There is a body of work in history and historical sociology in which it is possible to identify the strands of a new paradigm of historical inquiry—what might be called “meso-history.” This work provides examples of strong, innovative macro-explanations that give more compelling and nuanced expression to this approach to historiography than past macro-history. I characterize this paradigm as “conjunctural contingent meso-history” (CCM), and I argue that this approach allows for a middle way between grand theory and excessively particularistic narrative. The paradigm recognizes historical contingency—at any given juncture there are multiple outcomes which might have occurred. It recognizes the role of agency—leaders, inventors, engineers, activists, and philosophers are able to influence the course of development in particular historical contexts. It recognizes the multiplicity of causes that are at work in almost all historical settings—thereby avoiding the mono-causal assumptions of much previous macro-history. And it recognizes, finally, that there are discernible structures, processes, and constraints that recur in various historical settings and that play a causal role in the direction and pace of change. It is therefore an important part of the historian’s task to identify these structures and trace out the ways in which they constrain and motivate individuals in particular settings, leading to outcomes that can be explained as contingent.

* Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Social Science History Association (October 2000) and at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, and the author expresses his gratitude for comments and suggestions extended on those occasions.
results of conjunctural historical settings. This approach recognizes an important role for social theory within the historian’s practice, while at the same time emphasizing that the notion of historical inquiry as no more than applied social theory is one that trivializes the problems of explanation and interpretation that confront the working historian.[1]

Once the ground is cleared along these lines—emphasizing both the importance for the historian of the particular contingencies of a specific historical context and the causal efficacy of the broad structures and processes that are in play—the challenge for the historian of large processes is more apparent. It is to seek out the specific institutions, structures, and processes that are embodied in a given historical setting; to identify the possibilities and constraints that these structures create for agents within those settings; and to construct explanations of outcomes that link the causal properties of those structures to the processes of development that are found in the historical record. Finally, it is imperative that the historian of large processes explore the space of “what might have been”—the space of contingent alternative developments that were equally consistent with the configuration of large structures and particular circumstances at a given time.

This paper takes a narrow objective: to identify and analyze the ontological and conceptual conditions that must be satisfied in order for this form of meso-history to be feasible. What do the ambitions of comparative macro-history imply for our assumptions about the structures and entities that make up the social world? And what sorts of conceptual systems are needed in order to permit the meso-historian to do his or her work of comparison and explanation? Are there “big structures” in history? And do “big structures” fall into kinds or universals that recur in different contexts? (Tilly 1984) This

[1] These ideas are spelled out more fully in (Little 2000).
inquiry can be understood as a sort of Kantian metaphysics for the social world: what are the ontological and conceptual presuppositions of the possibility of a certain kind of empirical knowledge of historical processes?

**Ontology and explanation**

Historians and historically minded social scientists offer conceptualizations of large bodies of historical phenomena. That is, they identify historically extended individuals—events, structures, and formations such as riots, revolutions, and states. This requires that they aggregate large ensembles of actions, events, and properties into large entities, structures, or processes (Tilly 1984). Further, they attribute causal powers to these structures—they make assertions such as “the exigencies of the military brought about a fiscal crisis”. And they attempt to establish explanatory relations—causal, interpretive, functional—among and within some of the historical formations that they identify. This description brings to the foreground two metaphysical questions: What entities exist in the historical realm? And what types of entities exist in the historical realm? The first question has to do with “things,” and the latter question has to do with “universals.”

These are both questions of social ontology. And they are unavoidable questions if we are to have a coherent conception of macro-history. When we ask “Why are X’s P?”, we presuppose that there are X’s, and that X’s constitute a type or group of things with some important dimension of commonality. For example, when we ask “Why do revolutions commonly occur in agrarian settings?”, we imply that there are such things as

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2 For good recent treatments of philosophical approaches to the study of ontology, see (Loux 1976), (Strawson 1963), and (Quinton 1973). Writers in the philosophy of social science who have raised
revolutions, and that they constitute a significant group or type of social occurrence. Minimally, then, these questions imply that we can identify individual events as “revolutions”; that we can identify a group of events under the rubric “revolution”; and that we can pose the question whether there are underlying causal, structural, or agency features that these events share. Large-scale historical inquiry thus implies that we must be able to identify historical “things” and subsume these things under “concepts.” And it may seem to imply that the historical concepts that we use refer to “kinds” or “universals”. Much of what follows will attempt to clarify these two points.

Ontology is the abstract theory of the nature of the entities, properties, and relations to which one refers in a given domain of discourse or science (Quinton 1973), pp. 00-00. To provide a social ontology is to answer the questions like the following:

- What sorts of social entities exist?
- To what extent are there stable, continuing, and comparable social entities within a given social order over extended space and time? Is there such a thing as the “American state” or “East Asian trading regime”?
- To what extent does a given social concept identify a range of phenomena with common internal nature? That is: to what extent does a given concept refer to a “social kind”? Is a riot in contemporary Malaysia the same type of thing as a riot in 16th-century France? Is “bride sale” the same social custom in England and China?
- To what extent do abstract social concepts cleanly divide patterns of activity in the various social contexts? For example, the western concept of the political excludes

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questions about social ontology include (Gould 1978), (Ollman 1971), (Giddens 1979), (Ruben 1985), and (Elster 1989)
the religious; how does that work for Iran, Bali, or India? The “economic” excludes the normative; how does that work in societies in which charity is an important feature of economic transaction?

- To what extent is a given concept deeply rooted in a particular historical example—with the likely result that the concept is not readily transportable to other historical contexts? Perhaps “feudalism” and “capitalism” fall in this category, as does the “theatre state of Bali.”

**The social realm**

Let us first address the issue of “things”—individuals, entities, particular structures. What logical features must “things” satisfy in order to be things? In order to identify the individuals in a given domain, we need to address some or all of the following issues.

- Criteria of the entity’s identity over time (e.g. is the French state in 1930 the same state as the French state in 1830?)
- Is X part of Y? (e.g. was racial struggle in Martinique part of the French Revolution?)
- Demarcation criteria between entities (e.g. is there a single French national working class, or are there several distinct regional working classes?)
- Criteria of classification: the basis for judging that x is a Y; this protest is a riot. (E.g. are the American state and the English state of the 1980s both liberal democracies)
An ontology of things requires, then, that we be able to identify features of persistence and continuity. We must be able to offer reasonably clear criteria of reidentification over multiple stages. And we must be able to provide reasonably clear boundaries for the entity.

Questions about identity are particularly difficult for social entities. Two large sets of questions confront us about a given social entity. First, what are the social “threads” that suffice to unify a range of social actors, institutions, 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 economies, cultures, 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 reidentify “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 difficulties, what can we say about the question, what things exist in the social realm? That is, what purported entities satisfy these requirements? There is a wide range of choices in answer to this question, from the spare to the ontologically demanding. On the spare end, we can describe a social ontology in which only individuals with beliefs and preferences exist. At the demanding end of the spectrum, we can describe a social ontology in which “states,” “modes of production,” “mentalities,” “religions,” and “political cultures” exist. Here I will defend a social ontology that falls on the spare end of the spectrum. On this approach, what exists is the socially
constructed individual, within a congeries of concrete social 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). This provides an interpretation of the individual; but what of the “institution”? 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.)

Let us expand this basic ontology along the following lines. What exists in the social realm includes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The socially constructed individual</th>
<th>Institutions and organizations</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual agent</td>
<td>Relations among individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human needs and desires</td>
<td>Organized groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational agency</td>
<td>Social practices embodying and conveying norms and worldview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual worldview and norms</td>
<td>Power</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication and transportation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology—agriculture, manufacture</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>System of production and reproduction</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social formation</td>
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</table>

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

Note also what this list does not include: state, feudalism, market, Christianity. What, then, about higher-level social entities—economies, states, cultures? Into what sorts of structures or entities do these “elements” compose at broader levels of social functioning? On the ontology being advanced here, those higher-level entities are the sum of the congeries of socially situated individuals and institutions that exist at a given time. Higher-level structures supervene upon individuals and institutions. Let us say that the comprehensive social entity at the macro-level is the social formation. It consists of a particular set of practices, organizations, and institutions at a particular stretch of time, through which human agency flows. Social formations, further, embody complexes of institutions that we denote as “state”, “military regime”, “market”, “family”, and other medium- and large-scale structures.

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 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.

Consider one example in detail: the land tenure system of North China in the
1920s. Philip Huang describes this system in several works (Huang 1985, 1990). (See
also (Netting 1993) for careful analysis of a variety of land tenure systems.) Essentially
the system is a share-cropping regime, where the tenant cultivates the land, harvests the
crop, and shares the produce with the landlord. The landlord has the responsibility to
provide a minimal level of maintenance in the land. And landlord and tenant share the
responsibility for improvements in the land. Each agent is constituted with a set of social
interests and social constraints, and the system survives as long as the constraints and
interests suffice to propel the activities of all agents within the lineaments of this social
property system.

These 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

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4 See Yaegwon Kim’s exposition of this concept (Kim 1984; Kim 1993).
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.

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. The following, then, constitutes a simple social ontology:

- individuals, relations, institutions exist
- individuals have agency within constraints
- institutions evolve to satisfy individual and collective purposes
- institutions and organizations have powers
- institutions have properties of organization and functioning

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 permits us to say that they exist as durable social entities. This ontology is counterpart to the “microfoundations” and “weak generalizations” approach I have taken elsewhere (Little 1998). It places the level of “thing”-ness in the social realm close to the level of individuals in social relations and practices.

Types and kinds

So far we have focused on the question of individual instances of entities. There is a more general ontological question that needs answer as well. Do individual entities fall into natural classes, types, or kinds? Are there social universals that recur across historical contexts and settings?

What is a type of thing?

- set of things sharing a list of properties
- set of things sharing many among a cluster of properties
- set of things sharing a causal nature

The concept of a type is metaphysically undemanding, since it admits of the possibility that the things that are classified within the type are heterogeneous. A more demanding concept is that of a “kind” or a social universal.
A particularly important version of scientific realism invokes the idea of a “natural kind.” [references for natural kinds; (Putnam 1975), (Cartwright 1983, 1989)]

What is a kind? We may refer to a “kind” as a group of things that share fundamental properties—structural, essential, causal. When “things” fall into groups that share deep, explanatorily relevant properties, we refer to the groups as “kinds”. For example, “metal” constitutes a kind; “plastic” does not. “Gold” is a kind; “mud” is not. The question about social kinds, then, is this: are revolutions, riots, or kinship systems “social kinds”? That is, do social entities fall in groups of things that share deep, explanatory properties? And do “higher-level” social entities constitute social kinds? Do the categories of state, class, taxation system, religion, Islam, etc., constitute social kinds? Do the concepts of “revolution,” “liberal democratic state,” or “banking system” identify social kinds among social phenomena? If we conclude that there are not, does this make comparative meso-history impossible?

My general strategy is to say that there are no social kinds in the strong sense. Rather, there are social constructs that succeed in identifying groups of phenomena that share important common features. There are “cities,” “riots,” “states,” and “kinship systems.” But these concepts do not identify groups of entities that share a common essence, and they do not identify “kinds” or universals.

My view is that higher-level abstract social categories are non-essentialist concepts that pick out clusters of institutions based on observable features and paradigm instances. They do not constitute kinds. Likewise, the political, the social, the religious as “realms”; these concepts too are descriptive rather than types. These higher-level
concepts divide social phenomena, structures, institutions, on abstract grounds that may or may not correspond to the organization of institutions in particular social contexts.

On this approach, a given social formation 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. Social formations possess brute quantitative characteristics (population levels, population density, urbanization rates, nutritional levels of the population, educational levels of the population); and characteristics of individual behavior (levels of communal spirit or group identification, levels of violence). 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, natural events (disastrous or favorable), the appearance of singular and exceptional individuals.

What then is the ontological status of concepts such as “feudalism,” “state,” “free market”, “bureaucracy”, or “public goods problem”? These concepts represent idealized and abstracted theories of certain paradigm instances of particular configurations of institutions and relations. Once we have identified a specific interlocking set of institutions, it is possible to infer the institutional logic that these institutions produce. And this in turn gives us a theoretical basis for understanding concrete historical circumstances; to the extent that the abstract assumptions defining “feudalism” apply to a
particular instance of Meiji Japanese society, we can use the historical model to explain or predict some of the developments that can be expected in the Japanese case. It is also true, of course, that the historical case does not exactly fit the model; so the model’s behavior may in turn not exactly fit the historical developments. But it is often possible to discern the effects that the model predicts. Examples of the latter might include state, citizen, domain of politics, or bureaucracy. These might be called “institution-specific” concepts, in that they reflect historically contingent configurations of institutions that may or may not recur in other contexts.

This approach emphasizes the singularity of specific configurations of social institutions in particular settings. We may also observe that there are many concepts in social science inquiry that transport readily from one world context to another. These are descriptive or quantitative concepts that involve counting and measuring specific elements of social life—people, prices, incomes, grain reserves. Examples include the pace of agricultural or technological change; population change; standard of living; scope of market activity. These represent what we might refer to as “social indicators”—features of social life that can be observed and measured, and which can be discerned in every social setting.

We now come to a second important ontological view: social entities (social relations, social institutions, social structures, social regimes) do not fall into social kinds in the strong sense. Rather, they form heterogeneous groupings of contingently configured institutions and structures. The groupings of such entities do not have shared essences that would allow us to infer from one such element to the next. Instead, the work of comparative social science and history takes the form of probing and identifying
points both of similarity and difference among the social entities identified as “states,”
“economic systems,” or “population regimes”.

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). The contents 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.

This ontology is a sparse one, in the sense that it denies the existence of social kinds or universals. However, I maintain that comparative social and historical research can proceed on this basis, and that we come closer to identifying social kinds as we move downward along the slope of aggregation. Whole-society terms—“feudalism,” “authoritarianism”—are further from social kinds than are disaggregated terms such as “free-rider problem,” “revenue extraction institution,” or “free market.” Feudalism and capitalism are not part of the furniture of the social world, whereas relations and institutions are.

**Concepts**

Let us turn now to the conceptual questions. What sorts of concepts are to be found in social inquiry? And how do these concepts relate or correspond to the social world?
What is a typical act of historical conceptualization? Historians often work to identify, classify, and conceptualize particular or singular events as instances of a related group of things or occurrences. “This was a revolution, that was an episode of extended banditry.” (Note, however, that the event can be differently characterized or classified, and that this is often an essential feature of the story.) Once an event is classified as an X, we can ask whether x’s have causal properties or regularities in common, and then we can offer a social science analysis of the case and the class of cases. Or we can inquire into the specific causal and narrative properties of the particular case.

What is a concept? It is an element of language that serves to identify an entity, a type of entity, a property or relation, or logical compounds of entities, properties and relations. Concepts serve to range entities within groups or classes. What is in common among the things classified under a concept? There is a range of possibilities: we may define a concept in terms of a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, in terms of a set of symptoms or observable features; in terms of a cluster of properties; in terms of a common structure; or in terms of common causal properties.

We can distinguish broadly between two approaches to scientific concepts: nominalism and essentialism. According to the nominalist, concepts are a human linguistic convenience through which we break down complex phenomena into distinct entities. Concepts are necessary for science, but, according to the nominalist, they should not be understood as “carving nature at the joints” or as identifying real bits of the world. Essentialism (or realism) maintains, for at least some scientific concepts, that concepts succeed in identifying ontologically real entities, structures, and properties; and that good

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5 Early years of the Chinese Revolution have raised exactly this type of question: was it rebellion? Was it banditry? Or was it revolution in the making? (Bianco 1971), (Perry 1980)
concepts are an essential step along the way toward formulation of scientific truths about the world. “Phlogiston” failed to identify a real type of entity, whereas “oxygen” succeeded.

Whether or not nominalism is an acceptable general approach to the meaning of scientific concepts is an unresolved question. However, the approach has a central benefit in that it alerts us to an important error in scientific reasoning, the error of reification. Reification consists in the social scientist’s assumption that, because he has a concept of X, that X really exists and has an underlying coherent essence. Because the concept of feudalism can be applied to Britain, Japan, and China, the historian may be led to assume that there is a common essence among these. But I find that it is better to regard these terms as nominalistic groupings; they are more like ideal types or descriptive concepts than kind terms.

I take the view that complex structural concepts such as “state,” “early modern state,” “feudalism,” or “free market economy” should be understood as ideal types, and should not be understood as referring to specific social essences or kinds. So I urge a nominalist understanding of social structure concepts—especially at the higher levels of description. There may be pure cases of feudalism in history; there are certainly many mixed cases; and the utility of the concept of feudalism is in focusing our thought in a first approximation as we begin analysis of the institutional specifics of a novel social order. What is real in the novel social order, however, is not its feudal character, but rather the specific set of institutions and organizations that are currently embodied and through which individuals exercise agency.
Is there, then, such a thing as “capitalism” or “feudalism”? There are paradigm cases that correspond closely to the ideal type (19th-century Britain, 12th-century France). But there is no regulative social system, capitalism or feudalism, that, like a social virus, captures the institutions of a given society and transforms those institutions in the direction of a pure capitalist or pure feudal system.

We come now to a general view about the semantics of social concepts: social concepts do not identify social kinds, but rather take the form of cluster concepts or ideal type concepts. That is, they work to group a set of social entities together on the basis of a cluster of properties they share in common; or they work to identify the class of entities in terms of a one-sided but illuminating paradigm case.

**Basis for expecting common institutions and structures**

This approach is minimalist; it doubts the availability of higher-level social kinds with deep structural essences. Does this imply, then, that there is no order or pattern to the development of a complex of institutions and arrangements in various social histories? Or is there some alternative basis for expecting similarities?

I believe that the latter is the case; that there are “existential” circumstances of the human social condition that give rise to the expectation that there will be broad similarities among the institutional arrangements of separate social histories. The “political” corresponds to a general set of features having to do with the exercise of power; the “economic” corresponds to the arrangements, private and cooperative, through which individuals satisfy their material needs; and so forth. There is a stock of similar solutions that social individuals arrive at in their efforts to solve the problems of material existence.
This approach owes much to a weak form of materialism and an account of common features of the human condition. Consider the logic that underlies the *German Ideology* (Marx and Engels 1970). Human beings have material needs (food, clothing, shelter); and they have certain common capacities—a capacity for labor, a capacity for prudent decision-making, a capacity for discerning and projecting the observable causal regularities of the environment within which they live, and a capacity for creating the instruments of social cooperation.

On the most general level of description, we can view the history of a particular civilization as the development, modification, refinement, and transformation of institutions through which individuals and groups pursue their purposes and satisfy their needs. There are two broad avenues of institutional innovation: invention and borrowing (diffusion). Once an institutional arrangement is in place, it is immediately subject to pressures leading to change. From that point forward, institutions evolve through a series of minor adaptations (similar, perhaps, to the refinement of a large system of computer code over time; for example, the air traffic control software system).

Consider the example of sharecropping as an institution governing access to the land and division of the risks and revenues created by cultivation. This is an institution of property relations in land that has emerged in many separate historical contexts (Netting 1993). And it is an arrangement that is directly salient to participants, given the circumstances of risk, need, and interest that affect the powerful and the cultivator, on the one hand, and the circumstances of traditional agriculture and technology, on the other. Therefore it is not surprising that this institution has been re-invented in countless contexts.
We can therefore predict that existing societies will possess a range of institutions that serve a handful of functions—

- **Economic**—production, exchange, income generation, savings and investment
- **Political**—regulation of public order, enforcement of agreements, establishment of the conditions of economic activity (currency, banking and credit, standards of health and safety in products), collection of revenues, establishment of public infrastructure (water, roads)
- **Social**—educational institutions, institutions of social solidarity (religion, associations)

Social institutions thus emerge as the result of individuals striving (sometimes cooperatively, sometimes competitively) to solve existential problems. And as institutions emerge, they are often “captured” by opportunistic individuals and groups who can exploit them for their own purposes. Social institutions thus have a deep potential for “morphing” into new shapes and configurations (another reason, however, for doubting the strongest variants of technological, materialist, or cultural determinism).

We can further predict that these various institutions will be subject to specific forms of pressure and erosion. For example, given that institutions work through specific agents and given that these agents have private purposes as well as role-defined purposes, we can predict that there will be a tendency toward “rent seeking,” corruption, and capture. Likewise, “principal-agent” problems are predictable, in which subordinates within an institution make use of their powers for purposes other than those intended by
the superior. But likewise, because other agents can anticipate these consequences, we can predict the emergence of preventive checks on the use of position and power for personal ends.

This blend of rational choice theory and materialism takes us to the point of being able to assert the likelihood of the development of similar institutions in different societies. But it does not take us the whole way to an ability to predict (or explain on first principles alone) the course of a given historical period. The reason for this has ultimately to do with human agency. Historical change proceeds through agents’ interests and needs. Institutions and structures exist at particular points in time as the cumulative evolved result of agents’ previous efforts to satisfy their needs and interests. Institutions are therefore more like artifacts than natural kinds; they are the result of many individuals’ purposive actions and unintended effects. To the extent there are common features of institutions this derives from “parallel evolution”—a particular feature is a commonly accessible solution to a common existential problem—or the result of diffusion of organizational themes and ideas (transmission of governing styles and strategies).

Once a stock of institutions exist in a particular setting, they constrain the future choices open to agents; so they become part of the causal field within which historical change proceeds. But it would be misleading to attribute primacy to the institutions; rather, institutions are themselves the artifact of the agents (collectively over extended sweep of time). So we can generalize Hughes’s point above concerning technological momentum to speak of “institutional momentum”: institutional configuration is plastic in its development and relatively sticky in operation. This analysis can be understood as the

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6 See (North 1990) and (Ostrom 1990) for rational choice constructions of the development of institutions.
social contract argument writ large. The general approach is to identify a common existential situation for a group of agents within the material circumstances of human life; identify a salient and accessible solution; and infer that this institutional arrangement will recur again and again.

It is also important to bear in mind that, at any given time, agents are presented with a repertoire of available institutions and variants (along the lines of Charles Tilly’s point about a repertoire of strategies of collective action; Tilly 1986). The contents of the institutional repertoire is historically specific, reflecting the examples that are currently available and those that are available through historical memory. This highlights one of the reasons for the institutional differences that Wong identifies between the political histories of Europe and China; the repertoire of institutional choices for Chinese decision makers was significantly different from that available in early modern Europe.

Conclusions

Do social structures have the features of permanence, demarcation, and reidentification that allow us to call them “things”? Are social structures more like molecules or clouds? Do states, societies, crowds, organizations, institutions, mobs, or classes exist? Are there social things?

Yes, there are individual social things we refer to as states, crowds, institutions. But no, these individuals do not form social kinds. The things we refer to as “states” or “crowds” do not have underlying essences that permit us to infer to new cases.

In particular, I offer reasons for doubt about social kinds. Terms like feudalism, proto-industrialization, revolution should be understood nominally, not essentially or realistically. They do not refer to a real and unchanging class of instances. Rather, they
serve to pick out historical instances that show similarities and differences to paradigm cases. We can be realist about social things—relations, institutions, practices, organizations—in particular settings, but nominalist about the groups of such things across contexts.

This position represents a very sparse ontology. Things exist, but they do not constitute kinds of things. A social order existed in Northern France in the 12th century that can be classified as “feudal”. The social order existed; feudalism does not.

Is this approach enough for meso-history? I believe so. The meso-historian compares complexes of social relations and institutions that perform certain social functions; and he/she compares, differentiates, and analyzes these complexes. There are “states,” “economies,” and “religions”; but they are heterogeneous groups of social things that share properties in fluid and changeable ways, depending on underlying features of structure and agency that produce these properties.
References


