

Still Looking for the Third Way? How about “critical realist social process micro-mechanics”?

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A hypothesis worth testing is that the greater the intellect of the author(s) of a work of science, the more fruitful it is to pay relatively greater attention to the footnotes as compared to the main text. Arguably, the new book *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* by Alexander George and Andrew Bennett is a case in point.¹ On page 214 (footnote 25 of chapter 10), George and Bennett hint at a synthesis between the epistemology of scientific realism and their own methodological preference for process-tracing and the identification of social mechanisms. They observe that “scientific realists who have emphasized that explanation requires not merely correlational data, but also knowledge of intervening causal mechanisms, have not yet had much to say on methods for generating such knowledge.” Since they go on to suggest that their own methodological advice could be viewed to fill this gap, presumably then, methodological advice à la George and Bennett is fully compatible with a scientific realist epistemology. This is an important observation because it can lead us to integrate a range of endeavors which are each promising but which, without integration into one paradigm of scientific inquiry, stand little chance of achieving stronger influence in the social sciences.

The first of these endeavors is that of scientific (or “critical”) realism. Initially developed mainly by Roy Bhaskar² but by now drawing also on contributions by a range of other scholars,³ this school of thought is an epistemology with ontological underpinnings. Its ontological underpinnings are, in essence, that there is a real world extending beyond our range of perception and that the regularities we observe are caused by underlying and often unobservable mechanisms which “belong” to this world (and not merely to our perceptions of it). In critical realist terms, “causality... is of unobservable yet (possibly) real underlying generative mechanism(s) that, when active, cause(s) observed/unobserved events.”⁴ These ontological underpinnings do not appear constructed prior to but are rather demanded by critical realism’s epistemology, according to which “causality might be captured through a non-empiricist but empirical scientific method that builds models of underlying generative mechanism(s) through a

¹ Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005.

² See *A Realist Theory of Science* (London: Verso, 2nd ed. 1975 [1997]); *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 3rd ed. 1998); *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* (London: Verso, 1986); and *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1989).

³ See, for example, Margaret Archer et al. (eds.), *Critical Realism: Essential readings* (London: Routledge, 1998); Andrew Collier, *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar’s Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1994); Berth Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002); Ilkka Niiniluoto, *Critical Scientific Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Andrew Sayer, *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach* (London: Routledge, 2nd ed. 1992) and *Realism and Social Science* (London: Sage 2000). Of course critical realism also builds on earlier traditions and works, too diverse to be named here.

⁴ Mehmet Y. Tezcan, “On Causality and Generalization in International Relations: Critical Realist Answers to the Positivist Dilemmas of Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods,” paper presented at the Fall Staff Seminar Series, The Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, 26 October 2005, p. 5.

dialectical mediation between empirical evidence and theoretical abstraction.”⁵ To generalize, in this view, “is to attempt to reveal real underlying generative mechanisms(s)”⁶ through questions like “how could this phenomenon come about?”

The second endeavor which calls for integration into this new paradigm is the “nuts and bolts” approach of developing knowledge about causal mechanisms, represented perhaps most famously by Jon Elster in his book *The Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*.⁷ In this book, which is an interesting inventory of some crucial mechanisms working at the levels of human action and interaction, Elster provides an accessible account of what we should understand by explanation via causal mechanisms. Essentially, these mechanisms emerge from tendencies in human and group behavior that we observe occurring with some regularity given comparable conditions. They are themselves not general laws but their workings can and indeed should be explained with reference to more general laws. According to Elster, “a causal mechanism has a finite number of links. Each link will have to be described by a general law.”⁸ What tracing causal mechanisms adds to our knowledge of general laws is, essentially, an understanding of how regularities come about. While the simple observation of regularities might improve our predictive capacity, “for explanatory purposes the mechanism is what matters. It provides understanding, whereas prediction at most offers control.”⁹ “By concentrating on mechanisms,” moreover, “one captures the dynamic aspect of scientific explanation: the urge to produce explanations of ever finer grain.”¹⁰ The tension with structuralism is evident here, but, contrary to structuralist critiques, Elster’s approach does not necessarily lead to less parsimonious theorizing or less general validity of findings. Regularities are simply sought at different levels of aggregation than in competing structuralist accounts, and reduction is not seen as a threat in the search for social mechanisms.

The third endeavor that can be seen to support this emerging paradigm is the methodological school of thought represented by George and Bennett (and the many like-minded scholars cited in their book). Viewed from this perspective, this book is an early step in the direction of developing how-to advice for scholars working within this paradigm, and some of its evident shortcomings appear more justifiable. Important questions neglected in the book are, for example, how to determine at which level to observe and to theorize (i.e. how deeply to dive into Coleman’s bathtub)¹¹ and the related though not identical question of when we can stop complicating our causal accounts. Clearly there are no one-size-fits-all answers to these questions and, as the authors point out, “scholarly judgment” must always be exerted. Still, I hope the next book that will push forward this emerging paradigm will be one that focuses on developing teachable

⁵ Mehmet Y. Tezcan, “On Causality and Generalization in International Relations,” p. 5

⁶ Mehmet Y. Tezcan, “On Causality and Generalization in International Relations,” p. 5

⁷ Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Elster is living proof of the assertion by George and Bennett that their quest for social mechanisms and mid-range and typological theory is compatible with a rational choice orientation.

⁸ Jon Elster, *The Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*, p. 7.

⁹ Jon Elster, *The Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*, p. 10.

¹⁰ Jon Elster, *The Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*, p. 7.

¹¹ James Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1990).

methodological advice which (perhaps similar to the attempt by Gerring)¹² will at least lay open the relevant trade-offs and provide guidance on *how* to exert scholarly judgment in addressing these questions so central to the approach.

Reflecting back on the above and other attempts made to develop new, linked ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundations for social science research, what we have here is a potential new paradigm in the making. There is an ontological foundation that can easily accommodate the lessons of constructivism but remains wedded to the idea of a reality outside of our minds. Its realism is post-positivist in that it is clearly non-empiricist and has made a fresh peace with the idea (abhorred by positivism) that the building blocks of the social world are very often not directly observable – the concept of the “social mechanism” is to an important extent a metaphysical concept.¹³ There is an epistemology that emphasizes the creation of knowledge via a back and forth movement between theory and observation and maintains a focus on explanation via social mechanisms. And there is a set of methods (laid out in some detail by George and Bennett) that are specifically designed to uncover and trace the operation of such mechanisms.

Incidentally, this paradigm in the making also facilitates a rapprochement between the social sciences and history, as represented by Clayton Roberts in *The Logic of Historical Explanation*.¹⁴ His advocacy of pursuing “microcorrelation” is reminiscent of Coleman’s “bathtub model”, in which correlations at the aggregate (macro) level are elucidated by tracing their linkages at a lower (micro) level of aggregation.¹⁵ Once again, this does not mean that we give up the search for general laws. Rather, microcorrelation “is the minute tracing of the explanatory narrative to the point where the events to be explained are microscopic *and the covering laws correspondingly more certain.*”¹⁶ But it does mean that we refuse to content ourselves with the - ultimately esoteric - art of uncovering general correspondences and instead confront all correlational evidence with “how” and “why” questions. In the process, as pointed out in chapter 12 of George and Bennett, we come to mediate between abstraction and lived reality and our work arguably becomes more useful for decisionmakers in our fields of study.

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention to what I believe is our most serious problem when attempting to conduct research in the way advocated by this emerging paradigm. That problem is lack of usable theory. When we search our fields for theories that might have applicability to our empirical focus of study, we often discover that the theories we do have are too general, sometimes even approaching the status of ontologies. They cannot usually deliver satisfactory explanations of particular phenomena, nor, of course, do they have much predictive value. As George and Bennett point out in their treatment of typological theorizing, there are two general strategies for

¹² John Gerring, *Social Science Methodology: A Criterial Framework* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Gerring attempts to provide such orientation for scholars working in a more positivistic vein.

¹³ The question whether the focus on “social mechanisms” requires or encourages a mechanistic ontology is an important one that unfortunately cannot be tackled within the confines of this short article.

¹⁴ University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996. See the summary in George and Bennett, pp. 225-230.

¹⁵ James Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory*.

¹⁶ Clayton Roberts, *The Logic of Historical Explanation*, p. 66. Quoted in George and Bennett, p. 227. Emphasis added.

creating usable theory – deduction and induction. The deductive approach seeks to “fit” more general theoretical models onto our empirical observations by systematically complicating them to accommodate real-world complexity. This approach is enormously demanding. Not only are general theoretical models which could be “fit” in this manner often lacking to begin with, but the series of decisions which have to be made by the individual researcher, in particular the discovery/construction of rival explanations at the level of theory-in-use, and the need to survey the entire property space of a general theory only to be left in the end with some theoretically informed observations of empirical detail in praxis demand too much skill and effort of the social scientist.

The inductive approach, in contrast, develops theory from the bottom up by confronting our observations with the question “What is going on here?” Ideally, the process of answering this question leads us to answer also the more strongly theoretically motivated question “Of what is this an instance?” It is this movement that leads from configurative-ideographic to disciplined configurative research and that allows us to develop lessons whose generality and applicability extend beyond our specific case(s). Of course the deductive and the inductive movement are necessarily linked. Without relating the two processes we could not get “off the ground” of idiosyncratic field research. But it seems to me that to address the problem of a lack of usable theory for empirical investigation in the social sciences, the most promising and practical strategy in which most of us can engage tends to favor inductivism and leads us to a) develop detailed knowledge of cases while b) cultivating a willingness to abstract from the stories in which we become immersed, indeed to tell “verifiable causal stories resting in differing chains of cause-effect relations whose efficacy can be demonstrated independently of those stories.”¹⁷ It is this second point on which most progress has to occur to lead to greater integration among the social sciences.

¹⁷ Charles Tilly, “Means and Ends of Comparative Macrosociology,” *Comparative Social Research*, Vol. 16 (1997), p. 48. Quoted in George and Bennett, p. 205.