

## THE FOUNDATIONS OF ECLECTICISM

### THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL STATUS OF AGENCY, CULTURE, AND STRUCTURE IN SOCIAL THEORY

Rudra Sil

#### ABSTRACT

The heated debates between proponents of rational-choice, culturalist, and structuralist (or historical institutionalist) analysis over method and substance derive from differences over philosophical issues. This article relates these differences between ideal-typical rationalist, culturalist and structuralist analysis to their positions on two fundamental problems in social theory: (i) the epistemological significance of structural principles vis-a-vis agency; and (ii) the relative significance of the material and ideal dimensions of social processes. This suggests that many recent efforts at 'synthesis' (e.g. through 'analytic narratives') end up being rhetorical gestures since the fundamental assumptions identified with a given approach are not significantly relaxed. A more pragmatic position has been outlined in 'structurationist' perspectives that build on Weber's social theory. Such perspectives are consciously agnostic about epistemological first principles in order to permit more question-driven analysis. Structurationism does not represent a novel paradigm for comparative analysis, but its epistemological flexibility makes it an ideal foundation for eclectic scholarship intended to transcend and engage the debates among rationalist, culturalist, and structuralist analysis.

KEY WORDS • agency • culture • epistemology • rationality • structure

The war of paradigms, in which we have long been engaged, may have been unavoidable, and may perhaps even have served a purpose in developing theoretical awareness. But it is time to go beyond it to genuine problem solving, in which we collaborate and which treats eclecticism in theoretical languages as a virtue... (Harry Eckstein, 1998: 514)

Eckstein's call for an end to the 'war of paradigms' is essentially a response to the acerbic quality of the debate between the more enthusiastic proponents of rational-choice approaches (e.g. Bates, 1988, 1997; Levi, 1988, 1997; Coleman, 1990; Kiser and Hechter, 1991, 1998; Fiorina, 1995; Chong, 1996; Ferejohn and Satz, 1996; Shepsle, 1996) and their structuralist or culturalist critics (e.g. Grafstein, 1992; Thelen and Steinmo, 1992; Tilly, 1992; Green and Shapiro, 1994, 1996; Abelson, 1996; Lane, 1996; Lustick, 1997; Somers, 1998). While I sympathize with Eckstein, however, there are good reasons why his plea may go

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unheeded: the battle-lines between rational-choice theorists, structuralists, and culturalists reflect not only differences over research methods and substantive hypotheses, but also irreconcilable, unverifiable assumptions about a range of *fundamental* problems that have plagued social science disciplines since their inception. These range from the disputes over the nature of social knowledge (positivism–realism–relativism) and the purpose of social analysis (explanation–interpretation–description) to the ontological status and epistemological significance of agents–structures and of the material–ideal dimensions of social life. The a priori assumptions that scholars explicitly or implicitly make, particularly on this latter set of issues, are intimately connected to the kinds of questions, methods, and standards favored by rationalist, culturalist, and structuralist approaches and, as such, they are likely to militate against the emergence of a genuinely collaborative, truly integrated field of comparative analysis.<sup>1</sup>

It is possible, however, to blunt the sharpness of the present debates by recognizing the *different* kinds of insights each approach has to offer, and by considering the epistemological foundations upon which some scholars can pursue what Eckstein refers to as ‘eclecticism in theoretical languages’. To this end, this article focuses on two important fundamental problems along which proponents of the competing research traditions consistently and sharply differ:

1. The first concerns the epistemological significance of individual *agents* and their choices vis-a-vis the *structures* that define the positions, roles, and identities of these agents in relation to one another (the problem of ‘methodological individualism–collectivism’). That is, does the *ontological* primacy of individual actors also accord them *epistemological* primacy vis-a-vis the structures that constrain, or give meaning to, their actions?
2. The second issue concerns the relative significance of concrete *material* factors or hidden, ‘fuzzy’, *ideal* factors in the analysis of individual motivations and patterns of social interactions. That is, does the fact that material features of social life (such as wealth, resources, rules, social networks) can be more directly observed than the ideal features (norms, identities, symbols, cognitive schema) accord the former greater epistemological significance in the interpretation of social phenomena?<sup>2</sup>

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1. Indeed, Eckstein’s own earlier responses (1996, 1997) to the hegemonic stance of some rational-choice theorists was to programmatically reject rational-choice theory as ‘metaphysics’ while embracing culture as a ‘foundation concept’ for social science.

2. Clearly, other assumptions about the possibilities and character of social knowledge (positivism–realism–relativism), and the routes to that knowledge (deductivism–inductivism) also fuel the debate between rational-choice theory and its critics (e.g. Kiser and Hechter, 1998; Somers, 1998; Steinmetz, 1998). I have addressed these problems elsewhere (Sil 2000) but side-step them here for two reasons. First, there is somewhat less of a consensus within each of the research traditions on these issues (see footnote 4, p. 356). Second, as will be evident later, the arguments that are most frequently invoked as foils in the present ‘war of paradigms’ can be traced directly to assumptions concerning the epistemological status of agency–structure and material–ideal factors.

The first section explores some of the more common refrains in the contemporary ‘war of paradigms’ and finds that these do evince strong, explicit commitments on the problems of agency–structure and the material–ideal components of social life. Figure 1 (p. 360) captures the logic behind much of the present debate by relating ‘pure’ versions of rationalist, culturalist, and structuralist approaches to the juxtaposition of these two fundamental problems. The following two sections examine in turn the agent–structure dilemma and the material–ideal dimensions of social life; each of the dichotomies is examined independently of the other, with the heterogeneity of each category highlighted in order to identify more precisely the nature of the dichotomous opposition on each of the issues. In the fourth section, I examine the implications of this classificatory scheme for efforts by some adherents of each tradition to incorporate the assumptions of competing approaches, including recent attempts to explicitly bridge traditional rational-choice models with context-specific narratives. I argue that such approaches, while useful and insightful, still yield cantilevered bridges at best since their builders do not significantly relax either of the two fundamental assumptions that distinguish the contending research traditions. In their substantive discussions, however, scholars from all three traditions do occasionally make statements that point to an agnostic position along the agent–structure and material–ideal divides, a position that is identified in the concluding section through a brief discussion of the ontological propositions and epistemological flexibility evident in ‘structurationist’ perspectives on social theory. The assumptions associated with this position would not constitute a superior alternative to the assumptions undergirding the contending paradigms, but they could serve as a reasonable foundation for eclectic approaches that can transcend, integrate and engage pure versions of rationalist, culturalist and structuralist analysis.

### **Exemplary Foils in the ‘War of Paradigms’**

The demise of structural functionalism and the theories of modernization it spawned in the 1950s–60s (e.g. Parsons, 1951; Almond and Coleman, 1960; Lerner, 1964; M. Levy, 1966) gave way during the 1980s–90s to new approaches to comparative analysis, each building on a particular critique of the paradigm. Those whose primary objection lay in the absence of a theory of individual action and motivation emphasized the centrality of agency and rationality in social theory (e.g. Rogowski, 1974; Elster, 1983; Bates, 1988; Levi, 1988; Coleman, 1990; Kiser and Hechter, 1991, 1998); those who were troubled by the ahistorical framework of evolutionary convergence emphasized a more historically grounded comparative approach aimed at tracing the diverse impacts of structures, networks, and institutions, whether at global, national, or local levels (e.g. Wallerstein, 1974; Skocpol, 1979, 1984; Tilly, 1984, 1992; Wellman, 1988; Brieger, 1991; Thelen and Steinmo, 1992; Steinmo, 1993; Katznelson, 1997);

and those who were frustrated by the reification of culture as a holistic determinant of order in social systems sought to develop more flexible understandings of culture, emphasizing how specific values, norms, identities, and symbols enable or hinder certain kinds of change and certain forms of action in particular social or organizational settings (e.g. Swidler, 1986; Archer, 1988; Eckstein, 1988, 1996, 1998; Ellis et al., 1990; Friedland and Alford, 1991; Meyer and Rowan, 1991 [1977]; Zucker, 1991; Ross, 1997; Inglehart, 1997).

These diverse reactions to the hegemony of structural functionalism have certainly provided a welcome change by suggesting new intellectual problems and new methods of comparative analysis. At the same time, however, the crystallization of three contending research traditions – more or less identifiable with the rational-choice, structuralist, and culturalist approaches to social analysis – has contributed to the fragmentation of comparative analysis as a field (Lichbach and Zuckerman, 1997). The distinguishing assumptions, goals, methods, and theoretical claims of the rational-choice, culturalist and structuralist approaches have been captured comprehensively in broad commentaries on the field (Koelble, 1995; Hall and Taylor, 1996; Lichbach, 1997),<sup>3</sup> and in programmatic statements by proponents of each of the traditions. Certainly, as will be evident later, not all scholars are equally attentive to, or rigid about, the full range of characteristics associated with their particular research tradition, and even among the most ardent proponents of a given tradition, the consensus on some matters is simply not as strong as on others.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, proponents of each of the research traditions do consistently and regularly invoke strong assumptions concerning agency–structure and the material–ideal aspects of social life as foils in the ‘war of paradigms’.

Rational-choice theorists typically assert that all social phenomena – including the formation of rules, institutions, communities, and norms – ultimately can be reduced to the instrumental behavior of strategic individual actors. The notion of instrumental action, in turn, is predicated on the existence of self-conscious, deliberate individuals who are able to define a hierarchically ordered set of preferences and who can make quasi-mathematical calculations to determine the ideal strategies for realizing those preferences based on their estimates of other

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3. The pieces by Koelble (1995) and Hall and Taylor (1996) compare the three ‘new institutionalisms’ in comparative analysis, but these essentially correspond to the structuralist (historical institutionalism), rationalist (rational-choice institutionalism), and culturalist (sociological institutionalism) approaches.

4. Many rationalists, for example, view themselves as positivists (e.g. Bates, 1988; Levi, 1988, 1997) while a few view themselves as realists (e.g. Kiser and Hechter, 1991, 1998). Structuralists also vary in terms of whether they emphasize general consequences of causal configurations (e.g. Skocpol, 1979; Steinmo, 1993) or historical particularism (e.g. Somers, 1998, Steinmetz, 1998). Similarly, cultural analysis can be thought of as a nomothetic endeavor aimed at general inferences (e.g. Diamond, 1993; Inglehart, 1997; Eckstein, 1997), or it may be idiographic, aimed at context-sensitive interpretive studies (e.g. Geertz, 1973; Scott, 1985; Kane, 1996).

actors' behaviors in a given situation (Bates, 1988; Levi, 1988, 1997; Coleman, 1990; Hechter, 1992; Bates et al., 1998a). Many rationalists in comparative politics and sociology have at least formally moved away from strictly economic understandings of rationality as self-interested, gain-maximizing behavior (e.g. Buchanan and Tullock, 1962); they opt instead for a more 'thin' version of rationality and take into account the role of values and even cognitive aspects of decision-making (Elster, 1983; Taylor, 1993; Chong, 1994; Hechter, 1994; Bates et al., 1998b). In practice, however, with some rare exceptions (Elster, 1983; Taylor, 1993), most applications of rational-choice theory do end up equating instrumental action with informed, calculated, self-interested behavior even if the 'interest' itself may not be pecuniary.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, a favorite refrain of rational-choice theorists is that structuralists and culturalists unnecessarily reify collectivities (such as ethnic groups, classes, or nations) and their shared attributes while ignoring the more fundamental issue of the individual motivations and strategic interactions that give rise to particular social coalitions, institutions, norms or identities. These aggregate-level phenomena are not unimportant in rational-choice theory; they are simply treated as aspects of choice-situations facing individual actors and/or as equilibria outcomes of strategic interactions (Shepsle, 1989; Knight, 1992; Calvert, 1995; Fearon and Laitin, 1996; Bates et al., 1998a). Thus, while rational-choice scholars may employ 'thin' notions of rationality and choose to incorporate extensive narratives about particular choice situations (e.g. Kiser, 1996; Bates et al., 1998a, Laitin, 1998), the part of their account that is explicitly theoretical ultimately consists of deducing the supposedly uniform calculus through which actors define and pursue their preferences upon consideration of their situations.

Contemporary structuralist analysis (primarily historical institutionalism) differs sharply from past structural-functionalist analysis in that it is founded on a more historical epistemology and a more inductively oriented, case-based approach to comparative analysis (Skocpol, 1984; Somers, 1998). But, the most common refrain binding different kinds of structuralists together vis-a-vis rational-choice theorists is the claim that the latter make unwarranted assumptions about (i) the conscious, deliberate, informed manner in which individuals make their calculations, and (ii) the invariability of individual preferences in a given choice situation. For structuralists, individuals are at best 'rule-following satisficers' (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992: 8), and variations in historical outcomes, even if they are the immediate result of strategic interactions among actors, are more concretely and meaningfully explained in terms of the *common* constraints that members of certain groups face as a result of their position in a common social environment. That is, both preferences and the constraints that limit the scope of action are considered to be systematically reflecting the particular

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5. See, however, the later discussion of more recent articulations of rational-choice-based approaches that claim to be relaxing this assumption.

position of categories of actors in that environment. This environment, or 'structure', may be characterized in terms of concrete rules and institutions, the distribution of resources and obligations, regularized social networks and coalitions, or simply the location of actors within a given social or institutional hierarchy (Skocpol, 1979; Wellman, 1988; Brieger, 1991; Granovetter, 1992; Steinmo, 1993; Katznelson, 1997; Steinmo and Tolbert, 1998).

Many rational-choice theorists obviously take such factors quite seriously in their accounts of particular phenomena (e.g. Levi, 1988, 1997; Knight, 1992; Bates et al., 1998a), but they do not view the epistemological significance of these factors as being on a par with that of the instrumental action of rational individuals. This is precisely the reason why structuralists retort that rational-choice arguments appear compelling only in those 'nooks and crannies' where their specific assumptions of knowledgeable, self-conscious, gain-maximizing rational actors actually hold (Tilly, 1992: 333). For the most part, structuralists regard rational-choice models as parsimonious representations of the more trivial aspects of historical phenomena that arbitrarily highlight the significance of individual interests. What is more worthy of analysis in their view are the different ways in which 'interests' are defined and pursued by different groups of actors in the face of particular constraints and historical configurations (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992; Skocpol, 1995; Katznelson, 1997, 1998).

Culturalists, perhaps more so than the other two research traditions, are divided among themselves on the problem of whether the subjectivity of individual or context-specific beliefs negates the possibility of a positive science of culture. Moreover, 'culture' itself is understood and employed in different ways by different scholars, some emphasizing the shared attitudes shaped by a 'psychological orientation toward social objects' (Almond and Verba, 1963: 14–15), and others adopting a more contextual view of the concept as a 'historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols' through which members of communities 'communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life' (Geertz, 1973: 89). These are not inconsequential differences, but for the purposes of this article, cultural analysis as a whole can be broadly distinguished from structuralist and rationalist analysis in that it seeks to discern the implications of the system of *meanings* that binds certain actors together as members of a collectivity, reflecting their orientations towards aspects of their social life and enabling them to communicate and predictably interact in their everyday lives (Ross, 1997). In contrast to past structural-functional theories that took the coherence and causal significance of cultural variables for granted, contemporary studies of culture tend to be more attentive to the relevance of particular norms, values, identities, and symbols in particular contexts. The effects of specific aspects of culture are thus gauged not in terms of constant, unchanging patterns of social life – what Parsons (1951) termed 'pattern maintenance' – but in terms of their significance in understanding how groups of actors 'frame' their choices and interactions in given situations (Swidler, 1986), make sense of their roles in

particular social or organizational environments (Scott, 1983; DiMaggio, 1990; Meyer and Rowan, 1991), and even join in social movements and group conflicts (Scott, 1985; Laitin, 1986; Ross, 1993). Nevertheless, the ideal-typical culturalist insists that without some grasp of the collectively shared mental constructs that account for the meanings actors attach to their experiences and environments, neither a particular calculus of costs, benefits and risks, nor the persistence of social regularities or institutions can be meaningfully understood.

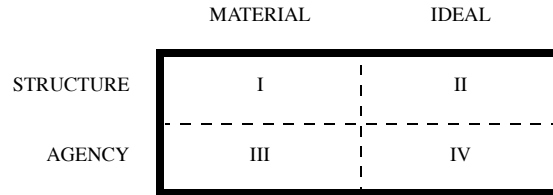
Rationalists will challenge cultural analysis by insisting that shared norms and values are only relevant for depicting the choice situation for a given course of action. In their view, it is precisely the culturalist's tendency to reify the causal significance of values, norms, and identities that is responsible for the ambiguous status of culture in social science. Structuralists, while sometimes more sympathetic than rational-choice theorists to the realm of ideas and norms (e.g. Weir, 1989; March and Olsen, 1989), also downplay the direct consequences of pre-existing values, norms, or symbols for patterns of social behavior.<sup>6</sup> For them, the significance of ideas and norms are to be understood as part of the historical context and are only relevant to the extent that they are 'embedded in the organizational structure of the polity or political economy' (Hall and Taylor, 1996: 938). Groups may respond to particular symbols, embrace particular ideologies, or make use of new ideas, but these would only serve to buttress specific rules, institutions, or patterns of social relations; the impact of the realm of ideas and norms would ultimately be mediated by the wider social and institutional context. From the perspective of culturalists, both rationalists and structuralists unjustifiably take for granted the existence of an objective reality that can be understood and compared across contexts without attention to the particular meanings that groups of actors might attach to particular gains, risks, social relationships and institutions.

It is important to recognize that the typical oppositions the three research traditions most commonly rely on as foils, although frequently framed in methodological terms, are ultimately driven by a priori epistemological assumptions, particularly assumptions about the relative significance of agency–structure and the material–ideal realms of social life. Figure 1, the implications of which are developed later, demonstrates how opposite positions taken on the agent–structure and material–ideal dichotomies, taken in tandem, yield a simple matrix of four ideal-typical approaches that can effectively capture much of the 'war of paradigms'.

Although many studies do not neatly fall into one of these four categories, much of the present debate becomes entirely predictable upon recognizing that

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6. Those students of 'institutions' whose primary focus is on the implications of values, norms, identities, and symbols for the persistence of institutions and organizational practices (e.g. Friedland and Alford, 1991; Jepperson, 1991; Meyer and Rowan, 1991 [1977]; Zucker, 1991; cf. Scott, 1995) are classified here as 'culturalists' rather than 'structuralists.'



**Figure 1.** The Intersection of Agency–Structure and Material–Ideal Aspects of Social Life

three of these four categories largely correspond to the positions adopted to define and promote ‘pure’ versions of rational-choice, cultural, and structural analysis. Traditional rational-choice theory, to the extent that it shares the assumptions of neoclassical economics, is unequivocally agent-centered and accords primacy to the material interests of actors and material dimensions of choice situations (Box III). Structuralist theories distinguish themselves by emphasizing the concrete, material factors in social life, downplaying the role of values, ideologies, and symbols; and they view the observable position of individuals within a set of social relations or institutional environments as crucial to understanding the former’s preferences and scope of action (Box I). And culturalist theorists emphasize the significance of the hidden, collectively shared, sets of attitudes, norms, identities, and symbols that are thought to not only constrain the individual actor but also provide group-specific templates for attributing meaning to observable actions and material objects in the social environment (Box II). Box IV is most commonly addressed in the discipline of psychology, although it may be approached by some of the more flexible rationalist and cultural analysis.<sup>7</sup> The following two sections explore just what is at stake along each of the axes while controlling for other kinds of philosophical and methodological choices.

### ‘Methodological’ Individualism–Collectivism Revisited

‘Structures’ generally refer to shared attributes – whether emergent or pre-existing – that reflect the common *positions* or *identities* of actors that distinguish them as members of some category or collectivity. As such, structures essentially

7. Rational-choice theorists such as Elster (1983) often cite the work of psychologists in attempting to trace cognitive processes that might account for ‘irrational’ or ‘non-rational’ behaviors. Some traditions of cultural analysis – for example, ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), phenomenology (Schutz, 1932; Berger, 1967), and some variants of role theory (Mead, 1934; Turner, 1962) – also approach Box IV by emphasizing the role of individuals in creating or transforming their roles and identities through their own acknowledgment of reciprocated interactions (though these are not necessarily ‘strategic’ as in rationalist approaches).



represent shared or relational attributes that define choice situations, assign distinctive values to preference orderings, and constrain the options available to members of certain groups. For some, such structures may be merely emergent patterns of interaction among individuals, while for others, they are viewed as possessing systemic attributes that cannot be reduced to the sum of individual actions; in either case, social scientists will generally agree that structures cannot be defined meaningfully without reference to the individual. Where they disagree is over whether the fact that 'structures' are ontologically reducible to their constituent units suggests that only the dispositions of the latter can have epistemological significance in the analysis of social phenomena. While this is a key issue in the contemporary battles among social scientists, it has been the subject of debate between 'methodological individualists' and 'methodological collectivists' for quite a long time.<sup>8</sup>

Proponents of methodological individualism or agent-centered approaches, whatever their other differences over the limits of human rationality or the routes to social knowledge, generally view the ontological primacy of individuals as a basis for assigning them greater epistemological significance vis-a-vis structures. Methodological individualism is typically defined in terms of four interrelated elements:

1. only individuals are objectively 'real' while groups, institutions, and cultures are social constructs that reflect aggregated individual behavior of individuals;
2. therefore, all social phenomena must ultimately be analyzed through the motivations and conduct of individual actors;
3. all general propositions about the interactions or relations among individuals can be reduced without loss of meaning to the qualities, dispositions and actions of individuals themselves; and
4. the only laws possible in social science are ones about the uniform logics or cognitive processes shaping individual calculations and behaviors (cf. Lukes, 1977; Satz and Ferejohn, 1994).

These elements were already evident individually in certain strands of social science in the 19th century, but they were woven into a unified fundamental perspective in the writings of post-war theorists such as Hayek (1945), Popper (1957, 1962), and Watkins (1957), all of whom insisted that the ontological primacy of individuals had significant implications for the character of social analysis. For them, even if social institutions and complex historical configurations constrain individuals in certain situations, these constraints still produce

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8. I regard the use of the term 'methodological' in this context as somewhat of a misnomer. Although the opposition does suggest quite different strategies of social analysis, these strategies derive from prior, empirically unverifiable, epistemological first principles concerning the status of individuals and collectivities. For an excellent collection of essays that debates these first principles, see O'Neill (1973).

distinctive choice situations, each with its own logic; thus, systematic social science explanations can only be based on the the dispositions of individuals in that situation. Popper (1962) even viewed methodological individualism as a social scientific enterprise that was more appropriate for an 'open society', while rejecting methodological collectivism as founded on dangerous assumptions and attitudes that encouraged collectivist ideologies and even totalitarianism! Watkins, a student of Popper's, downplayed the ideological implications of the methodological divide, but still firmly rejected the sociological holism of his colleagues; for him, the *sole* task of social scientists was to construct comprehensive explanations that are deduced from axiomatic statements about the dispositions, beliefs, resources, and interactions of individuals, with all other factors essentially reflecting the descriptions of their situations (Watkins, 1957).<sup>9</sup>

In contemporary social science, rational-choice theory is perhaps the most coherent and best known approach based on principles of methodological individualism. As noted earlier, the rational-choice approach builds on the fundamental propositions that all individuals act in an instrumentally rational manner consistent with their preferences, that they are able to order their preferences based on rational calculations of self-interest, and that these interests can be uniformly deduced from any given choice situation. The social, political or cultural factors that contribute to the choice situation are relevant to specific explanations, but the ontological primacy of individuals makes their *response* to the situation theoretically more significant than the factors defining the situation in any general causal explanation. Thus, consistent with the injunctions of Popper and Watkins, rational-choice theorists believe that social science theories – including explanations for the origins of communities, institutions and norms – can only proceed from standard, axiomatic propositions concerning the dispositions and qualities of individuals.

It is necessary to emphasize, however, that the defining features of methodological individualism are *not* coterminous with the assumptions of traditional rational-choice analysis since many methodological individualists reject the particular assumptions most rational-choice theorists make about the relevant dispositions, motivations and capacities of individuals. Some treat the rationality assumption as a heuristic device at best, emphasizing the constraints posed by the 'boundedness of rationality' in the absence of adequate information (Simon, 1957, 1992). The implications of these constraints for tendencies of individual

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9. Some philosophers of science (e.g. Brodbeck, 1973) view methodological individualism as inherently founded on an empiricist philosophical tradition because of the tendency to oppose 'real' individuals and 'emergent' structures; but, as evident in the case of rational-choice theory as well as psychoanalytic theories, methodological individualism is very much compatible with other kinds of positivism and even scientific realism (Kiser and Hechter, 1991) where the less observable aspects of individuals (i.e. their calculations or psyches) are assumed to be epistemologically and temporally prior to their actual behavior.

decision-making have been probed by cognitive psychologists, particularly in the case of prospect theory and social judgment theory (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; Kahneman et al., 1982; Hammond, 1996). Others have deployed insights from these fields in order to explore the implications of 'subversions of rationality' for social order or conflict as actors modify their preference ordering, decision-making calculus, and even their reference group in the face of unexpected information and past successes or failures (Elster, 1983, 1989; Frank, 1985; Burge, 1986; J. Levy, 1996). More radical departures from traditional rational-choice analysis by methodological individualists involve the reconfiguration of marxist theory by emphasizing how the experiences, motivations, and behaviors of individual agents give rise to class divisions that then become aspects of choice situations (Roemer, 1986; Carver and Thomas, 1995).<sup>10</sup> Most recently, some scholars have employed agent-based modeling to demonstrate how behaviors that are rational under some initial conditions can produce randomly scattered, often unpredictable, social outcomes as a result of the cascading effects of unanticipated factors (e.g. Kuran, 1995; Axelrod, 1997; Cederman, 1997).<sup>11</sup>

Without going into the substantive content of these varied approaches, it is possible to recognize that they embrace quite divergent assumptions about the dispositions and capacities of individuals and about the implications of these for methods of comparative analysis. What they do not differ on, however, is the fundamental proposition that social analysis must first and foremost attend to the individual, whether it is to his/her actions, material interests, emotional gratification, or cognitive dispositions. That is, while methodological individualism cannot be equated with any one methodology or research tradition, it does have a coherence that derives from *philosophical* statements about the relationship between social action and social knowledge. The implications of such statements in the actual conduct of social inquiry, however, can only be understood when contrasted to a competing set of assumptions.

'Methodological collectivism' – or, 'structuralism' broadly defined – rejects all of the core elements of methodological individualism and emphasizes the importance of *patterns* of interactions among groups of individuals over time and space. Even if they grant that collectivities or structures are ontologically reducible to the dispositions of the 'real' individuals that constitute them, they see no

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10. This agent-centric marxism was partly anticipated in Thompson's (1963) study, *The Making of the English Working Class*, which emphasized how the defining attributes of the working class were 'made' by actors rather than produced automatically by pre-given class structures.

11. The notion of a 'complex adaptive system' (CAS) employed by scholars such as Axelrod (1997) and Cederman (1997) seems to accord a much higher degree of epistemological significance to patterns of interactions and social environments than do most methodological individualist approaches (since outcomes cannot be linearly and proportionately related to individual choices and actions). Nevertheless, the response of such scholars is to study how these complex systems can be rendered transparent through modeling the behavior of agents under different choice situations. For a succinct discussion, see Lustick (1998/99).

reason why social theory itself must be based solely on observations about individual behavior (Lukes, 1977). Whatever the defining elements of a given 'collectivity' or 'structure', methodological collectivism takes for granted that what makes social action *social* is precisely the *relations* among individuals in different positions and the common rules, organizational principles, norms, identities and ordinary routines that serve to reproduce these relations. Structuralists essentially find it impossible to ignore 'the tendency of patterns of relations to be reproduced, even when actors engaging in the relations are unaware of the patterns or do not desire their reproduction' (Sewell, 1992: 3). Thus, whether in the form of common institutional rules, patterned social relations or shared cultural orientations, 'structures' are epistemologically more relevant than the units whose shared attributes or relations they describe; the ontological primacy of units does not make structures any less significant as independent causal factors that have highly significant consequences for actors' perceptions of choice situations, their ordering of preferences, and their opportunities to act upon these preferences.

Just as there are distinctions between different kinds of methodological individualists, however, the theories and practices of methodological collectivists vary widely. In most marxist analyses, for example, the fundamental principles structuring the relations among individuals are evident in the ownership of means of production and patterns of class stratification. In Althusser's notion of 'metonymic' causation, for example, the categories for describing the relationships among units are pre-given, and the principles governing the relations among classes itself explains the synchronic operation of observed individual behavior (Glucksmann, 1974).<sup>12</sup> In empiricist variants of methodological collectivism, 'structures', rather than being causal forces shaping individual actions or collective outcomes, are simply uniform patterns of behavior that are reproduced with law-like regularity but that cannot be explained by reference to either aggregated individual behavior or pre-existing causal mechanisms; this view of social structures has evolved from the radical empiricism of the British anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown (1952) and is evident in such approaches as Merton's (1966) functional sociology, Geertz's (1973) interpretive analysis, symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1967; Blumer, 1969), social networks analysis (Wellman, 1988; Brieger, 1991) and the 'micro-structuralism' of Collins (1981).<sup>13</sup>

Most new historical or sociological institutionalists (e.g. Skocpol, 1979, 1984; Tilly, 1990; Meyer and Rowan, 1991 [1977]; Jepperson, 1991; Steinmo, 1993; Katznelson, 1997) lie somewhere in between these two variants of structuralism. Patterned social relations cannot be taken for granted as pre-given categories, and

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12. Wallerstein's (1974) 'world-system' is somewhat different in that it is historically emergent; but, considering its durability, it reflects a unified structure the description of which can be used to explain patterns of international economic inequalities and the behavior of transnational classes (cf. Wendt, 1987). As previously noted, however, not all marxists are unambiguously 'structuralist' (e.g. Thompson, 1963; Roemer, 1986; Carver and Thomas, 1995).

the relevant patterns must first be established empirically in the context of a given problem or situation; yet, once established, the repeated processes that constitute structures gain epistemological primacy in that they represent the most crucial 'social facts' and account for the collective behavior or shared orientations of the individual units. Thus, in contrast to marxists who take for granted the necessity of classifying individuals in terms of class relations, the new institutionalists first seek to inductively establish particular schemes for classifying the relations among individuals; but, in contrast to empiricist approaches to structures, the social positions attributed to individuals as members of particular categories are seen as causally significant components of historical configurations that directly explain crucial aspects of individual behavior.<sup>14</sup>

In the face of such diverse approaches to 'structures' and 'collectivities', what unites methodological collectivists are two epistemologically significant postures that can only be meaningfully defined in contrast to the aforementioned assumptions of methodological individualists. First, many aspects of social phenomena, including the behavior of individuals, are not directly and proportionately related to conscious, rational calculations. And second, those aspects of social phenomena that are directly attributable by individuals acting instrumentally are still better explained in terms of the common situational factors (level of resources, networks, shared norms and symbolic systems) that incline individuals towards a given set of preferences and frame their scope of action. What this suggests is that structures and collectivities, even if ontologically reducible to units, deserve greater epistemological primacy than the cognitions or calculations of individuals, since the effects of the former can be empirically analyzed without recourse to the latter and since the latter can often be explained by the former. This does not mean that the calculations, beliefs, and actions of individuals are inconsequential, but it does mean that for the purpose of interpreting or explaining phenomena of world-historical importance, these individual attributes can be directly inferred from the *common* interests and orientations individuals share as a consequence of their common position within a social structure or their common membership in a group.

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13. Collins' approach captures this brand of structuralism especially well. Building on Goffman's (1967) studies of patterned encounters and interactions, Collins interprets 'micro-structures' as simply 'chains of interaction rituals', clusters of 'microprocesses' that do not carry the same weight as do the structures defined by either marxists or the new institutionalists but at the same time do not reduce the chains of interactions to individual-level actions. Thus, Collins' approach begins to move from traditional structuralist analysis towards a middle ground along the agent-structure divide.

14. Durkheim's (1949) view of social structures is actually closer to this view than to the marxist understanding of structures. Although Durkheim took for granted that the basic unit of social action was necessarily a collectivity (the 'horde'), he did not assume that the classification of all groups involved pre-existing hidden rules to be uncovered (as is the case with marxists such as Althusser); instead, he sought to empirically establish the behavioral consequences of patterns of interactions among and between human collectivities. On this point, see also Glucksmann (1974).

The heterogeneity of both methodological individualism and collectivism stem from a number of cross-cutting differences over other philosophical and methodological issues, some more abstract than others. One of the more common issues that surfaces in contemporary debates has to do with the ontological and epistemological status of the material and ideal dimensions of social life in the analysis of individual and collective behavior. Methodological individualists and collectivists alike may emphasize the importance of actors' material interests or the concrete rules, networks, and resources that influence patterned action; or, they may emphasize the analysis of individually held psychological dispositions or collectively shared values, norms, identities, and symbols. Thus, a more complete understanding of the contemporary 'war of paradigms' also requires consideration of the theoretical implications of a priori positions for the relative significance of the material and ideal aspects of social life.

### **Material and Ideal Aspects of Social Life**

The distinction between 'materialist' and 'idealist' epistemologies is ideal-typical and not self-evident in most actual studies of social phenomena. Nevertheless, some sense of the distinction can be captured by considering what marxist theory, historical institutionalism, and economic rational-choice models have in common vis-a-vis such fields as political culture, symbolic interactionism, cognitive psychology, and interpretive anthropology and sociology. The former approaches – whatever their differences over other ontological and epistemological issues – consider the 'material' realm of social life to be the more significant objects of social analysis and more epistemologically significant in explanations of social phenomena. This realm can encompass factors ranging from pecuniary gain and the distribution of tangible resources to the crystallization of social networks or coalitions, systems for making and implementing binding rules, and the distribution of responsibilities and authority within societies and institutions. These are all concrete factors that can be directly recorded and directly compared across individuals or societies through either quantitative measurements or standard qualitative distinctions.

It is important to note that the material dimensions of social life encompass not only observable objects or measurable quantities but also less obvious factors that can be unproblematically inferred through the observation of their direct consequences. Where a materialist account of social phenomena invokes explanatory factors that are not directly observable, the immediate *effects* of these factors can be taken as proxies in establishing their ontological status and justifying their epistemological relevance. For example, while the actual calculus of a gain-maximizing rational individual may not itself be observed, it is taken to be directly and proportionately evident in the individual's behavior and in the immediate results of that behavior. Similarly, while not all structuring principles are

evident in written rules or observable coordination among members of social networks, their existence is presumed to be directly and proportionately evident in observable factors such as income stratification, the actual exercise of decision-making authority, or the rule-following behavior of individuals. In neither situation do unobservable aspects of a social process pose problems for the interpretation of that process since such aspects have direct, observable consequences.

By contrast, comparative studies of political culture, symbolic interactionism, cognitive psychology, and interpretive studies in anthropology or sociology – whatever their differences over other criteria or assumptions in social analysis – emphasize the epistemological significance of the ‘ideal’ realm even though the ontological status of ideal factors cannot be directly established through observation. That is, a pure ‘idealist’ analysis takes for granted the significance of similarities and differences in individual or collective mental schema in comparing patterns of behavior across particular communities or categories of actors. Some of the implications of these hidden mental constructs may be evident in observable patterns of individual or collective behavior (ranging from deviant behavior to ordinary practices), but the *processes* that lead to this behavior and the *meanings* attached to this behavior by actors cannot be discerned or compared through direct observation alone. For example, the values or norms shared by a particular community may become evident in the behavior of its members, but the content and significance of the values and norms cannot be immediately inferred from that behavior; the investigator must engage in *some* act of translation or interpretation to trace the meanings actors attach to their behavior. Thus, in contrast to materialist approaches, what I refer to as ‘idealist’ approaches do take as epistemologically significant the intangible mental constructs even though the ontological reality of these constructs cannot be directly and unproblematically established through the analysis of observable regularities.

This does not suggest that studies focused on the ‘ideal’ realm are intrinsically based on a relativistic epistemology, however. Comparative studies of political culture (e.g. Almond and Verba, 1963; Diamond, 1993; Inglehart, 1997), cognitive perspectives on decision-making (George, 1979; Janis and Mann, 1977; Tetlock and McGuire, 1985; Farnham, 1994), and psychological studies of risk-aversion and judgmental heuristics (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; Kahneman et al., 1982; Hammond, 1996) are considered ‘idealist’ here although they are founded on a positive epistemology and are predicated on the existence of categories for classifying and comparing the dispositions or attitudes across individuals or situations. What these approaches have in common with interpretive studies of culture is the crucial assumption that the most significant determinants of social phenomena cannot be automatically deduced or inferred from the direct observation of behavioral regularities. *Some* act of translation is required on the part of the investigator to determine what actions, events, and objects actually *mean* to individuals or groups, whether the concepts used in the translation are general, situational, or context-bound. Thus, while positive studies of culture or

cognitive psychology and interpretive studies of context-specific symbols and practices involve quite different objectives and methods, this should not obscure the shared challenges such approaches face in attempting to uncover the schema through which individuals or groups interpret and encode their experiences.

To better identify the epistemological significance of the material–ideal distinction, it may be helpful to control for agency and focus on how methodological collectivists differ in their approach to the material and ideal dimensions of social life. In this respect, the traditional opposition between ‘culture’ and ‘social structure’ in comparative politics and sociology offers useful insights. Methodological collectivists emphasizing the former take for granted that ‘underlying the very conception of a social unit – whether group, class, or society – and the very conception of orderly social process is some common grasp by the unit’s members of their common situation of action and of the import of ordinary conduct within it’ (Schegloff, 1992: 1295). Whether one focuses on the symbolic or expressive dimension of social action (Geertz, 1973; Abelson, 1996; Ross, 1997), the orientations and attitudes of actors towards objects (Almond and Verba, 1963; Eckstein, 1996), or the manner in which the latter relate to cognitive representations (DiMaggio, 1990), a broad conception of culture can encompass a wide range of unobservable mental characteristics – attitudes, norms, identities, symbols, schema – that are selectively evident in (and frequently account for) similar choices and actions among members of the group to which ‘culture’ is attached. The similarity of these choices and actions among members of a group provide only a basis for suspecting some shared set of mental schema at work; but, in order to arrive at some hypothesis or understanding of these schema, the collective behavior of groups needs to be interpreted in the context of the significance that members themselves attach to their behavior (unless one assumes a one-to-one correspondence between a given observable action and a specific belief).

Opposed to ‘culture’, ‘social structure’ is typically invoked to refer to material structures, aspects of collective life that can be recognized and directly compared over time and space (i.e. routinized social interactions, socioeconomic stratification, the organization of production, written rules and design of institutions, etc.). Such material aspects may be recorded for any bounded collectivity, be it a family, an ethnic community, an institution, or a nation; and, once recorded, such features can be meaningfully compared across categories without reference to differences in the subjective interpretation of these features by the relevant actors. Although some emphasize the interplay of culture and social structure, materialist approaches to structure generally tend to reduce cultural aspects to epiphenomenal by-products of observable material structures, while cultural theorists insist that the interpretive schemes through which groups encode their shared experiences deserve greater epistemological primacy.

From the point of view of methodological individualists, both ‘culture’ and ‘social structure’ are intellectual constructs that can be reduced to the dispositions or actions of individuals. Thus, when we control for structural arguments,



the distinction between materialist and idealist approaches to agency becomes evident in the extent to which individual decisions and actions are themselves based on calculations of concrete, identifiable factors rather than on hidden psychological dispositions. For example, in the case of neoclassical economics and traditional rational-choice analysis, the instrumental decision-making of the individual agent may not be observable, but this is not problematic since the resulting behavior and the gains from that behavior (money, property, consumption, etc.) are observable proxies for the former.<sup>15</sup> The 'idealist' counterpart to this type of methodological individualism is evident in cognitive psychology (e.g. Kahneman et al., 1982) as well as in ethnomethodology (e.g. Garfinkel, 1967). These approaches seek different kinds of insights concerning individuals, but they have in common the challenge of unraveling the complicated process through which aspects of the individual psyche (particular mental dispositions or schema) are manifested in particular forms of behavior in a given context. It is this hidden process itself that represents the primary focus of the investigation since the outcome of the process is not taken to be a direct and proportionate consequence of the initial conditions. What is problematic in idealist agent-centered approaches is precisely the extent to which an experience or action can be taken to indicate pre-existing individual dispositions towards particular situations or social environments.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Limits of Synthesis: 'Flexible' Rhetorics and Cantilevered 'Bridges'**

As Figure 1 indicated, the agent–structure issue predictably divides the structuralists and the rationalists (Box I versus III), while the material–ideal divide predictably divides the structuralists and culturalists (Box I versus II), and the materialist methodological individualism of rationalists provides for even sharper confrontations with the idealist methodological collectivism of culturalists (Box II versus

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15. As noted earlier, however, not all rational-choice theories share the assumptions of neoclassical economics. Many adhere to a broader notion of 'instrumental behavior' where the ends pursued are not necessarily limited to material goods (e.g. Kiser and Hechter, 1998), while others adopt 'thin' versions of rationality (e.g. Elster, 1983) that blur the distinction between material and ideal aspects of individual motivation.

16. Even though experimental psychology may be 'hard' relative to ethnomethodology, the investigator still seeks to interpret the mental states of subjects by reference to some prior hypothesis about intervening sequences leading from these states to particular responses or behaviors. For example, studies of risk aversion and judgmental heuristics (e.g. Kahneman et al., 1982) employ classificatory schemes to code the behavior of subjects, but the focus is on gaining insights into the hidden, complex processes leading to the behavior in light of given reference points or particular constraints on human judgment. That the result might be presented as a universalistic theory of human cognition does not change the idealist character of cognitive psychology or the significance of interpretation.

III). Sophisticated scholars from all three traditions, however, sometimes do qualify some of their positions in an effort to fend off criticisms from, and build bridges to, competing approaches. This section focuses on the seemingly reasonable claims of some of these scholars, to determine whether these reflect genuine shifts in the fundamental assumptions identified with a given research tradition. I first address some formal statements from scholars seeking to demonstrate the comprehensiveness and flexibility of their respective approaches; I then turn to recent efforts aimed at explicitly bridging rational-choice models and narratives detailing historical and cultural contexts.

Over the past decade, scholars identifying with all three research traditions have sought to establish the flexibility and utility of their respective approaches. From the rational-choice perspective, many scholars have suggested that the assumption of individual rationality is perfectly consistent with a detailed analysis of structural or institutional constraints and collectively shared norms. Levi, for instance, treats rational choice not as a purely 'micro' approach' but as a valuable solution to the 'micro-macro' gap: 'The rational choice approach recognizes that institutions and structures are the consequences of human actions...although, of course, institutions, structures, and other macro-states also shape individual preferences and behaviors' (Levi, 1988: 8). Hechter similarly argues that rational-choice approaches are quite flexible in that they seek to 'explain variations in outcomes by differences in preferences, opportunity costs, *and/or institutional constraints*' (Hechter, 1992: 369; emphasis added). Kiser and Hechter (1998: 801) add that since 'instrumental rationality' leaves open the possibility of different individual goals and different levels of information, sophisticated rational-choice models incorporate analyses of 'contextual circumstances' under which preferences are defined and pursued.

Other seemingly flexible frameworks are evident in rationalist treatments of social institutions (Knight, 1992), group conflicts (Hardin, 1995; Fearon and Laitin, 1996), and social movements (Chong, 1991; Hardin, 1995; Lichbach, 1995). For example, in Knight's (1992: 82) analysis, institutions are viewed as 'information-transmitting rules' that spontaneously emerge as by-products of distributional conflicts among strategic actors; the emergent social conventions, rules, and norms constantly simultaneously structure social action, encode the historical memories and expectations of communities, and provide crucial information to rational actors about the consequences of different courses of action. For Fearon and Laitin (1996), inter-ethnic cooperation is achieved through formal and informal mediating organizations that emerge as a result of spiraling equilibria among groups as well as in-group policing equilibria. In attempting to relate group norms to individual participation in social movements, Chong (1991) explores 'public-spirited collective action' and recognizes how the symbolic and expressive features of social movements strengthen the commitment of individuals to a social movement once the latter gain some sense that the movement can succeed and that their personal goals can be advanced in the process.

Hardin (1995) and Lichbach (1995) similarly emphasize how group boundaries and collective action emerge as a consequence of the interaction of rational actors under market conditions, but then become reinforced through non-market mechanisms such as intra-community norms and hierarchical coordination.

In the analysis of institutions, proponents of the new economic institutionalism, in contrast to both neoclassical economists and historical institutionalism, attempt to link the constraints of economic institutions to the functions they serve in enabling self-interested actors to minimize transaction costs (Williamson, 1985; North, 1990). Thus, 'institutions' for North,

are a creation of human beings. They evolve and are altered by human beings; hence our theory must begin with the individual. At the same time, the constraints that institutions impose on individual choices are pervasive. *Integrating individual choices with the constraints institutions impose on choice sets is a major step toward unifying social science research.* (North, 1990: 5; emphasis added)

Within this understanding of institutions, even cultural factors play a crucial role by providing the 'social conditioning' that strengthens the commitment individuals make to the kind of cooperation facilitated by a firm or organization (Williamson, 1985: 247).

Such seemingly reasonable claims are not at all unlike what we find in some of the more flexible structuralist approaches to the relationship between agency and structure under varying historical conditions. March and Olsen's (1989) broad conception of political institutions, for example, claims to be attentive to the interests of individuals, emphasizing how institutions incorporate 'rules of appropriateness' that subsequently shape the calculus and actions of actors. In his approach to economic institutions, Granovetter (1992) criticizes the 'markets and hierarchies' approach of Williamson (1985) for its lack of attention to non-economic motivations, but does identify a link between reduced transaction costs and the social trust engendered by dense social networks and community ties. In more general terms, Thelen and Steinmo (1992) suggest that historical institutionalism is not nearly as oblivious to 'micro-foundations' as its rationalist critics contend:

By shaping not just actors' strategies (as in rational choice), but their goals as well, and by mediating their relations of cooperation and conflict, institutions structure political situations and leave their own imprint on political outcomes. *Political actors of course are not unaware of the deep and fundamental impact of institutions, which is why battles over institutions are so hard fought.* Reconfiguring institutions can save political actors the trouble of fighting the same battle over and over again. (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992: 9; emphasis added)

Katznelson (1997, 84) similarly emphasizes how historical institutionalism is able to combine macro-historical analysis with 'the deployment of institutions as middle-level mediations between large-scale processes and the microdynamics of agency and action'. Moreover, Katznelson sees the power of the concept of 'institution' as deriving from its ability to 'probe the infinitely intricate history of humankind by virtue of its junctional location at the intersection of structure and

agency and of past and present.' And, not to be outdone by the attention some rationalists seem willing to pay to norms and identities, he goes on to note that historical institutionalism 'would have to make room for culture and incorporate identities ordinarily seen as nonrational. And it would refuse simple oppositions between rational and norm-guided action' (1998: 196).

Contemporary cultural theorists seek to blunt criticisms of past cultural arguments by gesturing towards the interplay of culture and social structure from the point of view of individuals (Archer, 1988), and by treating the coherence of cultural factors as *variable* across situations and problematics (Smelser, 1992). In situations involving collective action, for example, Swidler adopts an extremely fluid conception of culture as a "tool-kit" of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different sets of problems' (Swidler, 1986: 273). Eckstein's (1988) view of 'culture' emphasizes how specific cultural orientations are entirely consistent with the analysis of situational and structural transformations; and departs from standard methodological collectivism in asserting that 'individuals and societies are in fact best regarded for purposes of theory as same-level phenomenon' (Eckstein, 1996: 486). For other culturalists, the notion of 'meanings' serves as a focal point for tracing how collectively shared symbolic systems are established by individuals while also enabling the latter 'to interpret experience and decide how they should act' (Kane, 1996: 165). Constructivist approaches to the study of international politics have similarly adopted a more nuanced view of cultural factors such as norms and identities, emphasizing how these influence, and are shaped by, the perceptions and experiences of individual agents (Wendt, 1987, 1996).

With so many reasonable scholars offering so many reasonable, seemingly convergent, postulates, we must ask why the varied approaches to comparative analysis have not become better integrated into a unified paradigm. The reason, actually, is quite simple. In all of these aforementioned statements, what is being emphasized is not a unified synthetic approach, but rather the greater flexibility of a particular research tradition vis-a-vis the others; the objective is not to encourage theoretical integration but to ward off the standard criticisms each approach typically faces from proponents of competing approaches. The formal statements represent rhetorical tools designed to demonstrate that a particular research tradition is not some 'cultish monolith' (Hechter, 1992: 372) but rather a very flexible, accommodating approach that can subsume the concerns of competing approaches. In none of the studies are the original foundational assumptions identified as research traditions significantly relaxed.

For example, there is little doubt as to Levi's preference for approaching the 'micro-macro gap' from the 'micro' side of the equation: 'structuralism tends to exclude micro-foundations, whereas rational choice analysis requires incorporation of institutions and other macro-level phenomena into the model itself' (Levi, 1988: 204); the primacy accorded to the material interests of individual agents is not in question here. And while Kiser and Hechter gesture towards non-rational

sources of motivation, they refuse to part with the defining elements of methodological individualism, insisting that where structural and rational-choice accounts differ, the latter have 'a decisive heuristic advantage' since they are firmly anchored upon assumptions about individual motivation (Hechter, 1992: 369; see also Kiser and Hechter, 1998). Similarly, Knight's (1992) flexibility comes to an end when he engages March and Olsen (1989) and insists on the superiority of approaches that are ultimately 'grounded in strategic rationality' (Knight, 1992: 82); thus, the epistemological significance of institutional conventions, norms, and rules is reduced simply to the information these transmit to actors about past regularities of behavior and present sanctions for non-compliance within their communities. The same may be said for Chong (1991, 1994), Hardin (1995) and Lichbach (1995), all of whom take seriously the contribution of community norms and hierarchical structures in sustaining collective action, but, in the final analysis, view these variables as reinforcing or reflecting the more fundamental material interests that give rise to social movements or group conflicts; the independent effects of norms, identities, and symbols on social phenomena are not deemed to be epistemologically significant in comparison to individualistic first principles. In all these approaches, the epistemological primacy of agency and of the material factors that enter into individual choices remains unquestioned.

Similarly, the seemingly reasonable statements of the aforementioned structuralists and culturalists hold only as long as there is no need to declare which factors are epistemologically more significant. Thus, while Thelen and Steinmo (1992: 8) are willing to acknowledge that actors are basically aware of the impact of institutions on their interests, their fundamental point of departure remains fixed: individuals are 'rule-following satisficers' whose goals, preferences, and strategies are therefore formed and reproduced by state and societal institutions. And Katznelson (1998: 196) acknowledges that micro-foundations and cultural factors need to be taken into account, but insists on the centrality of 'rules and practices' and argues that 'historical institutionalism is right to claim a privileged, though not exclusive, ability to bind structure and agency to contingency'. Similarly, Eckstein's (1997) claim that individuals and societies are 'same-level phenomena' does not keep him from treating rational choice as 'metaphysics' and viewing culture as a 'foundational concept' that is intrinsically a *collective* phenomenon, transmitted and learned, but ultimately irreducible to individual preferences or dispositions (Eckstein, 1996). And while Smelser (1992: 23) may acknowledge that the coherence of culture is variable, the epistemological status as culture remains unquestioned; 'rational choice' itself becomes essentially an 'idea of culture, however thin that idea may be'.

In effect, each of the seemingly reasonable claims about the flexibility and breadth of a given research tradition is, in fact, quite consistent with the respective scholar's commitment to that tradition. In all of the aforementioned statements, scholars essentially state that X is consistently important, although Y and Z are also sometimes important, thus according X an epistemologically central

position.<sup>17</sup> Thus, without discounting the sophistication or insightful analyses that may emerge from the aforementioned approaches, it is possible to recognize that the rhetoric concerning the flexibility and comprehensive scope of a research tradition does not give way to a significant shift in the fundamental principles through which the competing research traditions distinguish themselves. In no case is there is much doubt as to the loyalty of the scholar to a particular research tradition and to that tradition's assumptions concerning the ordering of explanatory principles in social analysis.

More recently, however, some rational-choice theorists have embarked upon a different path, one that adopts a more sanguine position on the independent contributions of rational-choice theory and emphasizes the necessity of integrating analytic models and rich narratives that focus on actors, sequences, structures and cultural contexts (Kiser, 1996; Levi, 1997; Bates et al., 1998a, 1998b; Laitin, 1998). This synthetic effort is captured in such notions as 'rational-choice narrativism' (Kiser, 1996) or 'analytic narrative' (Bates et al., 1998a). Kiser (1996), for example, emphasizes that rational-choice theorists and narrativists converge on assumptions about temporality and agency and thus can be viewed as complementary efforts to address the weaknesses of traditional historical sociology. The latter, he argues, still suffers from a lack of understanding of micro-foundations; but this is something that can be easily remedied through the combination of narratives, which trace complex sequences of events and actions within particular contexts, and rational-choice theory, which can help to grasp and explain complex interactions more efficiently on the basis of ideal-typical models of instrumental individual behavior.<sup>18</sup>

Bates, Levi and others have sought to put these notions into practice in a recent volume, *Analytic Narratives* (Bates et al., 1998a), that includes several studies combining rich historical narratives focused on particular cases with the extensive form of the theory of games. The basic premise uniting this volume is that the insights of rational-choice theory, while sometimes of limited use, are consistently useful in conjunction with rich narratives that focus on 'stories,

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17. Compare, for example, the aforementioned statements of Levi (1988) and Thelen and Steinmo (1992). Levi sees institutions as products of intentional human action, and then adds: 'of course, institutions, structures, and other macro-states also shape individual preferences and behaviors' (Levi, 1988: 8). Thelen and Steinmo (1992: 9) view institutions as shaping individual goals and preferences, and then add: 'Political actors of course are not unaware of the deep and fundamental impact of institutions, which is why battles over institutions are so hard fought'. In both cases, these passing nods to points made by their critics do not reflect a major shift in fundamental assumptions.

18. We should not, however, be fooled by Kiser's claim that rational-choice narrativism need not be hegemonic since other forms of narrative can offer superior explanations 'in conditions in which instrumental action is not dominant' (Kiser, 1996: 265). Not only do rational-choice theorists generally believe that instrumental action *is* dominant in phenomena they deem worthy of explanation, but Kiser himself, in pieces co-authored with Hechter, is much less agnostic when he insists that rational-choice theory is the best available general theory precisely because it is based on the assumption of individual instrumentality (Kiser and Hechter, 1991, 1998).

accounts, and contexts' (Bates et al., 1998a: 10). The notion of 'analytic narrative' is designed to simultaneously capture the 'benefits to be gained from the systematic use of theory' in the study of particular contexts and the importance of a 'close dialogue with case materials' in the development of theory. Each of the chapters is intended as a contribution to the 'idiographic tradition' and, as such, seeks to 'trace the behavior of particular actors, clarify sequences, describe structures, and explore patterns of interaction'; at the same time, each chapter seeks to develop a powerful causal explanation that can speak to the development of general theory and, for this purpose, employs game-theoretic models to capture 'explicit and formal lines of reasoning which facilitate both exposition and explanation'. The authors contend that macro-historical structures and institutions are not reduced to micro-level choices, although the micro-level strategic interactions of actors are viewed as necessary for translating macro-historical forces into specific historical outcomes. This is precisely why narratives must be accompanied by rational-choice theory: while narratives end up highlighting historical sequences and structural patterns, their focus on context-specific historical processes keeps them from parsimonious, logically compelling accounts of the particular causal mechanisms that produce specific historical outcomes. Thus, Bates et al. introduce 'thin' forms of reasoning – i.e. game-theoretic models – to cut through 'thick' accounts of social phenomena in order to expose the 'logic of the processes that generate the phenomena' (Bates et al., 1998a: 3, 10, 14).

Certainly, if we agree with Bates et al. (1998a: 3) that 'theory linked to data is more powerful than either data or theory alone', then it is worthwhile to bridge data-rich narratives with theoretical models or frameworks. But what does the particular conception of 'analytic narratives' in this volume suggest for the fundamental assumptions traditionally associated with rational-choice theory? The answer, once again, is: not as much as the authors contend. *Analytic Narratives* is a sophisticated, insightful volume that demonstrates the authors' impressive abilities in combining qualitative research with formal modeling, but when it comes down to the actual principles of explanation, the standard assumptions of rational-choice theory remain quite close to the surface. That the authors in this volume view their approaches as 'problem-driven' and wish to 'immerse' themselves in their cases (Bates et al., 1998a: 13, 10) should not detract our attention from the fact that the explicitly theoretical component of the account, the component that actually yields the explanation of a given historical outcome, is derived from the rationalist postulates underlying game theory. The reliance on narratives for data is nothing new in the social sciences; formal models always need to be operationalized when applied to particular cases, and this process always requires detailed information about particular contexts so that information can be properly coded. In the case of *Analytic Narratives*, the fact that the authors may have done archival research or conducted interviews tells us they really care about their cases, but it does not change the fact that the causal explanations they offer are predicated on the rationalist assumptions of formal game theory.

Thus, although Bates et al. (1998a: 15) claim that ‘the empirical content of the narrative is as important as the logical structure of the model’, the ‘narrative’ in ‘analytic narratives’ has no independent bearing on the logic of the explanation; that logic is already contained in a deductive, agent-centered theory that Bates et al. view as ‘an engine of empirical discovery’ (p. 15). This means that the fundamental assumptions of traditional rational-choice theory, whether they are transformed into single- or multiple-equilibria games, remain central to the determination of which components of the narrative actually matter in the explanation of social phenomena. The narrative may provide insights and information into the context, but the principles of explanation remain embedded in the abstract logic of instrumental individual rationality as represented in game-theoretic models. The individual studies may still be viewed as efforts to ‘bridge’ rationalist models and historical narratives, but as far as epistemological principles are concerned, the result is at best a cantilevered bridge.<sup>19</sup>

### **Towards an Agnostic Epistemology: The Relevance of Structurationism**

None of the discussion in the previous section is intended to suggest that all social phenomena must fall neatly into one of the categories of Figure 1 or that the aforementioned efforts to develop each of the research traditions lack value in the analysis of particular social phenomena. In fact, many scholars, whatever their stated position on fundamental issues, end up framing specific empirical discussions within their broader analyses in ways that evince no prior assumption concerning the primacy of the agency–structure or material–ideal realms. Consider, for example, the following statements from two well-known comparative studies:

1. [R]ulers maximize revenue to the state subject to determinant constraints on their behavior. It is these constraints that motivate my hypothesis. It is the effects of the variations in these constraints that I am investigating.

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19. This also applies to other supposedly integrative frameworks (e.g. Hechter, 1994; Laitin, 1998; Bates et al., 1998b) that attempt to combine rational-choice models with cultural analysis. Values and ideas are incorporated into the studies, but only as aspects of choice situations; the causal dynamic still depends on the logic of interactions spurred by instrumental, strategic behavior. Thus, in Laitin’s (1998) study of language and identity formation among Russians in three non-Russian post-soviet nations, the chapters are full of rich contextual information, replete with archival and interview data, and yet the logic of the explanation stems from a ‘tipping game’ that is laid out on the basis of fixed, prior assumptions about knowledgeable individuals adopting sophisticated, well-thought-out strategies to improve their material well-being. Similarly, in Bates et al. (1998b), the role of ideas is taken seriously but the crystallization of certain ideas is seen as an equilibrium outcome of strategic interaction.



2. Monarchs were playing the same game – the game of war and competition for territory – under vastly different conditions. The more expensive and demanding war became, the more they had to bargain for its wherewithal. The bargaining produced or fortified representative institutions in the form of Estates, Cortes, and eventually national legislatures...

The first statement sounds very much like what a historical institutionalist might say: the focus is on *constraints* and the explanation of variations in the behavior of rulers appears related to the *variations* in those constraints. The second statement sounds very much like something in the ‘analytic narrative’ tradition, a reinterpretation of historical processes in terms of games and bargaining among strategic actors. In fact, however, the first statement is from Levi (1988: 9) who, as noted earlier, is quite convinced of the superiority of rational-choice theory; and the second statement is from Tilly (1990: 188; cf. Hechter, 1992: 372) who is partial to historically specific structural explanations based on emergent configurations. This suggests that in the process of relating specific historical trends or substantive findings to explanatory frameworks, strong a priori assumptions do *implicitly* get relaxed. This points to the possibility of an alternative foundation in which the negations of strong claims on the primacy of agency–structure or material–ideal dimensions of social life can be reconstituted as a broader framework emphasizing the dialectical relationship between the components of each dichotomy.

Such a foundational perspective is most clearly evident in the philosophical and methodological discussions of scholars identified with ‘structurationism’. While the roots of this tradition are not as recent as some of the aforementioned efforts to bridge agency, structure and culture, structurationism is actually more capable of providing a coherent foundation for truly eclectic, integrative approaches. At least part of the reason for this is the ability of structurationists to define a loose ontology that does not directly give rise to any particular set of epistemological first principles and that enables substantive problems and contexts to dictate the epistemological significance of key concepts (Cohen, 1986). Structurationist ontology proceeds from simple assumptions concerning the reification of individuals and societies.

Society must be regarded as an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions which individuals reproduce and transform, but which would not exist unless they did so. Society does not exist independently of human activity (the error of reification). But it is not the product of it (the error of voluntarism). (Bhaskar, 1979: 45–6)

Over the past two decades, several major works in social theory have built on this simple observation to develop specific concepts and elaborate frameworks that can all be loosely categorized as ‘structurationist’. These frameworks share several features that distinguish them from even the most flexible versions of rationalist, culturalist, and structuralist approaches. On the one hand, they consciously avoid assigning epistemological primacy along either the agency–

structure divide or the material–ideal aspects of social life; on the other hand, they articulate flexible concepts that are intended to draw attention to the process through which structures are made, reproduced and transformed through conscious or reflexive individual action. Moreover, they emphasize that the scope of action for individuals varies with the material and symbolic resources at their disposal. And they view the individual as acting on the basis of practical knowledge and reflexive tendencies that give rise to, and are conditioned by, material environments and shared systems of meaning (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977, 1990, 1998; Touraine, 1977, 1985; Giddens, 1979, 1984; Sewell, 1992).

In Bourdieu's (1977, 1990, 1998) approach, for example, symbolic goods and practices are as significant as economic goods and practices, with the importance of these reflected in individual strategies for increasing social prestige. The idea of 'social prestige' includes material gain and psychological satisfaction, but the meaning attached to both by actors is also contingent on shared conceptions of what is valued in a given society. In addition, the concept of 'habitus' acts as a mediator between agents and the cultural and material structures that constrain and enmesh them. Structures are treated as emergent hierarchical strata and horizontal cleavages that are only valid at a particular point in time, with the 'habitus' of individuals accounting for group-specific dispositions that guide individual action whether or not the action is gain-maximizing or instrumental. Essentially, the 'habitus' enables individuals to carry specific collective schema to enable them to consciously or reflexively interpret a given situation before undertaking a course of action. But, if the 'habitus' reflects the manner in which social forces shape and constrain individual thought and action, these social forces are themselves not viewed as fixed, inexorable structures that reproduce distributions of economic and symbolic capital ad infinitum. Structures are viewed as fluid, emergent only at a particular moment in time, depending on how individuals collectively transform or reproduce group-specific choices and routines.

The role of actors and the fluidity of structures are also evident in Touraine's social theory (1977, 1985). In contrast to conventional marxism, Touraine's (1977) notion of 'double dialectic' suggests that 'classes' are to be distinguished not only in terms of material resources but also the cultural ideals that simultaneously enable members of classes to reproduce class conflicts and resolve internal tensions. In his broader study of social movements, 'all aspects of social and cultural organization manifest...both cultural relations and power relations, and the social movements that express them' (Touraine, 1985: 766). Even more generally, social movements themselves represent the 'historicity' of social structures, arising out of particular tensions within society and reflecting the structural attributes of that society at any given time. Thus, the notion of 'historicity' captures the fluid nature of the conditions that enable agents from different classes to exert influence through, or compete for, control over material and cultural spheres.

Similarly, in Giddens' version of structuration theory, knowledgeable human actors engage in social practices, sometimes intentionally, sometimes reflexively,

and sometimes unconsciously, to produce and reproduce structures at any given point in time. What Giddens refers to as the 'duality of structure' basically captures

the essential recursiveness of social life as constituted in social practices. Structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of social practices, and 'exists' in the generating moments of this constitution. (Giddens, 1979: 4; cf. Cohen, 1987)

Patterns of social interaction over time and space are regulated and reproduced through legal institutions dominated by *normative rules*, through symbolic orders dominated by *interpretive rules*, and through political and economic institutions dominated by the power of allocative and authoritative *resources*. In effect, structure becomes defined as 'rules and resources recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems' (Giddens, 1984: 337), with the impact of these structures varying with contexts depending upon the extent to which particular social actions reflect routinized practices and reflexive consciousness of individuals. Everyday practices, encounters, and the positions of actors represent context-specific categories within which to trace the interplay of agents' material interests, their reflexive or discursive consciousness, and their material and ideal structures.

Building on Giddens' structurationist ontology, Sewell (1992) dismisses definitions of 'structures' that incorporate hypotheses about their causal significance, but emphasizes that they serve as something more than metaphors since they encompass the virtual (although unobservable) schema as well as the concrete, material resources that knowledgeable social actors consciously or reflexively heed in their actions and daily practices. 'Structures' thus represent

mutually sustaining schemas and resources that empower and constrain social action and that tend to be reproduced by that said action. But their reproduction is never automatic. Structures are at risk...because structures are multiple and intersecting, because schemas are transposable, and because resources are polysemic and accumulate unpredictably. (Sewell, 1992: 19)

All of these approaches rely on distinctive concepts that allow for epistemological flexibility in tracing the interplay of agency and structure and of the material and ideal aspects of social action. In fact, this is precisely what distinguishes structurationism from the integrative efforts discussed in the previous section: structurationists embrace ontologies that assign no prior epistemological primacy to either the agent-structure divide or the material-ideal divide. By downplaying uniform epistemological first principles and focusing on the comprehensive scope and flexibility of its ontology, structurationism leaves open the door to a wider variety of interpretive and explanatory propositions, depending on the interests of the investigator and the context of analysis (Cohen, 1986). In doing so, however, they are not shying away from fundamental issues; rather, through specific concepts (such as Bourdieu's 'habitus') they attempt to capture the dialectical interplay of agency and structure, of the instrumental and reflexive

aspects of individual consciousness, and of the material and ideal factors that constitute the social environment in which individuals ordinarily act. These concepts or frameworks do not incorporate explanatory logics, but do facilitate theoretically significant analyses for working out different aspects of the dialectical relationships between agency, structure, and culture across comparable contexts.

### Conclusion

Although the meta-theoretical propositions of structurationism are significantly more adaptable – and no less reasonable – than the narrower foundations on which even the most sophisticated rationalist, culturalist, or structuralist approaches are based, there is no reason to suggest that structurationism be viewed as a new, unified paradigm for comparative analysis. In fact, most of the fundamental assumptions behind the various concepts and analytic theories associated with structurationism are not dramatically new. For example, one can identify a loosely structurationist foundation within Weber's (1978) writings on methodology and his comparative studies of bureaucracy, economic activity, religion, and law. On the one hand, Weber recognized the importance of focusing social analysis on the perceptions and actions of individuals; on the other hand, he treated instrumental action as a heuristic assumption at best, emphasizing the *meanings* individuals assigned to their environments as members of particular classes or communities. While historical events and individual interactions may have given rise to particular socioeconomic structures and systems of meanings, the elective affinities shared by material and ideal structures served to provide a stable, meaningful, and predictable environment within which categories of individuals could define their identities, communicate, and locate their shared material and ideal interests. Thus, it is not surprising that Weber is frequently invoked by structurationists (e.g. Giddens, 1984: 213; Touraine, 1988/1984), nor unusual that rational-choice theorists, culturalists, and structuralists also find occasion to selectively invoke Weber in a defense of their respective research traditions.

But, beyond the fact that structurationist assumptions have been anticipated in the past, there are other reasons not to view structurationism as an emergent unifying paradigm. Because it is uncommitted with regard to epistemological first principles, structurationist assumptions become too flexible to define a coherent research agenda, leaving a great deal of discretion to investigators dealing with their particular problems. Moreover, structurationist assumptions cannot provide a practical foundation for each and every type of social analysis any more than can rational-choice, culturalist, or structuralist analysis. If a question focuses on the social sources of preference formation, such a question inherently assumes that preference formation has prior causes and thus looks for these causes outside of the realm of individual preferences. Similarly, if a question focuses on how institutions and norms emerged in the first place, it would hardly be surprising if

such an approach focused on individual preferences and strategic interactions to develop a model of institution or norm formation.

The problem, however, is that epistemological postulates found to be illuminating in the analysis of certain kinds of questions are all too often thought to hold in the case of all other questions. Within any given temporal and spatial context, a variety of social processes are simultaneously at work. Understanding some processes will involve the analysis of how individual motivations lead to actions and practices that result in the creation, persistence, or transformation of groups, institutions, norms, and identities; and here, assumptions concerning interest-driven instrumental action may be justified for analytic purposes. But, in concrete social phenomena, such processes are not extricable from simultaneous processes through which the dispositions, choice-sets, and calculations of individuals are being framed within particular material environments and particular systems of meaning. Thus, how and why some agents choose to conform to, or reproduce, and others choose to transform, an existing pattern of shared interactions, institutional rules, or group norms and identities is an object of empirical investigation that cannot be answered by fiat as proponents of rationalist, culturalist and structuralist paradigms are wont to do.

This is where structurationism's epistemological agnosticism can serve as a valuable counter weight to the more restrictive assumptions underpinning ideal-typical rationalist, culturalist, and structuralist analyses. While its agnosticism on the agency–structure and material–ideal divides makes structurationism unsuitable as a unifying paradigm, it also leaves open the possibility for exploring the variety of complex social processes that coexist within any given temporal or spatial context. In an environment of sometimes bitter, frequently repetitive, methodological battles, a fundamental perspective that downplays epistemological first principles on agency, structure, and culture, can inspire original, eclectic studies that can effectively challenge, transcend, and partially integrate the insights generated by the contending paradigms in contemporary comparative analysis.

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RUDRA SIL is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. His research interests span the history and philosophy of the social sciences, the political economy of development and transition, comparative industrial relations, and the politics of the former Soviet Union and Asia. He has coedited and contributed to *Beyond Boundaries? Disciplines, Paradigms, and Theoretical Integration in International Studies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000). He is also author of *Managing 'Modernity': Work, Community, and Authority in Late-Industrializing Japan and Russia* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming). ADDRESS: 217 Stiteler Hall, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6215, USA. [email: Rudysil@sas.upenn.edu]

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