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Acta Sociologica 2013 56: 199
DOI: 10.1177/0001699312468804

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What is This?
Social mechanisms and grand theories of Modernity – worlds apart?

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Abstract
In this article I argue against the widespread opinion that social mechanisms and grand theories of Modernity are conflicting approaches to social theory. My main thesis is that even though they clearly differ, they exhibit complementary strengths and weaknesses. Hence, I argue for a cooperative solution to the question of their coexistence within sociology. I present what I call a Weberian solution to this query. More precisely, I claim that a grand theory of Modernity should be conceived of as a constellation of social mechanisms. As a result, grand theories of Modernity may be both more properly articulated and tested empirically, whereas social mechanisms may be reconnected to the classical project of sociology, namely to construct a comprehensive theory of modernity. I illustrate the fruitfulness of my Weberian solution with a particular case, the sociology of freedom.

Keywords
freedom, functional differentiation, grand theory of Modernity, social mechanism, sociology, Weber

Analytical and classical sociology: Friends or foes?
Many sociologists would agree that producing ‘grand’ theories of Modernity (hereafter GTMs) is the classical and founding ambition of sociology. However, sociologists working within the field of ‘grand’ social theory should be alarmed by some of the shortcomings of existing GTMs. In particular, they should worry about the frequent lack of precise specification of the ‘middle range’ social processes mediating the dualism of structural macro-principles and the existential micro-conditions of individuals which typically characterize such theories. Also, they should worry about the weak empirical foundation of many GTMs. In the past decade, social theorizing based on social mechanisms (hereafter SMs) has
strengthened its position within sociology. The analytical programme in social theory, with its emphasis on empirical testing and focus on the intermediary causal social machinery linking the macro-level and the micro-level, possesses the capacity to remedy both weaknesses of GTMs. However, a problem with the SM approach is that it has abandoned the classical sociological ambition of producing a comprehensive theory of modern societies. Consequently, just to replace GTMs with SMs will impose a considerable cost on the discipline. From this follows the question that this article attempts to answer: Can the classical GTM approach and analytical SM approach be aligned, and, if so, how?

I argue in favour of what I call a Weberian solution to this challenge. My main thesis is that even though GTMs and SMs clearly differ, they exhibit complementary strengths and weaknesses and would have much to benefit from more cooperation. More precisely, I claim that a GTM should be conceived of as a particular constellation of SMs. In this way SMs can bridge the gap between structural macro-principles and existential micro-conditions in GTMs. Decomposing GTMs into constellations of SMs also makes it easier to derive observable consequences from GTMs and test them empirically. Incorporating SMs into GTMs will, furthermore, reconnect the analytical approach with the classical ambition of producing a comprehensive model of modern society. Finally, this solution respects the distinctive character of the two forms of social theory.

I proceed as follows. After giving a brief presentation and comparison of the analytical and classical programmes, I discuss some of their respective shortcomings. Taking these as my points of departure, I then present and argue my Weberian synthesis. In the concluding part I illustrate its fruitfulness with a particular case, the sociology of freedom. Going about it this way I hope to contribute to reconciling two bodies of social theory that at present seem encapsulated in separate intellectual universes.

The analytical approach: Social mechanisms

The analytical approach to social theory can trace its origins back to at least the seventeenth century and the attempt by philosophers such as Descartes, Hobbes, Locke and Hume to apply the principles of the scientific revolution to the study of man. Several of the founding fathers of modern social science have also inspired this approach, such as de Tocqueville (see Elster, 2009), Marx (see Elster, 1985), Weber (1978) and Simmel (1992). Nevertheless, as a clearly demarcated programme in social theory, analytical sociology is a rather recent invention established after World War II by social theorists such as Merton (1967), Coleman (1990), Schelling (2006), Elster (1989b, 2007) and Boudon (1991), and recently codified by Hedström and Swedberg (Hedström, 2005; Hedström and Swedberg, 1998b). The regulative idea of analytical sociology is to model sociology after the natural sciences (and in particular physics and chemistry) as an explanatory science that explains empirical observations by subsuming them under general principles. Hence to keep up with the explanatory ambition and not having to fall back on mere ‘thick phenomenological description’ (Elster, 1989a: vii), analytical sociologists have invoked a substitute for laws: SMs. Thus adherence to explanation by SMs is what unites the analytical approach.

Conducting research, analytical sociologists typically proceed in two steps. The first is to ‘establish the phenomenon’, as Merton (1987) says. This means to produce reliable empirical observations of important social phenomena such as typical beliefs, network structures, cultural tastes, social norms and common ways of acting (Hedström, 2005: 5; Hedström and Bearman, 2009: 3). The next step is to provide an explanation of these observations. Ideally, explanation would follow the logical syntax of subsumption under general laws according to the nomological-deductive model associated with Hempel (1965): ‘If \( p \) then everywhere and always \( q \).’ However, sociologists have yet to come up with any social laws, and probably never will (Elster, 2007: 32–36; Giddens, 1984: 343–347; Hedström, 2005: 15–20). Hence to keep up with the explanatory ambition and not having to fall back on mere ‘thick phenomenological description’ (Elster, 1989a: vii), analytical sociologists have invoked a substitute for laws: SMs. Thus adherence to explanation by SMs is what unites the analytical approach.

Several definitions of what an SM is have been proposed (for overviews, see Hedström, 2005: 25; Gross, 2009: 359–362). Here I follow Elster’s (2007: 36) broad definition, according to which an SM is an easily recognizable and frequently occurring causal social pattern triggered under generally unknown
conditions or with indeterminate consequences. Frequently occurring implies that SMs are context-independent; they are instantiated across social space and historical time. In this respect they satisfy one important criteria of the nomological-deductive approach: to subsume the particular under the general and thus explain more with less. However, because SMs in contrast to laws are triggered under unknown conditions and, in cases in which two or more SMs are triggered simultaneously, often with indeterminate net consequences, they cannot be used to predict social outcomes \textit{ex ante}, only to explain them \textit{ex post facto}.

Now to be more precise about what is meant by a causal pattern: a SM denotes a constellation of entities (human actors), their characteristics (desires, beliefs and opportunities) and activities (actions and interactions) that in a regular way produces particular outcomes (social facts) (Hedström, 2005: 25). Thus analytical sociology is also grounded on methodological individualism and a reductionist programme: to explain by disaggregation. Furthermore, and guided by the ambition of disaggregation, analytical sociologists often differentiate SMs into three main categories, inspired by Coleman’s (1990: 8–10) ‘dipping’ model (Hedström, 2005: 115 f.; Hedström and Swedberg, 1998a: 21–23): Macro-to-micro SMs (type 1) describe how social structures influence the characteristics of individuals (beliefs and desires) and their situation (menu of opportunities) – for example how one’s position in a social structure influences one’s beliefs. Micro-to-micro SMs (type 2) describe how an individual’s characteristics and situation jointly produce individual actions – such as rational decision-making under informational and situational constraints. And finally micro-to-macro SMs (type 3) depict how the (inter)actions of many individuals add up to produce collective social outcomes – such as decentralized exchange processes terminating in a social equilibrium.

From this brief presentation we can now deduce the analytical vision of social theory: a steadily accumulating toolbox of social mechanisms that can be invoked and elaborated on by sociologists wanting to explain delimited empirical observations made within the many specialized subfields of sociology (Hedström and Udehn, 2009: 42).

The classical approach: Grand theories of Modernity

The classical approach, not surprisingly, goes back to the classics Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Tönnies and Simmel, and has been prolonged after World War II by post-classical sociologists including Parsons, Adorno, Bell, Luhmann, Habermas, Foucault, Beck, Giddens, Bauman, Sennett and Castells. The \textit{desideratum} guiding the classical approach is to produce a scientific theory of modern society in its entirety. Thus, in contrast to the analytical programme, this approach is oriented not at explaining this or that partial social observation but at describing the overall characteristics of contemporary modern societies. Hence the founding question for classical sociologists is: What does it mean to be modern?


A bit surprisingly, though, we search in vain for a clear definition of what a GTM is. For instance, it is not included in the typologies of sociological theories presented by Merton (1967: 139–155), Alexander (1982: 3 and 40), Hedström and Udehn (2009: 29) and Abend (2008: 177–181). Despite obvious differences in theoretical vocabulary, conceptual sophistication, level of abstraction, empirical grounding and normative ambitions, the theories above share the following characteristics: A GTM is a conceptually articulated, empirically grounded and comprehensive model of contemporary modern society. Conceptual articulation means that a GTM must be articulated in a coherent theoretical vocabulary developed at an adequately high level of generalization designed to capture what I call the structural principles of modern
societies (more soon). Empirical grounding implies that producing GTMs is not a kind of armchair sociology. GTMs must be exposed to empirical testing and, if they don’t fit the data, be rejected or revised. And contemporary modern society means that a GTM picks out as its object the kind of society we live in today. What especially distinguishes GTMs as an independent form of social theory is the last element: comprehensiveness. A GTM does not portray this or that partial institution of society – such as the family, politics or law – or this or that partial social phenomenon – such as gender, power or social stratification – but society as a whole. That is, a GTM articulates what I with Giddens (1984: 17) call the structural principles of contemporary society: the ‘most deeply embedded structural properties implicated in the reproduction of social totalities’. Thus structural principles are the most general principles organizing the lives of the members of society and exhibit two properties: breadth – they apply to most members of society and regulate many aspects of their activities – and depth – they influence outcomes allocating resources and burdens essential both to their objective life chances and subjective identities.

We are now in a position to comprehend the classical vision of social theory: a continuous debate over the constituting structural principles of Modernity.

Some points of convergence

Despite clear differences of opinion regarding what social theory ought to be – a toolbox of explanatory social mechanisms versus models depicting the structural principles of modernity – the analytical and classical approaches actually have quite a lot in common. Both approaches are hostile to all forms of ‘mindless’ and ‘abstracted’ empiricism (Mills, 2000); of making sociology the endeavour of aggregating more and more data without fitting them into coherent and highly generalized conceptual schemes. For that reason, both approaches also agree that developing social theory is absolutely necessary if sociology is to progress as a discipline. Furthermore, both analytical and classical sociologists want to bridge what Goldthorpe (2007: 4) designates the ‘scandal of sociology’, namely the ‘manifest lack of integration of research and theory’. Thus both social mechanisms and structural principles are forms of theory that can pilot the design of empirical studies and guide the interpretation of empirical observations. And because both SMs and GTMs are forms of social theory which stretch across sub-disciplinary borders, and hence can facilitate communication between them, both the analytical and classical approach may potentially counteract the fragmentation of sociology into a set of hermetically sealed subfields. Moreover, SMs and GTMs are both bodies of sociological knowledge characterized by a high level of generalization: in the case of SMs we have to do with context-transcending causal social processes, in the case of GTMs with structural principles organizing a very high number of social processes. This is also why we call them social theory (Alexander, 1982). And, finally, the high level of generalization implies that both programmes construct abstract models that cut off many layers of diversity and details from the concrete social world (Hedström, 2005: 2 f.; Hernes, 1998). As a result, SMs and GTMs clearly differ from various kinds of ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 2000) and inductive and ‘grounded’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1999) approaches that stay much closer to concrete social phenomena.

These points of convergence notwithstanding, there are important points of divergence between the analytical and classical approaches. To see this, I now criticize analytical sociology from the standpoint of classical sociology and vice versa.

Some problems with social mechanisms

Even for those who accept the main tenets of the analytical approach, several issues remain to be clarified. For instance, notions such as social causality, intentionality, reductionism, methodological individualism, action, and even the concept of a mechanism itself are highly contested (Abbott, 2007; Bunge, 1997; Gross, 2009; Hedström, 2005; Manzo, 2010). Important though these internal discussions are, here I nonetheless take the position of a classical outsider and present an external critique. I address
the shortcoming which I find to be most troublesome, namely that the analytical approach has renounced what must be said to be sociology’s historic mission: to construct a theory of modernity.² Let me explain.

One way to demarcate different kinds of social theories is by the type of questions they provide answers to. Thus SMs provide answers to the question: What social process brought about this or that particular observed social phenomenon? To illustrate: in Elster’s recent book Explaining Social Behavior, a comprehensive introduction to the analytical approach, we find a list of typical ‘analytical’ research questions (Elster, 2007: 1–5): Why do gamblers believe that when red has come up five times in a row, red is more likely than black to come up next? Why do more Broadway shows receive standing ovations today than twenty years ago? Why are parents much more likely to kill adopted children and stepchildren than to kill their biological children? Why do supporters of a Socialist party sometimes vote Communist and thereby prevent their party from winning? Similar questions are found in The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology, edited by Hedström and Bearman: Why is divorce contagious (Åberg, 2009)? Why do people trust each other (Cook and Gerbasi, 2009)? Why are successful cultural products orders of magnitude more successful than average products (Salganik and Watts, 2009)? Now these are all important questions, and I would be the first to admit that sociologists need theories that can generate explanations to such queries. But that as it may, one category of questions is glaringly absent from the above lists, namely this: What are the structural principles constituting the kind of society we live in today? As a result, if sociologists collectively adopted the analytical approach, they would no longer be able to answer the ‘grand’ question raised by the founding fathers of sociology: What kind of society do we moderns live in? This absence is unsatisfactory not only for historical (disciplinary) but also for epistemic reasons: the analytical approach only informs us about the pieces of society, not the totality they constitute – and knowledge of the pieces cannot replace knowledge of the whole.

Let me illustrate these weaknesses. The sociology of education is among the most important and highly developed subfields of sociology. One of its key empirical observations is that in spite of the great expansion of the educational system in all (post)industrial Western countries since World War II, class differences in educational attainments display a high degree of resistance to change. With some minor exceptions, this observation is valid across all ‘advanced’ nations (Goldthorpe, 2007: 45). Now this is a very interesting empirical observation, and both for cognitive and practical purposes it is important to detect the SM(s) that brings it about. This could be rational choices, differences in biologically inherited traits, differences in socially transmitted cognitive skills, differences in socially transmitted cultural practices, differences in socially transmitted aspirations, etc. For my purposes it is not necessary to take a stand in this debate.

However, to contribute to the development of a comprehensive theory of modern societies, we have to move on and analyse what consequences for our view of modernity as a whole these partial results entail. That is, the dissection of the social must be supplemented by its synthesizing. One way to do this would be to assess which of the existing GTMs could best accommodate these results. Doing this we immediately discover that many of the most influential contemporary GTMs can be criticized for disregarding the vertical dimension. Thus the theory of functional differentiation emphasizes horizontal instead of vertical differentiation (Durkheim, 1984; Luhmann, 1997; Parsons, 1971); the theory of individualization emphasizes how individual lives have become increasingly detached from class positions (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991); and the theory of risk society claims risk positions now overlay the class positions of ‘old’ industrial modernity (Beck, 1992).

As a response to this vertical deficit, we could take a further step and assemble insights from the wider sociological field of social stratification and construct a new GTM making vertical differentiation the basic structural principle: Modern society would then be conceived of as a relational system of relatively clearly demarcated, stable and objective social positions that individuals occupy depending on their volume and composition of economic, social and cultural resources. Marxism was one such GTM based on a combination of vertical differentiation and socio-economic class, but after the demise of Marxism stratification researchers have been slow to develop new GTMs.
However, being true to the analytical approach will prevent sociologists from taking part in debates like these and producing such ‘grand’ theories. From the classical perspective, this is the main problem of grounding social theory on a toolbox of SMs.

**Some problems with grand theories of Modernity**

As was the case with the analytical approach, even sociologists who generally accept the classical approach face many internal challenges. Indeed, there are probably more unresolved issues emasculating the classical than the analytical approach. For instance: What kind of methodology goes with the classical approach? How to pick out, rank and combine structural principles? How to accommodate local variation in highly abstract structural principles? How to test ‘grand’ theories empirically? Here, however, I launch an external critique from the position of an analytic outsider. Much analytical critique of ‘grand’ theorizing does not afflict GTMs. For instance, GTMs are not what Merton (1967: 45–63) calls ‘total systems’ presupposing that we have captured the essence of man, the true nature of society and the inherent *telos* of history. Thus in contrast to the proto-sociological and ‘metaphysical’ theories of Hegel, Comte and Spencer, GTMs are fallible hypotheses about the structural principles of contemporary modern societies based on what information the social sciences can provide at present. Moreover, GTMs are not simply empty classificatory systems developed to put social phenomena into conceptual boxes, such as Parsons’ (1971) theory of the general action system or Giddens’ (1984) theory of structuration (Mills, 2000: 42 f.).³ Although general conceptual schemes are an integral part of GTMs, as they are of SMs, GTMs are substantial theories about concrete societies. Therefore, in what follows I look at two other problems with the classical approach that stand out very clearly when viewed through the theoretical lenses of analytical sociology.

The first is that most GTMs are characterized by an unfortunate dualism between ‘grand’ structural principles at the macro-level and claims about the existential predicament of the individual at the micro-level. What are missing are descriptions of the more fine-grained causal social machinery – the nuts and bolts, cogs and wheels – connecting the structural principles ‘up there’ with individual lives ‘down here’. To be more precise, and using the typology of social mechanisms inspired by Coleman, we can say that GTMs are particularly weak on specifying type 1 mechanisms describing how structural principles influence actors and their situation, and type 3 mechanisms describing how the (inter)actions of several individuals add up to (re)produce structural principles. As a consequence, GTMs often appear vague, imprecise and explorative rather than well defined and distinct, and the important micro/macro-link is typically a black box.

The second problem with GTMs is their weak empirical foundation. Even if GTMs differ in this regard, there is a widespread disproportionate relation between their grand claims and feeble empirical evidence (for an exception, see Castells, 2000). Typically, a GTM exhibits some combination of generally few empirical observations to back up its claims, extensive use of personal experience and anecdotes, and a biased sample of pre-existing empirical studies.

To illustrate these problems with GTMs, I will take a closer look at one of the most widely discussed GTMs in the past two decades, namely the theory of individualization (hereafter TI). The theory consists of two elements. First, on the institutional level, it is a theory about the macro-properties of contemporary modern societies based on a particular structural principle, namely social deregulation. In short, the theory says that the institutional matrix of industrial modernity has been dismantled the last 30–40 years as the aggregated result of several social processes: Globalization has stretched social life across the territorial borders of the nation-state; a more flexible post-industrial economy has replaced the ‘fordist’ regime of organized industrial capitalism; and the epidemic spread of the dual breadwinner family has undermined the sexual division of labour dominating the nucleus family in industrial modernity. The net result of these and similar processes is a new ‘post-traditional’ (Giddens, 1996), ‘liquid’ (Bauman, 2000), ‘flexible’ (Sennett, 1998) and ‘individualized’ (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001) social order characterized by de-regulation, de-standardization and de-stabilization. At the level of
individuals, and this is the second element, the TI claims that due to a lack of clearly demarcated social positions and role-expectations, a new existential predicament for the individual follows. Identity now becomes a ‘problem’ (Bauman, 1995), the self a ‘reflexive project’ (Giddens, 1991), and the biography and life-course of the new ‘homo optionis’ turned into a succession of choices (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Beck, 1992).

From the analytical perspective, the first problem with the TI is its dualism. It is founded upon a structural principle at the macro-level and claims about the existential predicament of individuals at the micro-level, but lacks precise social mechanisms connecting the two levels. For one thing, the TI lacks precise macro-to-micro mechanisms. Using Hedström’s (2005: 38–42) DBO model, where a human action is conceived as the joint product of the actor’s desires, beliefs and opportunities, structural principles can have an impact on individual actions by way of influencing an actor’s desires, beliefs and opportunities. All we find in the TI in this regard are vague suggestions of mechanisms. To take desires as our example, Beck (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001: ch. 2) claims that ‘living a life of one’s own’ is a predominant cultural value in individualized modernity, and the same does Giddens (1991: 78 f.) with respect to ‘authenticity’. But the mechanisms through which these values are transmitted to individuals (imitation, learning, conformism, adaptive preferences, etc.), and thereby can generate desires, are in both cases black boxes. The situation is not much better with regard to opportunities. The TI says that due to expanded opportunity sets, people are ‘condemned’ (Beck) to be choosers in ever more aspects of their lives. Here some mechanisms are hinted at, such as the weakening of social norms (‘post-tradition-alism’) and the ‘disembedding’ of social relations from local social contexts. But, then again, the hints are all we get.

But the theory is also weak on micro-to-macro mechanisms. Both the emergence and reproduction of individualized modernity are supposed to be the unintended and unanticipated outcome of individual actions. But apart from vague pointers to ‘reflexive modernization’ – Modernity modernizing itself – no mechanism or concatenation of mechanisms is specified in order to explain how the concerted consequences of many individual actions are coordinated and channelled into the macro patterns described by the TI.

The second major problem with the TI is its weak empirical foundation. Even though the sociologists associated with it differ at this point, the general impression is a combination of the three weaknesses I pointed to above. The overall emphasis is on conceptual issues rather than empirical testing. Furthermore, much of the empirical backing we get is anecdotes and personal experiences, as in the cases of the most essayistic of the theorists, Bauman and Sennett. And, finally, empirical evidence is selectively sampled. For instance, Giddens (1991, 1992) bases his theory of the reflexive self and the ‘pure’ intimate relationship primarily on self-help literature, which must be said to be expected to support such a thesis in the first place.

To sum up, the TI is vaguely articulated and full of black boxes regarding how structural principles affect individuals’ identities and behaviour and vice versa. In addition, its empirical backing is generally weak, based on anecdotes, personal experiences and a biased sample of pre-existing empirical studies. In this way it exemplifies typical weaknesses of the GTM approach as seen from the analytical perspective.

A Weberian synthesis

So far I have presented the main principles and discussed some of the problems with GTMs and SMs. As SMs and GTMs have complementary strengths and weaknesses, classical and analytical sociologists have strong incentives to cooperate. Today, however, such cooperation is more or less absent. Analytical sociologists have not taken any steps in this direction, as they are very hostile to ‘grand’ theorizing (Elster, 2007: 446 f.; Hedström, 2005: 12 f.; van den Berg, 1998). And the hostility is reciprocated from most contemporary classical sociologists, although some have tried to bridge the gap between structural principles and individual lives by adding historical and empirical detail to their GTMs. Seen, however, from the perspective of bridging the classical/analytical gap, such attempts, the most prominent example
being Wagner’s (1994, 2012) sociology of Modernity, have two shortcomings. First, Wagner and his likes do not relate to or learn from the SM literature. And second, important though adding more empirical and historical material is, such GTMs lack the parsimony of the subsumptional analytical approach: to explain much with little. Instead they explain much with much through historical narrative and thick phenomenological description.

This lack of cooperation raises the question of whether we as sociologists really can have both an analytical and a classical self, or do we end up in contradiction trying to combine incompatible approaches? I argue that we do not necessarily end up in contradiction combining GTMs and SMs. To justify this claim, I now propose a Weberian solution to this combinatorial challenge.

Weber is rightly praised for resolving the tensions stemming from several dichotomies in sociology, such as the one between ‘subjectivist’ interpretational and ‘objectivist’ explanatory sociology (Weber, 1978: 4). In what follows I argue that Weber in his attempt to reconcile another dichotomy, that between idiographic and nomothetic approaches, also proposed a simple but persuading solution of how to combine SMs and GTMs. To see this, we need to notice three things about Weber’s sociology.

First, Weber is obviously a ‘grand’ theorist of Modernity in so far as he seeks to describe the overall cultural, institutional and psychological matrix of contemporary ‘Occidental’ societies. In Weber’s GTM ‘formal rationality’, the tendency to reflexively calculate, plan and control everything is the key structural principle. At the cultural level of world-views, this principle is expressed in the demystification of a world reduced to a causal mechanism that can be explained and predicted according to universal laws and without recourse to magical or transcendent powers (Weber, 2009: 138–143 and 350–357). At the institutional level, formal rationality is expressed in the dominance of bureaucratic organizations – in particular the state and capitalist firms – designed to make it possible to calculate, coordinate and control human activity (Weber, 1978: ch. XI). And, finally, at the psychological level, formal rationality is expressed in the emergence of a novel personality-type practising the art of disciplining his or her impulses to an unprecedented degree (Weber, 1992). This is the idiographic part of Weber’s sociology: picking out the defining characteristics of a ‘historical individual’ (Weber, 1949: 49), that is, a singular social totality.

Second, Weber is also pivotal in establishing the SM approach in sociology. Not only was Weber (1978: 13 f.) a proclaimed methodological individualist, he pioneered the SM approach by introducing the idea of ideal types (Weber, 1949: 90–112): fine-grained action based causal models applicable to understand and explain social outcomes across different social and historical contexts. To be sure, not all Weber’s ideal types are causal models (SMs). Many are more general classificatory systems (in particular typologies). Even these, however, are designed as tools for producing SM explanations of social phenomena. Accordingly, most of Weber’s 1200-page magnum opus, the posthumously published Economy and Society, consists of general causal models and classificatory systems. This is the nomothetic part of Weber’s sociology.

Finally, in Weber’s sociology his ‘grand’ theory of modern societies and ideal types mutually support each other. GTMs need to be properly specified, hence Weber develops his ideal types to articulate his GTM. For example, in his cultural sociology, and in particular in his sociology of religion, Weber specifies the general causal mechanisms that go into the formal rationalization of world-views, such as psychological pattern-seeking (the search for cognitive closure: consistent and meaningful explanations of experience) and cognitive specialization (validity-claims such as truth, beauty and moral rightness are addressed separately) (Weber, 2009: 323–359). In his institutional sociology, Weber (1978: ch. XI) specifies the causal conditions for the rational coordination of human conduct, namely a bureaucratic organization build on such features as division of labour, hierarchy, formal rules, meritocratic recruitment, predictable career opportunities, paid salary and the separation of employees from ownership of the means of production. And in his famous study of the ‘economic ethos’ of the protestant ethics, Weber (1992) specifies the causal conditions producing the modern rational personality type, namely the internalization of religious principles backed up by social sanctions that makes a moral virtue out of ‘inner-worldly ascetism’. In this way, Weber’s GTM is nothing but a constellation of SMs (Weber, 1949: 173–177). From this also follows that Weber did not construct his ideal types (SMs) ex nihilo but guided by his ambition of producing a
comprehensive GTM. Consequently, which types of social processes he models and which social observations are important to explain by SMs are piloted by the GTM. This is Weber’s combinatory principle.

**Some arguments for the Weberian synthesis**

This combination of a GTM and SMs explains why Weber is highly regarded by both analytical and classical social theorists, albeit for different reasons. Now, it is important to note that even if we do not approve of Weber’s particular choice of structural principle or the constellation of SMs he applies to open the black boxes it entails, his general solution seems promising. Let me state some general reasons for this.

Analytical sociologists would benefit from the Weberian solution by being reconnected to the ‘grand’ questions and ambitions of the classical approach, and this in particular in two ways. First, GTMs might be a sensitizing device in the design phase for analytical sociologists conducting empirical studies. It could help them pick out from the infinite population of possible objects of empirical study the sociologically important phenomena that ought to be modelled and explained by SMs. To give an example, much of today’s empirical research within the field of social stratification springs from a particular GTM: the theory of vertical differentiation and in particular Marx’ theory of modern capitalism. This I call the benefit of empirical selection. Secondly, GTMs might also provide comprehensive interpretational frameworks that the results of analytical sociology could be fed into. In this way it could raise the stakes of analytical sociology and increase the area of application of its research results. To keep up with the sociology of social stratification, the results from this branch of sociology may have important and perhaps dire consequences for the theory of individualization. This I call the benefit of increased interpretational scope.

Classical sociologists too have much to benefit from a dialogue with the analytical approach. As we have seen in connection with Weber’s theory of formal rationalization, SMs make it possible to open the black boxes entailed by GTMs and specify in much greater detail the kind of social processes going into a structural principle. In this way SMs may be applied to decompose the elements that constitute a GTM and thus avoid the charge of vagueness. This is the benefit of opening intermediary black boxes. Specifying SMs also makes it easier to deduce observational consequences from GTMs and hence to test them empirically. For example, specifying the bureaucratic social processes going into the institutional dimension of formal rationalization makes it much easier to see how well actual institutions and organizations cohere with this structural principle. This is the benefit of empirical foundation. Finally SMs can make it easier to solve a peculiar problem facing classical sociologists in search of structural principles. How, namely, can it be legitimate to subsume a variety of social processes occurring in different social circumstances under one and the same structural principle? For instance, what justifies subsuming social processes taking place in the family, work life, media, religion and politics under the structural principle of individualization? The answer is that these processes are all generated by the same SM or concatenation of SMs. In the case of individualization, the unifying SM might be blurrier and weaker social norms. This is the benefit of identifying structural principles.

Instead of continuing a general discussion of the advantages of the Weberian synthesis, I now make efforts to illustrate its practical usefulness.

**Combining the classical and analytical approach in the sociology of freedom**

Both psychologically and socially freedom is of outmost importance to us. Psychologically, in normal cases of action, we all have the explicit or implicit feeling of freedom; that what we do is up to us and that we could have chosen to do otherwise (Dennett, 1984: 104). Also, at the societal level, freedom is a culturally highly validated and institutionally rather thoroughly implemented idea(l) in the Western world (Patterson, 1991). This importance notwithstanding, sociologists have been slow to develop a sociology of freedom. The concept of freedom is rarely explicitly addressed in social theory, and there are not many empirical studies
that directly address the social conditions of freedom. Hence there is a need for a more worked out sociology of freedom.

Applying the Weberian synthesis to the study of freedom would mean studying the overall social conditions of freedom in contemporary modernity from the perspective of a GTM while also specifying the SMs that go into it. In what follows I do just that: I first very briefly outline a GTM, then specify some important SMs that go into it, and, finally, based on the conjunction of the two, I say something about the overall social conditions of freedom. Although I think the elements I present below are highly pertinent to a sociology of freedom, I do not intend my analysis to be comprehensive, my aims are mostly illustrative.

I have, for two reasons, chosen functional differentiation as my structural principle. Firstly, I agree with Durkheim (1984), Parsons (1971) and Luhmann (1997) that this is the most important structural principle of contemporary Modernity as it picks out the major social institutions and unveils much of the logic of their inner workings. Secondly, although the implications of functional differentiation for efficiency (Smith, 1999[1776]), social inequality (Marx, 2000), solidarity (Durkheim, 1984), value conflicts (Weber, 2009: 323–359) and social inclusion (Parsons, 1971) are thoroughly studied, this is not the case with freedom. Hence, there is a need for a more developed sociological analysis of the relation between functional differentiation and freedom.

According to the principle of functional differentiation, modern societies are split up into several distinct social institutions such as law, religion, politics, economy, science, art, education, media and family. Each institution is characterized by the functions or tasks it fulfils for the members of society, such as producing goods and services (economy), stabilizing behavioural expectations (law) and collective action (politics). Internally, the institutions are characterized by separate languages; that is, distinct values, social norms, roles, sanctions and vocabularies. For instance, the economy is built on profits (value), formal rules for economic exchanges between strangers (norms), buyers and sellers, creditors and debtors, employers and employees (roles), economic incentives (sanctions) and the ‘cold’ language of prices (vocabulary). Separate languages also give the institutions a high degree of autonomy. You cannot, for instance, buy good book reviews (art) or a position as a professor (science) or a spouse (family) for money (economy). Furthermore, the institutions are highly specialized; for instance, scientists only produce knowledge, they do not (often to their dismay) make collective decisions (politics), regulate behaviour (law) or save people (religion). And, finally, members of a functionally differentiated society live multi-institutional lives. A person cannot, for instance, spend his whole life receiving education; he also needs goods from the economy, intimacy from the family, news from the media and so on.

As I intend to study how a structural principle constrains and enables individual actions, I look only at type-1 SMs (macro-to-micro). For this purpose, I find it very fruitful to employ sociological role theory as systematized in Merton’s (1957) proclaimed ‘middle-range’ theories of status-sets and role-sets. The status-set denotes all the social positions a person occupies, such as father (family), consumer (economy), professor (science) and legal subject (law), whereas the role-set denotes the totality of roles that are entailed in a single social status. For example, to one’s social status as physician (medical institution), the role-set includes the roles as therapist, researcher, administrator, professional colleague and member of the medical profession. I now describe three SMs related to the status-set and role-set that depict important regularized consequences of functional differentiation for individual freedom.

The SM of increased lifestyle opportunities: Compared to all pre-modern societies, fully-fledged functionally differentiated societies produce very comprehensive status-sets. And from large status-sets follow an increased menu of lifestyle opportunities. To see why, note how many potential identities, life-projects and life-courses are available to members of a functionally differentiated society: One could choose to make one of one’s many social statuses the axis of one’s life, such as being a businessman (economy), a family-man (family), an artist (art) or an intellectual (science). Or one could choose to found one’s life and identity on any combination of social statuses, such as being an art-loving businessman. Or one could choose the ‘postmodern’ and ‘pointillist’ life-strategy of continually swapping identities and life-projects.
The SM of weakened social control: In functionally differentiated societies we live multi-institutional lives. Hence, compared to societies based on kin, clan, estate or class, in which there was ‘nowhere else to go’, exit opportunities flourish. Thus, if I am unhappy in my marriage, I can always spend more time working or shopping. In addition, large status-sets imply that each role becomes less important. For instance, even if I am inclined wholeheartedly to embrace my role as a surgeon, already the family picture at my desk reminds me that I am also a husband and a father. Thus functionally differentiated societies create what Goffman (1961) calls ‘role-distance’.

The SM of sociological ambivalence: Sociological ambivalence (Merton, 1976: 6) implies that in a functionally differentiated society people are often pulled in opposite directions by conflicting social expectations. In one type of situation, people are pulled in opposite directions by conflicting expectations stemming from different statuses in their status-set. For instance, the status as father (family) and employee (economy) or scientist (science) and believer (religion) may pull a person in opposite directions. In another type of situation, different roles in the role-set pull people in opposite directions. For instance, in her status as a professor, a person may be pulled in conflicting directions by the roles as researcher, supervisor, administrator and teacher.

No doubt many more SMs go into the structural principle of functional differentiation, but for my purposes these suffice. Before I analyse the connection between functional differentiation and freedom, let me briefly spell out what I mean by freedom. I define freedom as the absence of constraints when we act (deliberately change the world according to an intention). Although several basic aspects of our actions may be constrained, I here limit myself to the two most important, namely our ability to decide what our intention should be and our ability to transform the world according to it. To the first corresponds freedom as choosing (decisional freedom), to the second freedom as absence of external constraints (opportunity freedom).

In a functionally differentiated society the SM of increased opportunity-set implies that very many potential social identities and life-projects are available to the majority of the members of society. In addition, the SM of reduced social control – exit-opportunities and role-distance – implies that the social costs attached to choosing different identities and life-projects are rather low. Together, these two SMs significantly build down external social obstacles to living the life one wants to. Furthermore, the SMs of increased opportunity-set and sociological ambivalence both exert considerable decision-making pressure upon the members of society. With large status-sets and a corresponding ‘crisis of identity’, the individual is ‘condemned’ to choose who to be and what to do. The same follows from regularly being faced with conflicting social expectations in many circumstances due to sociological ambivalence. All in all, therefore, functional differentiation increases both the pressure to decide what one wants and one’s ability to do what one wants. Of course, functional differentiation also produces obstacles to freedom, but compared to premodern and less differentiated modern societies (such as totalitarian and authoritarian forms of Modernity), a full-grown functionally differentiated society with autonomous institutions greatly enhances the freedom of its members.

Let me conclude this brief analysis by asking what we have gained from combining the classical and analytical approach in this way. In sociology, analyses of functional differentiation have hitherto been embedded in modernization theory and based on three premises: ‘grand’ evolutionary schemas (increased social complexity), holism (parts are explained by their position in the whole) and functional explanations (social benefits are teleological causes). Even in versions where evolutionary necessity and functional explanations are explicitly abandoned, as in the case of Luhmann, the holistic approach persists.4 Thus the common sociological approach to functional differentiation exhibits the standard weaknesses of GTMs: lack of intermediary processes connecting ‘grand’ macro processes and structures with individual actions. Hence the first benefit of the Weberian synthesis is to bridge the micro/macro gap in theories of functional differentiation through intermediary SMs that specify in more detail how functional differentiation affects individual freedom. The SMs of sociological role theory, on the other hand, have been developed mostly within small-scale empirical studies of social groups. Thus by relating them to functional differentiation (a GTM), we have connected them to the ‘grand’ questions of
sociology, thereby increasing their interpretational scope considerably. Through the Weberian synthesis, therefore, we have brought together insights contained in the classical and analytical traditions in a comprehensive and fine-grained and empirically testable theory of the social conditions of freedom.

Conclusion

However the Weberian synthesis is implemented, and the above is just one example, my main point in this article has been to argue that it is important for sociology to overcome the classical/analytical divide. I have invoked two arguments to support this claim. The negative argument picks out weaknesses in the analytical and classical approaches. Thus, if analytical sociology was all there is, sociologists would no longer know what kind of society we inhabit, whereas the problem with the classical approach is vagueness, the micro/macro gap and weak empirical foundation. The positive argument says that because of complementary weaknesses and strengths, cooperation between classical and analytical sociologists might solve many of these problems. I certainly do not claim to have solved all the complex issues entailed by the question of such cooperation. I do claim, however, to have raised an important question that sociologists ought to address more wholeheartedly, and also, through the Weberian synthesis, to have pointed out one possible way of overcoming the troublesome classical/analytical divide.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Acknowledgement

I thank Ferdinand A. Mohn and three anonymous AS reviewers for comments.

Notes

1. For a brief overview of the history of analytical sociology, see Manzo (2010: 132–139).
2. Many classical sociologists such as Marx (2000), Durkheim (1984) and Habermas (1987) would also criticize analytical sociology for lack of critical ambitions. Normativity is an important aspect of the classical/analytical divide but for lack of space not one I address here.
3. To avoid confusion: several social theorists, including Parsons and Giddens, have developed both GTMs and general classificatory systems.
4. In Luhmann’s theory, social systems consist of communication, not individuals and actions, and display emergent properties and system level causality.

References


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