Levels of the “Social”

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Structure of the talk

- Doldrums in social science theory and research
- The problem of levels and its importance
  - The core questions of level—ontology, inquiry, explanation
- My position
  - Microfoundations
  - Causal mechanisms
  - Methodological localism
- Survey of good current social science research
- Conclusions
Starting points

- We need new ideas and models for conceptualizing “social science” and the social.
- “Empirical methods and conceptual confusion”
- Bad tropes for the social sciences—
  - Naturalism—no!
  - Social kinds or essences—no!
  - Strong generalizations across social phenomena—no!
  - Hyper-quantitative approaches to social inquiry—no!
And yet—

- Social explanation is possible
- Causal relations obtain within the social world
- Agents within structures give rise to social patterns
- High-level structures w/”signatures” and causal properties exist
Are there better themes, motifs, or metaphors for “social science,” “organized social inquiry,” or “social theory and observation”?

There are. Emphasize …

- Plasticity and variation of the social;
- Emphasis on “causal mechanisms” within the social realm.
- Dependence of the social on structured human agency
- The fertility of theoretical pluralism/eclecticism
Better ideas ...

• It is in the context of these critical thoughts that the question of level acquires its urgency.
A new approach

- There is a new approach to the "levels" question; one that eschews high-level structures, capitalism-feudalism; state; high-level causal connection—in favor of local social relationships, local causal mechanisms, a nexus of "agent within a web of social relationships". Tilly; Lee; Pomeranz. Brenner in his own way (not "capitalism", but a specific complex of locally binding social-property relationships). Sabel on contingency of industrial development.
Setting up the problem ...

Figure 5. A Model Irrigation Grid for the Subak
The problem of level

- It is possible to define the focus of analysis, description, and explanation in the social sciences at a range of levels.
- 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.
- We can distinguish “micro,” “meso,” and “macro”; “local” and “global”
- We can assert causal connections from one level to another.
The problem

- Do social sciences differ in their selection of level?
- Are there theoretical or methodological considerations that suggest one level or another is preferable?
- Are there reasons to choose one level of analysis, inquiry, and explanation over another?
Dimensions of “micro-macro”

- Individual-social
- local-regional-national-global
- temporal extent (long, short)
- proximity to the individual: relationships-organizations-structures
- more general--more specific
This may seem to be a “tired” question, invoking old debates about methodological individualism and holism.

I’d like to frame the issues in ways that open new and more fruitful insights.

We should seek out a methodology and ontology that is well suited to the intellectual challenge of the social sciences, given what we know about the social realm.

This issue is highly important because we often make the mistake of reification of social phenomena; and we go in for a naive naturalism that offers bad analogies with the ordering of "natural" phenomena.
The core questions …

- **Ontology**: are there social entities that do not depend on individuals?
- **Explanatory**: do social explanations need to "reduce" to arguments about the actions of individuals? Are there any "level" restrictions on social explanation?
- **Causal**: do social entities have causal powers not dependent upon the agency of individuals?
The core questions …

- **Inquiry**: at what level should (a given style of) social inquiry focus its efforts at descriptive and explanatory investigation? What is the "right" level of social knowledge [for given fields of social investigation]?
- **Description**: are there "level" requirements or constraints on social description? can we give good descriptions of high-level social phenomena?
- **Generalization**: are there higher-level “types” of social entities that recur in different historical and social settings?
Inter-level positions that can be taken

- Reductionism
- Supervenience theory
- Microfoundations
- Methodological individualism
- Holism
- Structuralism
- “Methodological localism”
Chief arguments against “global” or “structuralist” approaches

- The reification argument
- The “action at a distance” argument
- The “non-availability of high-level regularities” argument
- Absence of direct causal powers not mediated by individual agents
- Ontological issues: social kinds, lack of fixed recurring properties; social plasticity
Levels of inquiry and description: local

- There is legitimate social science interest in local, particular, ideographic description of practices, events, and outcomes.
- Highly local studies: local histories, local ethnographies, local sociological studies
Levels of inquiry: local

- Studies at this level focus on events, institutions, practices, and persons that are concretely described in situ.
- But these sorts of studies commonly refer to trends, processes, structures, institutions, and forms of collective behavior that extend far beyond the local: the Great Depression, the state, commodity markets, the influence of television, the influence of fundamentalism … (Marcus and Fischer 1978: 77 ff.)
Why choose the local?

- Some good reasons, and some bad—
- the view that knowledge at this level is more concretely rooted in experience; epistemically superior.
- doubt about the availability of patterns that persist from local to regional.
- view that variation rather than continuity is the rule for social phenomena.
Why choose the local? …

● Much of this comes down to a view about what we can know, or can know best: the local, the direct, the unmediated. So there is an underlying positivism to the insistence on the local.

● Another strong impulse towards the local comes from a perception that variation and novelty are more significant than continuity, similarity, and generality in social phenomena.
Legitimacy of the “macro”

- There are supra-local entities and causes
- For example: systems of norms, social and political structures, institutions and organizations.
- We can fruitfully study these through empirical research, and we can construct legitimate social explanations based on what we find.
- But it is mandatory that we be able to provide “micro-foundations” for entities and causes at the macro-level.
A different take on “the social”

- The “socially situated individual”
- Social facts that influence individuals
  - Networks and other persons
  - Institutions
  - Norms
  - Worldviews and paradigms; folk knowledge
- Local and global institutions
  - Government and legal systems
  - Markets and economic institutions
  - News, media, and information sources
Levels of structures and entities

- Ontology: social entities at higher levels
- E.g. state, trading regime, system of religious values, property regime
  - How are “higher-level structures and entities” embodied?
  - How do they exercise causal influence?
  - How do they affect individual behavior?
  - How do they influence other high-level structures and entities?
My thesis about social entities

- Social entities supervene upon individuals; they have no independent existence.
- But social structures possess “multiple functional realizability”
- Social entities convey causal properties through their effects, direct and indirect, on individuals and agency.
- We need to exercise great caution in postulating high-level abstract structures that recur across instances—state, mode of production, protestant ethic, Islam.
My thesis about social entities

- Nonetheless 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; How so?
  - Social institutions, structures, and practices “morph” over time in response to opportunism and power.
Levels of explanation

- Are there theoretically justifiable constraints on inter-level explanation?
- Are the best explanations those that explain higher-level phenomena in terms of lower-level causes?
What is the “levels of explanation” problem?

- Here we raise the question of causal primacy or causal adequacy: what is the level of social activity at which we can confidently say “circumstances and processes at this level cause or influence outcomes at other levels”?
- A benign reductionism is relevant here; it is maintained that phenomena at higher levels need to be explained on the basis of facts at lower levels. Reductionism, methodological individualism, methodological localism, and supervenience are all pertinent in this context.
What is the “levels of explanation” problem?

- It is a demand for—
  - A thesis about causal ordering of phenomena in the social and behavioral world
  - A thesis about causal closure: what things influence other things
  - A thesis about ontology and the reality of items identified at various levels
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!
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
Causal realism

- My general thesis: 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
The social mechanisms approach


- This approach is relevant because mechanisms generally shed light on the local circumstances of individual agency, giving rise to higher-level processes and outcomes.
Is there such a thing as “macro-macro” causation?

- Yes—but only as mediated through “micro-foundations”. State institutions affect economic variables such as “levels of investment,” “levels of unemployment,” or “infant mortality rates”.
- But only by changing the opportunities, incentives, powers, and constraints that confront agents.
A positive view ...
Three large areas of questions for the social sciences

- **what makes individual agents tick?**
  - accounts or mechanisms of choice and action at the level of the individual; performative action, rational action, impulse, ...

- **how are individuals formed and constituted?**
  - accounts of social development, acquisition of preferences, worldview, moral frameworks.

- **how are individual agents' actions aggregated to meso and macro level?**
  - theories of institutions; markets; and social mechanisms aggregating individual actions
Three large questions ...

These three areas of research combine to give upward and downward social influence. Social institutions and facts influence agents; and agents' actions influence institutions and outcomes. This has some resonance with the "macro-micro-macro" analysis described in Coleman.
The ontology of methodological localism

- The view I’ve come to …
- METHODOLOGICAL LOCALISM
- Socially situated individuals in local contexts constitute the “molecule” of social phenomena.
- This level of description has greater realism than EITHER description at the global level and the a-social individual level.
Methodological localism

- This is not an “individualist” position.
- It invokes the “social” in the definition of the position of the individual.
- It refers freely to norms, networks, institutions, belief frameworks, and other supra-individual constructs.
- But it is a “local social”: the socially constructed individual who is agent/actor.
- Actors acquire their social properties as a result of a history of interactions with local institutions, organizations, networks, and other actors.
Social facts for the socially situated individual

- The “social-constructed-ness” of the individual is itself the result of the actions of other socially situated individuals.
- Norms are conveyed to the individual through specific local institutions and practices and embodied in the “practical cognitive” psychology of the individual.
- Shaping institutions include—schools, religious gatherings, media; social practices of accomplished adults.
More social facts

- Institutions are embodied in local individuals who are differentially subject to conformity to “institutional expectations.”
- Formal and informal norms and mechanisms of enforcement
- The material aspects of institutions—train tracks, banks, information networks, tax records
Methodological localism and microfoundations

- Socially situated individuals—individuals with social properties and existing in social relations and social institutions—are the “molecule” of social phenomena.
- Asserting facts about higher-level processes requires that we give an account of the “microfoundations” through which these processes come about.
- I.e.: the circumstances of socially situated individuals who then behave so as to bring about the observed outcome.
Aspects of methodological localism

- Structures are plastic over time and space.
- Individuals are interchangeable; “multiple realizability”.
- 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.
- The complexity and looseness of the relation between levels that we find in human affairs.
Why localism?

The key to the looseness is: human ability to create/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; ...
Why localism?

- 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?"

- We work on the basis of a thesis of supervenience: "causal connection between A and B supervenes upon activities engaged by p1, ..., pn involved in A and leading to B"
Examples from good social science

- Elvin, High-Level Equilibrium Trap
Goal of exploration of examples

- Test methodological localism as an ontology and explanatory paradigm
- Identify possible exceptions: areas of social science research that deviate from ML
- Consider whether there are other issues of “level” that arise in these examples
- The general finding: these many examples illustrate research at a range of levels; but they almost always fit well into the large research question of identifying features of the socially situated actor and aggregate consequences of this setting.
- So the maxim “seek out causal mechanisms that work through socially situated agents” is one that corresponds well to a range of levels of social science
The “New Institutionalism” in Sociology

- Institutions as systems of incentives and constraints
- Formal and informal constraints
- Social networks at the bottom
- Norms that induce and enforce the institutional requirements
- Shasta County cattle trespass (Elickson)
- Labor cooperation in Taiwanese farming (Pasternak)
Large political structures


- 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, …
Comparative historical social science

- Identify levels of institutions that permit comparison across historical cases—England and France, western Europe and China, England and Yangzi Delta
- Don’t reify institutions such as the state; rather, bring the level of analysis down to specific institutional mechanisms of the transmission of power, decision-making, and knowledge-creation.

Political science theory

- Rational choice theory
- Highly consistent with the perspective of methodological localism
- Less attentive to the workings of culture and institutions than desirable.
Anthropology and ethnography

- Inquiry should be focused at the local level; expect the ideographic; don't expect regularities or similarities across cases.
- Don't look for causal explanations; look to provide meaningful interpretation of the actions and relationships that are discovered.
- Supra-individual organizations are still pretty close to the ground, and readily understood as composed of individuals (with the caveat that specific individuals are replaceable without changing the organization)
Anthropology and ethnography

- Ethnographic description of practices and worldviews
- Local knowledge
- Generalizing knowledge?
Ethnography

- Connections between the local and the global: political economy
- How are extra-local economic and political forces conveyed and expressed in the local social practices?
Sociology

- Social movements
- Race and identity. Critique of essentialism provides impetus for discovering the “micro-mechanisms” of identity formation and reproduction.
- Example: Lieberson on names. Identifies social mechanisms at the level of individual choice that “blindly” produce regular high-level outcomes.
Example: Social capital

- Does this concept disaggregate into the strands of local interaction required by methodological localism?
- It does. It is a measure, for local society, of the density of a certain kind of institution, organization, and network.
- It is a measure at the level of the individual of the density of relationships he/she bears to organizations and institutions representing “social capital”.
- Examples: James Coleman (1988); Putnam, *Bowling Alone*
Example: “Modern World System”

- This construct looks “global” and non-local.
- To an extent this is how Wallerstein has deployed the concept.
- Nonetheless, it has a fairly straightforward avenue of connection to the local, in most cases.
- When it does not—it falls prey to the “reification” complaint.

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 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
Wrap-up: My claims

- “Good” social science is already consistent with “methodological localism”.
- Researchers and theorists in each of the areas of the social sciences are generally providing insight into one or another of the “nexuses” presented by the socially-situated individual.
- When theories deviate from this conception, they are typically falling into fallacious thinking: functionalism, teleological thinking, blind structuralism, “action at a distance”
End (Battle of the Overpass)
End (Wreck at Montparnasse)
End (Central Places)