Acknowledgement

• These ideas derive from Chapters 9 and 10 of my Microfoundations, Method and Causation (Transaction Press, 1998).
Manifesto

• There are causal relations among social phenomena, and causal explanation is the central form of social explanation. This thesis cuts against those who argue that the social sciences are intrinsically hermeneutic and non-causal.
Causal relations are not constituted by regularities or laws connecting classes of social events or phenomena. In fact, the regularities of the social world fall far short of the predictive and strict laws of nature that characterize many domains of natural phenomena.
Manifesto

- Social causal relations are constituted by the causal powers of various social events, conditions, structures, and the like, and the singular causal mechanisms that lead from antecedent conditions to outcomes. Accordingly, a central goal of social research is to identify the causal mechanisms that give rise to social outcomes.
Manifesto

• There is no such thing as pure social causation from macro-state to macro-state; instead, hypotheses about social causal mechanisms must be constructed on the basis of an account of the “microfoundations” of the processes that are postulated. Individuals choosing in the context of structured circumstances of choice are the engine of social change.
Manifesto

- Social entities and structures -- institutions, ideologies, technological revolutions, communications and transportation systems -- all these exercise causal powers through the effects that they have on individual choices, preferences, beliefs, etc.
Social scientists discover myriad causal properties attaching to states, demographic regimes, cropping practices, agricultural technologies, transport systems, and the like. Moreover, there is substantial causal diversity in the mechanisms and properties that social scientists discern.
Manifesto

It is therefore methodologically defensible to be eclectic in one’s causal hypothesizing; there is no philosophical basis whatsoever for supposing that there is a single unifying social theory that could serve as the basis of all social change.
Manifesto

• As philosophers of the social sciences we should pay close attention to the best practice of social scientists, and should formulate both our problems and our solutions in consideration of the methodological, conceptual, and epistemic challenges that confront real social science research.
Causal realism

• The Humean approach--causation is defined as statistically significant associations among variables--is philosophically misguided.
• Analysis in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions is also not fundamental.
• Social explanations depend on identifying causal mechanisms.
Causal realism

• In looking for a causal explanation of a particular outcome P we are assuming that there is a set of properties, conditions, and events which occurred prior to P and which, as a consequence of the causal powers of these factors, brought P into being.
People advocating causal realism

People advocating causal realism

Causal mechanisms

• Seek out the individual-level and local-level mechanisms through which social outcomes emerge
• For example, “prisoners’ dilemmas,” “public goods problems,” “principal-agent problem”
Causal realism

- Singular causes?
- General causes?
- Singular causal sequences?
Microfoundations thesis

- Social causation proceeds through the structured circumstances of choice of individual agents.
- Macro-explanations need micro-foundations: detailed accounts of the pathways by which the macro-level social patterns come about.
Examples of micro-foundational explanations

- Aggregative explanation; “institutional logic” explanations
- Field shape in medieval France (the wheeled plow)
- Low investment rates in sharecropping regimes
- Micro-class analysis of outcomes--Brenner, Tilly
Causal powers of institutions

- Social entities exert influence in several possible ways:
  - They can alter incentives for individuals
  - They can alter preferences
  - They can alter beliefs
  - They can alter the powers or opportunities available to individuals.
  - They can impose costs on certain lines of action.
Methods of causal analysis

- Comparative social science and historical sociology (e.g. Skocpol)
- Process-tracing
The logic of comparative social analysis

• The logic of comparative inquiry: review “similar” cases with differing conditions and outcomes, and attempt to discern causal relations.

• Paradigm case: Skocpol’s study of revolutions.

• “Do food crises, strong organizations, and weak states cause revolutions?”
Mill’s methods

- method of similarity
- method of difference
INUS conditions

• INUS condition: insufficient but necessary part of a condition which is itself unnecessary but sufficient for the result (Mackie 1974:62).

• $BDEF \lor BDAF \lor BDAC \lor BDEC \Rightarrow R$

• $((A \lor E) \& B) \& (((C \lor F) \& D) \Rightarrow R$
The easy case: exceptionless causation

- The requirements for this analysis:
  - complete causal field--causal closure
  - exceptionless causation--no probabilistic causes
- INUS conditions
The causal diagram

A  .33  food crisis
    
  B  .40  local organiz.
       
  E  .50  exploitation
       
  B  .40  local organiz.
       
  C  .15  war
       
  D  .50  weak institut.
       
  F  .33  econ. crisis
       
  D  .50  weak institut.
       
  .3  
  .7

social unrest

.75

state crisis

.8 .5

revolution
The hard case: probabilistic causation

• Causal conditions exert influence probabilistically: If Q1, Q2, … Qn, then there is a likelihood of P that R will occur.
• Incomplete knowledge of the causal field; possibility of unknown causes
• Mill’s methods are not useable.
• Causal relevance: A is causally relevant to the occurrence of R iff P(R|A) <> P(R) (Salmon)
The hard case: probabilistic causation

- Assume that the world is causally organized according to the causal diagram. This diagram involves six independent variables, two intermediate causal variables (social unrest and state crisis), and one final variable (revolution). The states of variables G and H are determined by the states of A-F. And the state of R is determined by the states of G and H.
Analysis

• With an arbitrarily large number of cases it is possible to infer a great deal about the structure of the causal diagram: relevance of factors, independence or dependence of factors, and conditional probability of outcome given conjunctions of factors.

• The assumption of unlimited data is unrealistic.
Analysis

- Theory is needed to guide the construction of hypotheses about causal pathways.
- We need to have hypotheses about possible causal mechanisms that can then be tested by identifying cases in which these mechanisms are present/absent.