

Between agency and social structure : an epistemological point

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BETWEEN AGENCY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL POINT

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I agree with Jeffrey Alexander on most of his points. True: some of the actor's knowledge is "society's" knowledge. True: action "can occur only in relation to two highly structured internal environments", i. e. cultural system and personality. True: actors are often befuddled, passive, self-deceptive, etc. These ideas are so obvious that a non-sociologist would probably consider it strange that a sociologist has to teach them to other sociologists.

This implicit discussion of Jeffrey Alexander with unidentified antagonists raises an important but often ill-perceived point: sociological analysis cannot aim at describing human beings, in short "men", as they are; as Simmel said, it uses always a "conventional" or "abstract" psychology.

I will cite two classical analyses to illustrate this point. In his *Old Regime*, Tocqueville explains the stagnation of French agriculture at a time where British agriculture was flourishing: because of the prevailing conditions in France, the landlords often preferred to leave their land and become civil servants. In this case, Tocqueville uses a model of the "rational choice" type, and does so on repeated occasions. The very existence of such good, uncontroversial, universally accepted explanations using the rational choice model suffices to disqualify all *a priori* objections against it.

The same Tocqueville uses on many occasions other types of models, e. g. when he explains why many French intellectuals at the time of the Enlightenment militated energetically for the nationalization of all kinds of economic activities, and why they enjoyed much more social authority and influence than their British counterparts. The beliefs of the intellectuals appear to us as strange, suggests Tocqueville. They are not, though; their views are wrong, but they had *reasons* for believing what they did believe. In the same way, it may seem strange that so many people were influenced by them. They had good reasons, however, for paying attention to the Enlighteners. The strength of Tocqueville's analysis is mainly due to his reconstruction of these reasons. These "reasons" have nothing to do with the reasons considered in the rational choice model, however. To my knowledge, nobody has proposed serious alternative explanations of the same phenomena.

So, a satisfactory sociological analysis will in some circumstances successfully use an “abstract” psychology, say, of the “rational” model type; in other circumstances, it may use other types of “abstract” psychology.

Many discussions could be avoided if more attention was paid to the following points: 1) sociological analysis uses always a “model”, never a realistic “picture” of man; 2) a good model of man is always a trade-off between realism and simplicity; 3) the validity of a given model of man depends on the nature of the questions raised by a particular sociological analysis; 4) thus no particular model of man can be a serious candidate for universality; 5) in any given circumstances a model can be valid or invalid, e. g. when it treats an action as meaningful when it is meaningless (or vice versa)¹.

(Original English; editing: Martha Baker, Munich)

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1 See R. Boudon, “Subjective Rationality and the Explanation of Social Behavior”, *Rationality and Society*, Vol. 1, no 2, October 1989, 171–196 and “Beyond the Alternative Between the *Homo Sociologicus* and the *Homo Oeconomicus*: Toward a Cold Theory of Beliefs”, to be published in *Social practice: Essays in Honor of James S. Coleman*, Praeger, New York.