Department of Politics and IR
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Philosophy of the Social Sciences
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Lecture 6: **STRUCTURE, AGENCY and the EXPLANATION OF HUMAN ACTION**

The Problem

Difficulties with the application of 'laws' in the explanation of human action and interaction have generated responses from, on the one hand, structuralist accounts of macro explanation. and, on the other hand, individualist or subjectivist accounts of decision and action.

Summary

1.   Causal laws as applied to human action: Mill
2.   Macro causality: explaining rates and regularities: Durkheim
3.   Structuralism
4.   Individualism
5.   Action
6.   Weber: scientific explanatory adequacy
7.   Shutz's phenomenological criticism
8.   Davidson and rational action theory

Key concepts

Social

..... a surprisingly vague concept
1.   contrast terms: psychological, biological, physical, chemical.....
2.   a portmanteau term analysable into: kinship, economy, culture, political etc
3.   social as interactional:
•   qua physical being I could be alone in the universe
•   qua social being I MUST be interacting with other (social) individuals
•   in social interaction we relate to each other by way of social attitudes, roles, and conduct

Fact

2 rival approaches in analysis
1. a 'fact' is *an item of knowledge*, a *linguistically expressed entity*, usually of *propositional form*.
   • There are no facts 'in nature' on this view; facts are an aspect of our epistemological lives.
   • Facts are independent of any natural language; but are linguistic in form: le chat est sur le paillasson = il gatto e sul zerbino = the cat is on the mat
2.   a 'fact' is the *state of affairs that a true proposition describes* or refers to.
   • 'the cat is on the mat' is true iff the cat is on the mat; the cat's being on the mat is the fact
Both ordinary and philosophical usage is frequently ambiguous between these two.
Why does it matter?

Kuhn argues that 'the facts' can change from theory context to theory context. Realists argue that this is preposterous – facts must be unchanging and stable.

Individual

This is a tough one.

- In some interpretations 'individual' is a **<u>social</u> status** from the outset – depending on legal, political and other conditions. <u>eg</u> in C18 English common law a woman was not a legal individual.

- The idea of the individual – that we are separate from each other, with autonomy, our own volition, capacity for self-sufficiency etc – can be argued to be a particular **cultural (and legal, political, etc) construction** that cannot be taken a priori to be valid in any context.

- In other interpretations an individual is the upshot of theoretical individuation:; that is, it is an **epistemological construction** <u>eg</u> here is an individual table; there is an individual set of chairs; here is an individual splinter of wood - under the microscope I could see the atomic structure of the splinter of wood – the individual atom; think of 'individual family', 'individual college', 'individual department' – no need for physical unity of an individual.

- The theme of 'individualism' in social science is often taken to involve **reductivism** – the reduction of statements about collective phenomena (nations, families, classes, societies) to statements about individual phenomena. But the question is: *what 'individual' is this*? <u>eg</u> the individual <u>person</u> looks like a moral principle; the individual gene looks like a biological reduction, perhaps to a more causally powerful level; *the social scientist's individualism is the biologist's collectivism ....*

We must distinguish among a *range of 'individualisms' for social science*.

- **metaphysical individualism** – *all there IS are individuals...* (although what individuals are these?)

- **methodological individualism** – *for the purposes of social sciences we treat the world as though all there are are individuals* (just as chemists ignore the social context of their chemicals when doing chemistry).

- **explanatory individualism** – *in social science explanations we always invoke individuals* rather than eg classes (macro) or psyches (a variety of psychologism or mentalism)

- **moral individualism** – *morally we must act in such a way that moral priority is always given to individuals* (not groups, not individual genes...) The problem with non-individualistic social science is that it constructs a view of the world which is generalisable to politics and other domains which devalues individuals (Popper's eg of Stalinist social theory and Stalinist social policy).

Structure

- Constituents of object under study, and the relations between them;
- Structure is stable
- ? Structure as restabilising
- Structure describable mathematically
- Structure as distinct from its concrete instantiation

Structuralism

- structures are the proper objects of study for social science: only then can we understand and get explanation of the flux of surface (experienceable) reality

- 'deepness' of structures; <u>under</u> the surface:
  - structuralist grammar (**Chomsky**) – deep grammar of language generated by deep structure of brain/mind
  - structuralist anthropology (**Levi-Strauss)** – deep grammar of society, generated by deep structure of mind/psyche
  - structuralist linguistics **(Saussure)** - deep grammar of language and meaning – rules governing relationships between concepts/words/world – signified (concept-world) v sign (word/grammatical item)
  - structuralist literary criticism/text analysis (**Propp** on fairy tales): ALL written texts, narratives, stories, can be analysed for (uniform) deep dualistic structure; reflect or manifested by/in structure of psychic life
  - structuralist Marxism (**Althusser**) – deep structure of capitalist society; surface manifestations of human relations as ideological products of deep structure

System

- Structure static. System dynamic.
- 'System' is the process, usually describable as a flow, that takes place, perforce, in a structure.
- Systems often thought of on a continuum of open to closed.
- In social theory, 'system' also has to be thought of as 'reflexive', to be distinguished from 'self-equilibrating'.

Wholes

- confusingly the 'ism' is often written 'holism'
- whole as opposed to parts
- whole as unified totality

Decision

Somehow it's easier to approach this via **theory of decision making**. Here is a theory of decision making:
- a decision maker has a *range of objectives*
- these are measurable in the sense, at least, of *rank orderable by 'preferredness'*
- a decision maker has a range of possible actions/courses of action (*feasible set)*
- a decision maker has (limited) knowledge of the possible outcomes of various actions (*probability and uncertainty*)
- these outcomes include the possible actions of *other decision makers*
- a decision maker <u>*has the capacity to (consciously??) (rationally??) decide*</u>

Distinguish:
- **thin rationality**: the decision maker could have mad objectives, bizarre preferences, a mistaken or otherwise faulty view of the possibilities, no knowledge of possible outcomes of various actions, but decision will still conform to the model of rationality – ie acting in light of preferences and perceived options and expectation
- **thick rationality** the fully rational decision maker has reasonable or rational objectives, a perspicuous and reasonable rank ordering that does not violate rationality conditions such as transitivity, a well ordered set of possibilities based on means-end reasoning and reasonable expectations of the possible actions of others; in thick rationality <u>conscious</u>

calculation occurs (???) or at least the decision and action is <u>as if conscious calculation had occurred</u>

Distinguish:
- **<u>conscious decision making and action</u>: c**alculation and decision occurs at the level of conscious awareness
- **<u>unconscious decision making and action</u>**:
1. as conscious decision making but on 'automatic pilot' as it were; habit takes over from conscious calculation; the processes that have to be learned, in the course of cognitive development, shift to a level below consciousness
2. as taking place in 'the unconscious' meaning briefly a level at which meanings, expectations and desires are configured differently from how they are in the conscious; hence we can unconsciously do different from or even the opposite of what we would do consciously.

<u>Note that</u> unconscious decision making can, theoretically, have *the same structure* as conscious decision making:-

<u>**conscious**</u>	<u>**unconscious**</u>
objectives	desires
rank ordering	strength/imperative of desire
possibility	fantasy
expectations (probability and uncertainty)	expectations (also fantasy)
capacity to decide	action/behaviour
but: *is it decision making???*	

Action
Having decided what to do the default position is that *the actor will do it.*
What can get between a decision and an action?
- incapacity
- weakness of will
- impracticability

Distinguish:
- **<u>action</u>** in any stream of being and doing there are:
- some **actions of mine**
- some **processes I undergo**
- some **things that happen to me**
- some **behaviours**
- some **unconscious** or **habitual actions/behaviours.**

Note
- the tricky issue of bringing an action under the appropriate description (Davidson)

Who has said what about all this?

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)
- influenced by C19 developments in statistical analysis
- also influenced by the positive philosophy of <u>Auguste Comte</u> (1798-1857)
  <u>NOTE</u> *these two do not go together <u>conceptually</u>, nor, really, <u>historically</u>. However many social scientists take it that they come as a package; and criticisms of Durkheim often run the two sets of issues together.*
- social facts: a fact about society; a 'macro' fact; eg suicide rates, laws, norms ....

- social facts can be explanatory factors in individual human actions
  UNDERLINE REMEMBER *that for positivists and empiricists prediction IS explanation*
- fact/value distinction: *a methodological injunction is one thing; a moral injunction is quite*
-   *another*
- metaphysics is outwith the domain of science:
  It is often overlooked that Durkheim's first rule is 'TREAT social facts as things'; there is no valid inference from this to 'social facts ARE things'.
- treat social facts as things
- cause of a social fact is a prior social fact (cf empiricist analysis of cause)
- a variable is a scientific variable if it is measurable
- social facts do affect/cause individual behaviour
- elements both of realism and anti-realism

The 'methodological individualists'

Popper
all social phenomena, and especially the functioning of all social institutions, should always be understood as resulting from the decisions, actions, attitudes, etc of human individuals and ... we should never be satisfied by an explanation in terms of so-called 'collectives'.

Watkins
According to this principle, the ultimate constituents of the social world are individual people who act more or less appropriately in the light of their dispositions and understanding of their situation. Every complex social situation or event is the result of a particular configuration of individuals, their dispositions, situations, beliefs and physical resources or environment.
NOTE Watkins here sets out 'metaphysical individualism', but he CALLS it 'methodological individualism'.

Steven Lukes
Critical analysis of 'methodological individualism': he distinguishes:
- 'truistic social atomism' – on at least one interpretation you can't argue with Watkins.
  True but trivial
- a theory of meaning – 'all statements about collectives are 'reducible' or analysable out as a (finite?) series of statements about individuals. Try it
- ontological individualism – 'all there are are individuals'. False
- epistemological individualism – 'all we can know about/ observe are individuals'. False
- sociological laws are impossible. Doesn't prove anything
- social individualism or moral individualism – society has as its end the good of individuals. Fair enough.

Structuralists
- content/function/nature of 'parts' dependent on position in 'whole'/'structure'/'system'
- 'binarism' as fundamental principle of all human life
- binary oppositions serve as a) imperatives, b) sorting mechanisms.

Controversies in structural causation and structural explanation:
- Structure causes action
- Structure causes action causes social outcomes
- Structure causes social outcomes
- Social structure causes individual action
- Structures conceptually connected with individual actions

The question of realism
- Structures are systems of meaning
- Structures are outcome of cognitive propensity to binarism
- Knowledge is structured in binary oppositions
- Structures as normative systems
- Social structures as <u>physical</u>: stuctures as distributions of material goods

Systems theory
- systems in nature: elements in constant interaction
- systems in society: parts don't simultaneously affect one another
- social systems are 'open'

Hayek
- micro point of view gives us limited access to patterns in the world
- it takes maths and stats to detect patterns at the macro level
- wholes can be defined in terms of general properties of their structure
- wholes constitute distinct objects for explanatory theory
- the problem with <u>social</u> structures is their complexity
- scientific explanation
    1. explanation of an event / class of events
    2. explanation of the recurrence of patterns – this is an end in itself for <u>social science</u>

Weber
According to Weber a theory of action (and by extension a theory of <u>aggregate</u> or <u>macro</u> social phenomena) must be:
- **adequate on the level of meaning**. It must be articulated in terms based on *subjective interpretation* (by whom? – by the theorist) of *a coherent course of conduct, recognisable as meaningful* (to whom? – to the agent and to the theorist) according to *currently accepted norms* (ie the actions of Chinese warriors in the C15 are intelligible in light of the culture in which those roles and actions are embedded)
- **causally adequate.** A theory is causally adequate if there is a *reasonable probability that the action will always occur in the same way; that the **typical** or **average** agent would always do that*. (What counts as 'reasonable probability'?)
- **causally correct.** A process which is claimed to be *typical* must be shown to be both *meaningfully adequate* and to some degree *causally adequate*.

Alfred Schutz (1899-1959)
Weber's concept of 'causal adequacy' relates to the 'objective' context of meaning which is social science itself – only by reference to the context of what is accepted in social science can we say this or that about these probabilities. That is, it is not 'ordinary people's' expectations about others' behaviour that is relevant to causal adequacy; it is 'social scientists' or other 'experts' expectations that count.
- Weber is not explicit about this – he tends to *run conceptions of 'subjectivity' together*
- Weber, and other social scientists, prefer the postulate of the normativity of *rational action* rather than any other postulate, for example *norm guided action, emotionally driven action, etc*
- But then, the model <u>*will not conform to the actor's own model of his subjective motivations, understandings and so on in relation to his action*</u>

- Weber focusses on the *ideal agent:* this is an *ideal type,* or a *statistical construct*;
- That is, according to this methodological principle it is <u>*not the function of social science to treat with real people*</u>
- How are Weberian *ideal types derived??* From what kind of experience? Are they derived from *sense experience?*; are they *scientifically mediated and constructed?*; what is the role of Popperian *inspiration, insight, emotion etc?*
- Answer: *it is the basic norms of the discipline* (c.f. Kuhn's 'normal science') *that determines what counts as an ideal type*
- But there is an alternative function for social science: *social sciences can also take as their subject matter the* **real-ontological content of the social world as constituted**, *and study the relationships and patterns in themselves.* (c.f. Hayek's study of complex wholes and how patterns are maintained).

Charles Taylor (b 1931)

Taylor is critical of the basic theory of action set out above because it takes the 'mental content' of the model to be insufficiently complex:

- *where the basic model features* **objectives** *and* **preferences** Taylor wants to speak of complex **desires** which not only are constructed by aspects of the **social structure** but also are structured into **first order desires** which can be **ordered and re-ordered**; and **second order desires** which are the upshot of **strong evaluation of desire**
- *where the basic model features* **choice** Taylor emphasises that our **articulations of the choices we have** are themselves complex constructions of **evaluations**, and of our **articulations of our own identities.**
- *This is not a simple matter of* **description**; rather these **articulations** are constitutive of our **selves**; certain **modes of experience** are not possible without certain **self-descriptions**
- *where the basic model hypothesises*

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preferences + expectations
determine
choice+action

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Taylor emphasises that the 'causality' or 'determination' goes in TWO directions:-

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choices and actions under a description
(where description of choice and action is conceptually connected with self-description)
constitute
preferences and expectations
(as well as vice versa)

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Donald Davidson (b.1917)

- Sometimes, a **reason** explains an **action**. This is a species of **causal explanation**. (contra Winch)
- Giving the **reason why an agent did something** is to **name the pro-attitude to the thing or the belief about the thing**
- <u>PROBLEM</u> *If 'flipping the switch' and 'turning on the light' also 'alerts the prowler' then we have a problem: it looks as though 'the reason to flip the switch' is also 'the reason to alert the prowler'.* <u>SO</u> *We need to confine 'the reason for an action' to 'the reason for an action under a particular description'.*
- <u>Example</u> The agent's intention, to signal, explains his action, raising his arm, by redescribing 'raising his arm' as 'signalling'. If, under these conditions, an agent raises his arm, then he signals.

- (Back to the question of cause). IF **cause-effect** implies **constant conjuction** then we have a problem with single actions where there is no implication or covert assertion that 'if the circumstances were repeated the same action would follow'. Davidson says: *'there are no laws here; there is no constant conjunction from which we derive predictive power; what <u>emerges</u> as 'the reason' was, at the time, 'a reason'.'*

- <u>SO</u> can intentional human behaviour be explained and predicted? Davidson says: *'when we attribute a belief, a desire, a goal, an intention, or a meaning to an agent we necessarily operate within a system of concepts in part determined by the structure of beliefs and desires of the agent himself'*. ***Events described in physical terms are amenable to prediction and explanation; Events as described in the vocabulary of thought and action resist incorporation into any closed deterministic system.***

- *Can we somehow give conditions that are not only necessary but also sufficient for an action to be intentional, using only such concepts as belief, desire and cause? I think not. The reason, very sketchily stated, is this. For a desire and a belief to explain an action in the right way, they must cause it in the right way, perhaps through a chain or process of reasoning that meets standards of rationality. I do not see how the right sort of causal process can be distinguished without, among other things, giving an account of how a decision is reached in the light of conflicting evidence and conflicting desires. I doubt whether it is possible to provide such an account at all, but certainly it cannot be done without using notions like evidence, or good reasons for believing, and these notions outrun those with which we began.* ['Psychology as Philosophy]

- <u>Rational Action Theory</u>

A reason is a rational cause. .... the cause must be a belief and a desire in the light of which the action is reasonable. ... the way desire and belief work to cause the action must meet further and unspecified conditions. The advantage of this mode of explanation is clear: we can explain behaviour without having to know too much about how it was caused. And the cost is appropriate: we cannot turn this mode of explanation into something more like science.

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Agent's subjective probabilities +
Agent's values
affect
Action

Patterns in behaviour
licence inference to
Agent's beliefs and attitudes

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But there is no <u>predictive power</u> here, unless we assume (unrealistically) that beliefs and values are fixed.

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