Topics in the Philosophy of Social Science

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Acknowledgement

The program: Foundational questions

- Is there a “science of society”? 
- What is involved in “scientific study of social phenomena”? 
- What is a good social science explanation? 
- Are there scientific methods for the study of social phenomena?
Philosophy of social science

- How should we approach these questions?
- Not through apriori formulations and reasoning.
- Rather, through careful engagement with strong examples of social inquiry.
- Formulate methodological and philosophical maxims through study of good practice.
Behaviorism

- pernicious methodology deriving from positivism
- bad effects on cognitive science / psychology
“Society is a system of variables”

Goal of research is to identify statistical relationships among dependent and independent variables

E.g. “correlates of war,” regression analysis of growth rates and social outcomes
Topics

- Social regularities
- Causal realism
- Microfoundations
- Levels of explanation
- Rational choice and the new institutionalism
Social regularities exist, but they are weak and exception-laden.

Social regularities are “phenomenal” rather than “governing”.

The goal of social inquiry should be to arrive at hypotheses about underlying social mechanisms that produce outcomes and regularities.
Predictions

- Predictions are weak and unreliable in social science.
- Countervailing tendencies; *ceteris paribus* conditions; complexity of social causation; effects of agency.
- Limited usefulness of the covering law model and the thesis of falsifiability.
Be eclectic: multiple theories

- ethnic violence
- political entrepreneurs; identity politics
- need several theories to explain various aspects of these complex phenomena.
- Multiple theories correspond to distinct mechanisms and processes.
Anti-functionalism

- Functional explanation is suspect in social science.
- To say that “The state exists in order to enhance corporate profitability” is mysterious until we have an account of what the causal mechanism is that leads to this result.
- Natural selection is not available as a mechanism.
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.
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 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.
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
Levels of social explanation

- **Ontology**: are there social entities that are not composed of individuals?
- **Causal**: do social entities have causal powers not dependent upon the agency of individuals?
- **Explanatory**: do social explanations need to "reduce" to arguments about the actions of individuals? are there any "level" restrictions on social explanation?
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
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.
Levels of phenomena

- The “socially situated individual”
- Social facts that influence individuals
  - Institutions
  - Norms
  - Worldviews and paradigms; folk knowledge
- Local-level institutions
- Global-level institutions
  - Government and legal systems
  - Markets and economic institutions
  - News, media, and information sources
Three large areas of questions

- 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; 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 by Coleman.
Individualism?

- There are no supra-individual actors in social causation.
- But this is not methodological individualism; individuals are socially constituted by worldviews, values, and institutions.
- Call it “methodological localism”.
Rational choice theory provides a powerful basis for social explanation.

In many institutional contexts, self-interested prudence dominates other factors; and so game theory, marginalist economic theory are empirically credible theories of individual behavior.

The new institutionalism.
Practical rationality

- Individual rationality is broader than utility-maximization.
- Agents have goals; beliefs; and norms and commitments.
- They act prudently out of regard for these goals and beliefs, inflected by their norms and commitments.
Collective action problems are ubiquitous among social phenomena. This is important because it provides a basis for a particularly broad and cross-cultural set of explanations.
Objectivity

- Social science is potentially “objective”.
- Objectivity involves two separate characteristics:
  - a rationally compelling case can be made for one hypothesis over another;
  - social phenomena are sometimes independent from the ideas and understandings of participants.
Empiricism

- Social science hypotheses can and should be tested and empirically evaluated.
Epistemic issues

- evidence
- inference
- conclusions
- critical evaluation of data
examples

- Huang: Mantetsu surveys; conclusions about North China
- Great depression; effects on rural economy.
- Railway; occupying army; marxist research teams.
Examples

- standard of living in rural China
- Tawney; travelers and observers; qualitative and anecdotal evidence
- Conclusion: conditions were improving.
Analysis

- critical assessment of the evidence and inferences is needed.
- Data, theory => inference => conclusions
Findings

- Social inquiry derives from a conjunction of inexactness and intelligibility that social phenomena almost always represent.
- Explanations are possible.
- But the social world is not a closed, determined system of variables and outcomes.
Findings

- There is scientific social inquiry.
- There are limits on the scope of social theories.
- We need to recognize the multiplicity of questions and answers that can be posed to the social world.