit certain actors to bring about their purposes, and to constrain the behavior of countless others. Institutions are embodied in the social individuals who make up the population and in the material artifacts that commonly represent some of the traces of the institution. It is legitimate to assert the existence of spatially and temporally extended structures and institutions—providing that we keep clearly in mind the sorts of individual-level activities and mechanisms that give these structures their coherence and stability over time and their social causal powers.

What can we say about the ontological and causal status of social entities beyond the scope of acquaintance of the situated individual agent—structures, organizations, networks, or social systems? Social entities are less tangible than physical entities; so the issue of characterizing and identifying a set of social conjunctions as an enduring and extended "thing" is more challenging. Two large sets of questions confront us about a given social entity (for example, a structure or system). First, what are the social "threads" that suffice to unify a range of social actors, institutions, and places into a single unified historical entity (that is, what are the criteria of identity for a "single social entity"). Is "China during the Han Dynasty" one unified social formation; or is it a congeries of semi-independent regional cultures, economies, and social orders? Is "the Chinese imperial state" a single historical entity over the 4000 years of Chinese political history? And second, at what level of description is it credible that we can re-identify "the same" institutions or practices in

separate historical formations? Is there some quality of "state-ness" that is possessed by the French absolutist state, the Chinese imperial system, and the Indian polity?

In view of these questions, what can we say about the topic, what things exist in the social realm? Here I will describe a social ontology that falls closer to the spare end of the spectrum. On this approach, 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).[9]

On this approach, a given society may be said to consist of specific social, economic, and political institutions; mentalities and systems of beliefs and values; and higher level structures that are composed of these institutions, practices, and mentalities. All of these social factors are constituted by the set of agents who populate them at a given time. Agents act within the context of these structures; and their actions both reproduce and modify the structure. At any given time, agents are acting in ways that affect future states of the system while being prompted or constrained by existing structures and mentalities; and agents are being shaped by these structures and mentalities in ways that influence their future actions. Finally, the social formation is subject to "exogenous" influences: climate change, war,

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[9] (Hacking 1999) offers a critique of misuses of the concept of social construction. This use is not vulnerable to his criticisms, however.

natural events (disastrous or favorable), the appearance of singular and exceptional individuals.

Inevitably, social organizations at any level are constituted by the individuals who participate in them, 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 the policies, memories, and acts of decision are imposed on the environment: buildings, archives, roads, etc. The organization exists and serves as a valid object of scientific study; the task for the social scientist is to uncover the institutions, rules, incentives, prohibitions, and enforcement mechanisms through which the behavior of sub-systems and agents is regulated. All features of the organization are embodied in the actors and institutional arrangements that carry the organization at a given time.

Within this formulation we can characterize the level of a given social unit by tracing out its location within a broader set of organizations and institutions, and its downward relationships to agents (as participants, subjects, and entrepreneurs). 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?

How do statistical facts about human populations fit into this analysis of the social and of social research and explanation? Groups of people present distributions with respect to various characteristics: wealth, height, propensity to make charitable gifts, life expectancy, … So facts about groups are normally statistical statements about the distribution of one or more properties across a population. The population of interest can be singled out in a variety of ways: by location, by nationality or race, by occupation, for example. And we can use the methods of social measurement and observation to estimate the distribution of the

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variable across the population (survey research, household studies, self-reports, direct observation, …). So it is an important part of social science knowledge to provide description and analysis of the distribution of properties across populations of people.

Observation of one variable across a population permits us to make descriptive statements about this population—for example, "the average income in metropolitan Detroit is $22,500, with a bottom decile of $12,500 and a top decile of $225,000 and a Gini coefficient of .55." Once we have estimated multiple variables for the population we can look for meaningful statistical differences in the distribution of one variable across the population when differentiated by a second variable: "Male workers in Cleveland earn salaries adjusted by skill and seniority that are 25% greater than female workers in Cleveland," "College educated workers earn 20% more than non-college-educated workers in Cleveland," … And we can make comparisons across populations: Detroit workers versus Cleveland workers, family size in the U.S. north versus the south, … Finally, we can test our data for correlations, statistical associations, meaningful differences in descriptive statistics (means, medians), and regression characteristics.

On the ontology being advanced here, higher-level entities such as "the Canadian federal state" are the sum of the constellations of socially situated individuals and institutions that exist at a given time. Social institutions and organizations come together to constitute complexes of institutions that we denote as "state", "military regime", "market", "family", and other medium- and large-scale structures. Higher-level structures indeed exist, but they supervene upon individuals and lower-level institutions. It is reasonable, on this approach, to affirm the existence of social structures like "the seventeenth-century French absolutist state", "the American industrial system", or "the Soviet military system"—if we note

carefully the subordinate ontological status that these higher-level structures have. These social entities exist in the particular concrete forms that make them up in a particular time and place: the institutions that create rules, powers, and opportunities; the assignment of powers and restrictions to particular officers; the material factors and objects that embody various elements of these systems; the assumptions and values that individuals bring to their interactions with these institutions, and the like. In all instances the social entity is constituted by the social constructed individuals who make it up, through their beliefs, values, interests, actions, prohibitions, and powers.

These higher-level organizations and institutions constitute larger systems that can be termed "political," "economic," "demographic." But the latter set of terms—"state," "market," "economic sphere", "religion"—should be regarded as nominal and provisional rather than essential. The French state, the British state, and the Indian polity all exist; but "the state as such" does not. Institutional configuration is plastic in its development and relatively sticky in operation. We can regard specific social formations as constituting distinctive regimes: distinctive and interlocking systems of institutions, norms, and groups that persist over time and through which agents pursue their goals. Moreover, given well-known processes of social feedback and selection, institutional settings will come over time to be adjusted so as to constitute a coherent system of institutions for accomplishing the social purposes of the society in question.

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).[10]

So the ontology that I defend comes down to socially constituted agents within social relations and institutions, possessing a set of material needs and purposes and a set of norms, beliefs, and goals that constitute the ground of their agency. These institutions convey individuals to the accomplishment of their purposes and embody various forms of power, production, and reproduction. And these institutions and practices in turn form larger configurations of institutions, practices, and organizations that we refer to as "states," "economic systems," "demographic regimes," and the like. It is then an empirical and contingent discovery when we discern important commonalities among the institutions of several distinct social formations—for example, similar systems of land tenure or systems of revenue extraction.

This ontology gives central focus to the relationship between structure and agency. Agents constitute structures; and agents are in turn constituted by structures. How can this apparent circularity be interpreted? The relationship between structures and agents is one of ongoing mutual influence, within and across generations. Agents constitute structures through their beliefs, preferences, and actions. Their actions are to some extent "channelized" by the incentives and disincentives created by existing institutional arrangements; more deeply, agents themselves are shaped through their educational and

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[10] "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

social development—processes that are themselves richly informed by the workings of institutions and organizations. Finally, individuals have the ability to change institutions—either dramatically through leadership or slowly through many acts of anonymous opportunism.

The key to the looseness of social organization to which we have referred frequently 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; ... So the hard question is not: "Do institutions and structures exercise autonomous and supra-individual causal primacy?", since we know that they do not. Instead, the question, is, "To what extent and through what sorts of mechanisms do structures and institutions exert causal influence on individuals and other structures?"

A coherent social ontology can now be formulated: individuals in social relations exist. Individuals in social relations constitute institutions that exist (that is, that persist and maintain their properties for extended periods of time). Configurations of institutions form higher-level complexes that we describe as large social structures: political systems, economic systems, cultural systems. And these higher-level structures too possess the qualities of persistence and continuity over significant periods (and surviving the comings and goings of the individuals who constitute them at a specific time) that permit us to say that they exist as durable social entities. This ontology is counterpart to the "microfoundations"

attention it is due" (Thelen 2003 : 208).

theory described below. It places the level of "thing"-ness in the social realm close to the

level of individuals in social relations and practices.

Causal mechanisms and microfoundations

Let us turn now to the second large question involved in investigating the levels of

social organization: how does social causation function across the breadth, depth, and layers

of social life? I maintain that social explanation requires discovery of the underlying causal

mechanisms that give rise to outcomes of interest.[11] Social mechanisms are concrete social

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 also casts some doubt

on the search for generalizable theories across numerous societies; it looks instead for

specific causal 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 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.[12]

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[11] Important recent exponents of the centrality of causal mechanisms in social explanation include
(Hedström and Swedberg 1998a), (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), and (George and Bennett 2005).
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.
[12] 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.

In *Varieties of Social Explanation* (Little, 1991) I argue that the central idea of causal ascription is the idea of a causal mechanism: to assert that A causes B is to assert that there is a set of causal mechanisms such that A in the context of typical causal fields brings about B (or increases the probability of the occurrence of B). A causal mechanism is a series of events or processes that lead from the explanans to the explanandum (Little, 1991:15).[13] This approach may be called "causal realism," since it rests on the assumption that there are real causal powers underlying causal relations.[14] 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. Finally, 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—institutions, organizations, states, economies, and the like. This idea will be more fully articulated below.

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

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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).

[13] Jon Elster offers a similar approach to social explanation. See particularly (Elster 1989b, 1989a).

[14] I make the case for this view at greater length in *Varieties of Social Explanation* (Little 1991), chapter 2. Richard Miller has advocated a similar conception of social explanation; he writes that "an adequate explanation is a true description of underlying causal factors sufficient to bring about the phenomenon in question" (Miller 1991), p. 755.

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 answers I offer flow from a very simple perspective. 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 influenced by individuals, so social causation and agency represent an ongoing iterative process (the agency-structure thesis). 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), chapters 10 and 11 for exposition of these ideas.)

Causal realism gives central place to the mechanisms that mediate between cause and effect. What can we say about the mechanisms that mediate social causation? Once we recognize that social phenomena are not governed by strict causal laws akin to some views of the physical sciences, we are forced to ask ourselves the question: what sorts of processes might constitute the metaphysics of social causation? I argue for a **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.

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]

How does this approach to social causation connect to causal reasoning in the quantitative social sciences? It was noted above that statistical description and analysis of

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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

populations are crucial parts of social scientific knowledge. Our interest in the statistical measurement of variables within populations takes two forms. First, a description of the distribution of a variable across the population is an important form of factual knowledge about the life circumstances of the people in this group. Referring to the "typical" peasant in Uttar Pradesh is unsatisfactory; we are much better served by studies that provide information about the range of incomes, land tenancy, taxation, citizenship rights, and health that characterize the rural population as a whole in Uttar Pradesh. Statistical data allow us to describe the group with a degree of precision—inexact but informative. Second, statistical analysis permits us to identify variables that may be causally linked: smoking and cancer, gender and income, race and health status. So statistical analysis can start us on the way of inquiry and explanation.

The literature on causal reasoning on the basis of statistical evidence is very large, but some points are clear.[18]

- Statistical associations and correlations across variables do not by themselves establish causation

- Strength of association or values of regression coefficients do not allow us to estimate the probable strength of the hypothesized causal influence

- …

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).
[18] Recent insightful discussions of statistical causal reasoning include (Salmon 1998), (Simon 1971), (Woodward 1995), (Cartwright 1995), (Goertz and Starr 2003), (Humphreys 1986), (Lieberson 1987), and (Pearl 2000), and many of the contributions in (McKim and Turner 1997).

The point to be emphasized here is that the overall knowledge framework of quantitative social science is in principle compatible with the microfoundational approach to social causation. This is so for several reasons. First, much of the most compelling analysis of causation in quantitative social science supports the requirement of seeking out credible and testable hypotheses about the causal mechanisms that link the associated variables. So this observation takes us in the direction of causal realism. And second, the causal mechanisms that might link "gender and profession" to "lifetime salary earnings" must themselves be expressed through local circumstances impinging on individuals. What are the circumstances of education, business practice, and legal environment in the context of which the typical female is conveyed into an occupational trajectory resulting in a reduced lifetimes earnings expectation? So a causal explanation based on statistical findings requires a theory of the underlying causal mechanisms, and these causal mechanisms must themselves exercise their causal powers through influences on the socially situated individual actor.

What the microfoundational approach precludes is the assertion of explanations that begin and end with statistical generalizations about populations, and it precludes the idea that a statistical law is itself a causal factor in social outcomes. The law of gravity may be said to be a causal law; the association between gender and income is a result, not a cause (a phenomenal rather than a guiding regularity; (Little 1998 : chap. 12)).

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.[19] The mechanisms through which social

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[19] 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 1998b : 24).

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 theory, analytical Marxism, or social psychology. What these fields have in common is a commitment to providing microfoundations for social explanations.

On the microfoundational approach, the causal capacities of social entities are to be explained in terms of the structuring of 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.

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

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 rock-bottom causal stories—the governing regularities for the social sciences—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

$\Rightarrow$ {structured environment of individual choice} $\Rightarrow S_2$.

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. 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.[20]

An 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). The openness to contingency characteristic of this approach parallels the approach to contentious politics offered in (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001).

Is there such a thing as "macro-macro" causation? Yes—but only as mediated through "micro-foundations" at the level of structured human agency. State institutions affect economic variables such as "levels of investment," "levels of unemployment," or "infant mortality rates". But large institutions only wield causal powers by changing the opportunities, incentives, powers, and constraints that confront agents. So the hard question is not: "Do institutions and structures exercise autonomous and supra-individual causal primacy?", since we know that they do not. Instead, the question, is, "To what extent and through what sorts of mechanisms do structures and institutions exert causal influence on individuals and other structures?"

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[20] Similar examples of arguments about the logic of power relations in pre-modern societies may be found in Mann (Mann 1986).

Here, then, we can come to several conclusions. 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. And social processes should be expected to

demonstrate a significant level of contingency, path-dependency, and variability—give the

multiple types of causal mechanisms, institutional variations, and features of individual

agency that come together to bring about a given outcome.

Methodological localism

The strands of thought offered to this point have led us to a distinctive position on the

question of the composition of the social world and the nature of social explanation—the

questions of the "levels of the social" and "levels of social explanation." I refer to this

emerging position as "methodological localism," in deliberate contrast to both

methodological individualism and methodological holism. This position gives both

ontological and explanatory primacy to the socially situated actor within a set of proximate

social relationships. This position seems most compelling on ontological and explanatory

grounds, and it is strongly supportive of research in many fields of the social sciences.

According to methodological localism, the social is constituted by socially situated

individuals, nested within social relations and institutions that have only an intermediate

degree of persistence and permanence. We disposed of the construct of the "pre-social"

individual in the opening paragraphs of this article; and we disposed of the idea of

autonomous structural causation through our discussion of the requirement of providing

microfoundations for social explanations. What we are left with, then, is a social ontology

that emphasizes contingency and impermanence in the social structures and institutions that

exist at a certain time. And we are left with a theory of social causation that works through

the idea of purposive human action within structured circumstances of choice. The circumstances that constrain human choice, finally, are themselves largely constituted by the social states of other individuals, who embody the characteristics, opportunities, and limitations of existing institutions.

Pervasive and common features of individual agency—common beliefs, ethical or normative motives, systems of norms, religious commitments, practical skills—are conveyed to the individual through specific local institutions and practices and embodied in the "practical cognitive" psychology of the individual. And it is an important challenge for social science research, including historical and comparative research, to identify the specifics and the variations that define the institutions that transmit ideas, values, and practices.

This approach suggests an answer to the question of "levels of the social". It suggests that the lowest level of the social is the socially situated actor within a local set of embodied social relations. The socially situated individual finds herself within a concrete set of social relationships, networks, and institutions; this complex both serves to socialize and to incentivize and constrain. The approach of methodological localism supports as well the reality that institutions often have extra-local scope, geographically, demographically, and administratively; so we can legitimately describe institutions with broader scope as being "higher-level" institutions. Recognition of the requirement of microfoundations, however, requires us to pay attention to the mechanisms through which the distant actors within the higher-level institution are constrained and induced to play their institutionally-defined roles. And likewise, as we rise to higher levels of geographical and population scope, as well as administrative complexity, we can legitimately identify "global" or "world-systems"

institutions—with exactly the same requirement that we be prepared to identify the institutional and material arrangements through which the actors who constitute the global institution are led to play their parts in the maintenance of the institution. (The imperfection of these mechanisms explains the plasticity of institutions over time, as opportunism permits the modification of institutional arrangements over time for the extra-institutional purposes of powerful actors.)

This approach suggests five large areas of focus for social science research:

"What makes the individual tick?" What makes individual agents behave as they do? Here we need accounts of the mechanisms of choice and action at the level of the individual. This area of research is purposively eclectic, including performative action, rational action, impulse, theories of the emotions, theories of the self, theories of identity. What are the main features of individual choice, motivation, reasoning, and preference? How do emotions, rational preferences, practical commitments, and other forms of agency influence the individual's deliberations and actions?

"How are individuals formed and constituted?" This approach gives deep importance to learning more about how individuals are formed and constituted. Here we need better accounts of social development, the acquisition of preferences, worldview, and moral frameworks, among the many other determinants of individual agency and action. What are the social institutions and influences through which individuals acquire norms, preferences, and ways of thinking? How do individuals develop—cognitively, affectively, and socially?

"What are the institutional and organizational factors that motivate and constrain individuals' choices?" What are the systems of incentives and constraints that govern

individuals' choices in particular settings? Institutions are systems of incentives and constraints, embodying formal and informal constraints. They constitute systems of norms, embodied in the actions and expectations of others, which induce and enforce the institutional requirements.

"How do individual agents' actions aggregate to higher-level social patterns?" The social sciences offer a host of models demonstrating how individual agents' actions are aggregated to more collective levels. Here we need theories of institutions; markets; social mechanisms aggregating individual actions; microeconomics; game theory; … What patterns of social activity can be inferred as the aggregate consequence of deliberate human choice within the settings of the institutions that can be identified as the social context of action?

"What is the distribution of a given set of characteristics across a specified social population?" Individuals have properties, and populations have distributions of these properties. The task of quantitative social science, most broadly, is to measure and analyze the distributions and associations of variables across one or more populations or groups. It is a crucial part of social science research to conduct the studies that permit observation and measurement of some of the social characteristics that are of greatest interest to us, for the purpose of explanation, diagnosis, and policy.

Social psychology and behavioral research are intended to shed light on the first two areas of inquiry. The new institutionalism, local ethnographies, and theories of organizational behavior shed light on the third question. And much of social science theory, devoted to the discovery of unexpected consequences, focuses on the fourth question: the results of prisoners' dilemmas and collective action problems, the aggregation of preferences

represented by "micromotives and macrobehavior" analysis (Schelling 1978), and much of economic theory and game theory. Quantitative social science focuses on the fifth type of question—what we might describe as the ultimate outcomes of the variety of social processes and individual choices described in the first several categories of question. And, significantly, the hypotheses about social causation that are suggested by the findings of quantitative research are best tested and supported by seeking out the causal mechanisms that can be uncovered through analysis of local circumstances, institutions, and the multiple factors that influence individual choices and lead to aggregate outcomes.

These five areas of focus combine to offer upward and downward social influence. Social institutions and facts influence agents directly, by constraining their choices; and indirectly, by influencing their cognitive and practical developmental process. And agents' actions in turn influence institutions and higher-level social structures—both by embodying the properties of those institutions at a given time (serving as a policeman or teacher, for example) and by opportunistically changing the workings of the institution (as a tax avoider, for example). And, strikingly, great portions of existing social science research can be accommodated within the scope of these research questions.

The approach of methodological localism gives rise to several cautions about assertions concerning higher-level structures and patterns. First, asserting facts about higher-level processes requires that we give an account of the "microfoundations" through which these processes come about. Second, socially situated individuals—individuals with social properties and existing in social relations and social institutions—are the "molecule" of social phenomena. This entails that all social entities (structures, institutions, rules, worldviews, ...) supervene upon individuals. Third, social institutions and structures are

plastic over time and space—given that they are maintained and modified by independent agents. This is in fact an important insight into the nature of the social; the complexity and looseness of the relation between levels that we find in human affairs is intrinsic to the nature of social life. Fourth, some degree of stability inheres in institutions as a result of the fact that individuals are to some extent "interchangeable"; there is "multiple realizability" in the achievement of institutional effect. Fifth, higher-level entities exercise causal properties solely through the individuals who constitute them at a given time. And finally, it is an important social fact that individuals are in turn constrained by the (supervening) institutions within which they exist—and which they constitute. Macro entities exercise causal properties through the individuals who constitute them at a given time. This is a "social" fact, in that individuals are constrained by the (supervening) institutions within which they exist.

Conclusions: Levels and Layers Within the Social

Several central points have emerged from this discussion. First, it is scientifically important for social scientists to arrive at a more adequate understanding of the social ontology that underlies their work, and such an ontology can be reasonably simple. The socially constituted agent within a set of social relations and institutions provides us a rich basis for characterizing social phenomena, and permits us to hypothesize higher-level structures and institutions as well. This approach to social ontology focuses on the level of the socially situated individual. Individuals exist; specific institutional arrangements exist; and specific ensembles of institutions exist. Here we proceed from the existential circumstances of human social life: agency, need, social relation, knowledge, power, worldview, and local opportunism.

Second, higher-level social structures exist; but they have their properties solely in virtue of the specific practices, rules, and arrangements that constitute them at a time and within a group of people. Higher-level structures are composed of the individuals, networks, and sub-institutions that coordinate and constrain the actions of persons throughout the scope of the social structure. The social sciences therefore need to exercise caution against "reification" of abstract structures. Social entities supervene upon individuals; they have no independent existence. Institutions and organizations exist at a range of levels, from the local to the global; but they are embodied in the same way, regardless of scale or scope: individuals occupy positions of service and decision-making; they have instruments of persuasion, communication, and coercion; they are subject to incentives, opportunities, and penalties; and they act in ways that are sometimes coordinated and sometimes self-serving.

Third, macro-social entities exercise causal properties through the individuals who constitute them at a given time. Social entities convey causal properties through their effects, direct and indirect, on individuals and agency. Individuals act according to a set of beliefs, values, and preferences that have been socially constructed; and their actions in turn preserve or modify the institutions and norms within the context of which they live and act. This amounts to recognizing that there is a requirement of "reduction" within the social sciences, but this requirement is not onerous. It is the "microfoundations" or the "social mechanism" requirement: explanations that refer to the effects of social structures must be accompanied with a schematic account of the mechanisms through which they bring about the putative effects at the level of locally-situated individual behavior.

Fourth, social structures and institutions are plastic over time and space. We need to exercise great caution in postulating high-level abstract structures that recur across

instances—state, mode of production, protestant ethic, Islam. Social institutions, structures, and practices "morph" over time in response to opportunism and power by the participants. It is therefore an important area of social and historical research to document the variations of structures, institutions, practices, and systems of values and belief across space and time, and to identify the social mechanisms through which these differences are caused. But symmetrically, social entities persist beyond the particular individuals who make them up at a given time, because of identifiable processes of social reproduction. Social structures, institutions, and practices have a surprising degree of stability and "stickiness" over generations. So we need to be able to offer an account of some of the social mechanisms through which this stability over time and generational cohort is achieved.

Fifth, it is highly significant that each of the major research frameworks in the social sciences finds a place within this treatment of methodological localism. Comparative research provides many of the tools necessary for probing the nature of institutional settings that define the social context of agency. Qualitative research sheds significant light on the nature of the "socially constituted actor." And quantitative research allows the social sciences to describe and analyze the social patterns that result from these various kinds of social mechanism and individual agency. A preference for a single research methodology ought not drive the agenda of social science research; instead, researchers should adapt their methodologies to the specific demands of the research questions they want to investigate and the complex social constructions that they would like to better understand. And this means that the approaches of qualitative, comparative, and quantitative social science are complementary to one another rather than incompatible alternatives.

Finally, I maintain that much existing social science research and theory is already consistent with "methodological localism." Researchers and theorists in many of the areas of the social sciences can be understood to be providing insight into one or another of the "nexuses" presented by the socially-situated individual. Virtually all the examples I can think of from the social sciences can be recast in these terms. Differences in disciplines are, in large part, the result of choices about which locus within the "socially situated individual" ontology to focus: development, action, relationship, network, institution. Moreover, when theories deviate from this conception, they are all too often fall into fallacious thinking: reification, essentialism, functionalism, teleological thinking, blind structuralism, social "action at a distance", and methodological purism.

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