The present position and prospects of social and political theory

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Quite a few years ago, I got interested in collecting "theoretical routines," more or less well known analytic tools that would be useful for students to know. I sought to make room for them in my teaching, even in seminars that conventionally focused on grand theoretical conceptions of the classics or of contemporary authors.

What I had in mind would range from useful concepts (for instance roles and role sequences) to productive middle range ideas (for instance W. I. Thomas's insistence that what counts is the actor's, not the observer's definition of the situation, a claim that reappeared and was elaborated in the ideas about reference groups) and it included also established theorems, such as propositions about the interrelations of interaction, norms, social control, and ranking in small groups. In my recent book Usable Theory: Analytic Tools for Social and Political Research (Rueschemeyer 2009) I aimed for a systematic collection of such ideas. In this essay I want to offer some broader reflections that suggested themselves as I was working on that project.¹

A mid-twentieth-century debate

I begin by a look backwards into the middle of the past century. In 1947, at the meetings of the American Sociological Society (as the ASA was then

¹ Yet even here I focus on what is called in political science "empirical theory." I do not aim to enter into the discussions on meta-theory that constitute the bulk of sociological work on theory. To review and critique these theories, which take their cues as much from philosophical considerations as from empirical research findings, is not to be denigrated. An outstanding recent example is Joas and Knöbl (2009).
known), Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton engaged in a consequential debate on the best strategy for theoretical advance in the social sciences.2

Parsons argued for a comprehensive theoretical framework because an adequate theory must reflect all of the complex interdependencies characteristic of social life - without omissions. He claimed that a "structural functionalism" could approximate such a theory, treating relatively stable patterns as (reasonably unproblematic) "structures" and focusing on processes within a social system - the "functions" of structural functionalism - that contribute to or detract from the system's maintenance and development.

Merton held that such an all-inclusive approach was premature. He argued instead for "theories of the middle range." These deal with limited and inevitably partial explanations of such pervasive phenomena as norm compliance and deviance or the conditions of efficient administrative organization. Such less comprehensive sets of theoretical propositions, he argued, have a better chance to create testable and tested theoretical knowledge and could bridge the gap between all-embracing theories and empirical description.

Merton clearly defined the nature of comprehensive theory frames. He called them "general sociological orientations," and they later came to be known as "meta-theories." They represent, he said, "broad postulates which indicate types of variables which are somehow to be taken into account rather than specifying determinate relationships between particular variables. Indispensable though these orientations are, they provide only the broadest framework for empirical inquiry." (Merton 1968b, 142)

Though sharply set off from each other, both approaches represented the ambition and the hope that the social sciences would be able to produce empirically testable and tested theories, a conception one might see roughly in line with neo-positivist prescriptions about theory development and testing.3 Both advanced reasonable arguments. And both had a profound impact for decades.

Empirically grounded work following functionalist ideas became influential and even dominant in macro-comparative sociology and in comparative politics. Yet Parsons' role declined as his own interests focused more and more on recondite aspects of his comprehensive conceptual framework, problems that were increasingly removed from empirical analysis.

Merton won the respect of most theoretically interested empirical researchers in both social and political analysis. And his influence lasts until today. For instance, it is clearly visible in current moves to focus on causal mechanism hypotheses.4

However, if we try to take stock of the results of twentieth century ambitions to generate theory - ambitions that were central to both sociology and political science - we can point only to meager results. There are precious few genuine theories that consist of interrelated general propositions, empirically tested under the conditions specified. We have too few theories in the full sense of the word that can be taken off the shelf and used in efforts to explain and predict. 3 Harry Eckstein spoke in 1975 of an embarass de pauvreté; and the situation has not much improved since then.

But didn't Merton initiate real progress with his conception of middle range theory? If we examine what is probably the best-known middle range theory, reference group theory, we make an interesting discovery. Reference group theory held that people's judgments about reality, both their assessments of what is the case and judgments about right and wrong, are shaped by what they see as the experiences and the views of others - that is, by "referring" to one or another group that seems relevant to them.

2 See Parsons (1945, 1948, and 1950); Merton (1945, 1949, and 1968a). They called theirs a discussion of the present position and the prospects of sociological theory. I adopted a slight variation of their formulation for the title of this essay.

3 If this is doubted about Parsons, it may pay to re-read early essays such as his "The Role of Ideas in Social Action" (American Sociological Review, 1938, 3, 652-64). In this paper he argued for asking more specific questions, turning away from philosophical problems, and moving the discussion "into the forum of factual observations and theoretical analysis on the empirical level" (652).

4 Recent work on causal mechanisms has brought major advances in the interface between considerations of method and reflections on empirical theory. To take these matters up is not possible within the confines of this essay. I cite only three items out of a large literature: Wendt (1999), Mahoney (2001), and Gorski (2009).

5 Let me preempt two widespread misunderstandings:
First, the generality of theoretical propositions is inherently subject to specified conditions. Theoretical generality is not set off from specificity but from historical concreteness.
Second, successful theoretical propositions enable at least partial prediction. However, prediction is not identical with forecasting. Prediction takes off from the specified conditions of theoretical propositions. Nobody was able to forecast the collapse of East European communism, except in vague terms that bordered on prophecy. But quite a few analysts could have predicted that the East European regimes would fall if the Red Army's guaranty for their existence were withdrawn.
Using reference groups as a guide to comparative assessments of social reality, it was for instance made plausible why during the Second World War military police, who had fewer promotion chances, were less dissatisfied than fighter pilots who had more. An example of absorbing norms from other groups was the role of "anticipatory socialization" in the course of social advancement. The theory, then, could instill a good sense of explanation; but – it is not able to predict. The reason is clear on reflection.

Reference group theory does some useful things. It prevents the naïve substitution of the observer's estimate of the "objective" situation for the understandings of the people observed and argues plausibly that expectations and views derived from the experiences of relevant others can matter decisively. This, together with some judicious ex-post selections of referred to groups, explains our sense of explanation. However, that reveals itself as a spurious sense. Reference group theory does not tell us under which conditions who looks to whom with an impact on which standards of judgment. This is the reason why it's hard to use it in predictions. And that is also the reason why it is not really an explanatory theory either.

Ironically, then, the most prominent of the theories of the middle range on which Merton placed his bets for the future of social analysis seems to share the defining characteristics of "general sociological orientations." It, too, "indicate[s] types of variables which are somehow to be taken into account rather than specifying determinate relationships between particular variables." That means the strategy of limited ambition did not lead to full-fledged theories, though some of those do exist. I will return to one below.

However, it would be a mistake to see reference group theory as just another version of meta-theory and set it and other theories of the middle range aside as similarly far removed from empirical analysis. It provides much more than "only the broadest framework for empirical inquiry." Reference group theory must be understood as a highly focused theory frame. Focused theory frames deserve our close attention. I will try to show why.

**Focused Theory Frames**

Theory frames can guide hypothesis formation, but – a few incidental propositions aside – they do not consist of or entail a body of testable hypotheses. Confronted with empirical evidence, theory frames are therefore not so much to be judged as true or false but primarily as fruitful or misleading in the ideas they suggest about empirical reality. Here is what theory frames typically do: they define a theoretical problem; they offer estimates about which factors – often causally relevant factors – are most important for understanding it; they propose conceptualizations of these factors and of their interrelations; and they give reasons for the identification of relevant factors and their conceptualization.

It is in my view not too strong a claim that it is in such theory frames and not in fully developed and tested empirical theories that we find the strongest advances in the social sciences over the last 150 years. A few examples will indicate the broad range of theory frames and may begin to make the claim plausible.

I am thinking of the powerful ideas of Georg Simmel and Emile Durkheim about the relation between social structure and individuality. Durkheim (1893/1964) saw differences in individualization grounded in contrasting structures of society, in what he called solidarité organique and solidarité mécanique (otherwise known as Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft or status- and contract-based societies). The more specific account of Simmel (1908/1955) points to an individual's location in concentric or overlapping social circles. A person at the intersection of different circles has to deal with a great diversity of counterparts and that makes for a more multifaceted and individualized outlook.

Another example, also dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century, may well be the most influential theory frame in comparative politics and macro-sociology: I speak of Weber's set of contrasting ideal (or pure) types of systems of rule – traditional, rational legal, and charismatic – which he offered as more fruitful than the typology of rule by one, the few and the many. Weber was explicit about the criterion of utility for theoretical advance: "The choice of this rather than some other basis of classification can only be justified by its results." At the same time, it's worth remembering that this typology has a theoretical thrust, relating each pure type of rule to contrasting conditions and outcomes. Furthermore, it takes off from differences in legitimation but is not at all confined to legitimating ideas: "The type of obedience, the kind of administrative staff developed to guarantee it, and the mode of authority, will all differ fundamentally. Equally fundamental is the variation in effect." (1922/1978, 213)

More recent examples include developments in social movement analysis. When structural, cultural, and rational action ideas were brought together to focus movement studies at once on political opportunities, re-
source mobilization, organizational capacity, and "cognitive framing," new insights were won that proved useful in empirical research.

Theda Skocpol's study of major social revolutions (1979) opened with a critical assessment of earlier work, which yielded a powerful frame. In *Capitalist Development and Democracy*, Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Huber (1992) began their comparative historical investigation of democratization with an explicit theory frame that focused on three balances of power - within society, between state and society, and the impact of international power relations.

Finally, in an important analysis of the scientific status of rational action models, Terry Moe (1979) has shown that they fail to meet positivist, "covering law" criteria of theory. The Prisoner's Dilemma does not explain or predict. However, it and other rational models, as Moe puts it, "operate as intermediate heuristic mechanisms ... they cannot explain empirical phenomena, but may point to theories that do." They are, then, theory frames of a special kind.

Focused theory frames have a number of remarkable characteristics that situate them between meta-theories or comprehensive sociological orientations and full-fledged theories that consist of interrelated propositions with testable implications. I want to emphasize six:

- First, theory frames contain suggestions for hypothesis formation. They are openings for do-it-yourself theorizing in the context of local research.
- Second, theory frames - by seeking to identify all factors that seem causally or structurally relevant for a given problem - ensure that important context is taken into account in the formulation of specific hypotheses.
- Third, theory frames often build on past research. As a result, theory frames have a sharper focus than comprehensive metatheories on social reality as it presents itself in research.6
- Fourth, theory frames often build on related frames, sometimes following a common overarching frame (for instance, diverse focused frames have been said to represent varieties of a "new institutionalism"). While this may convey a false sense of security, supplied by fashion and safety in numbers, it also establishes theoretical interconnections among different research areas, say among studies of revolution, of democratization, and public social provisions.
- Fifth, theory frames are open to revision, based on the success or failure of their suggestions for hypothesis development. At least the variety I have in mind is not used for shielding analytic work from critiques that have they basis outside the frame. That, indeed, would be an abuse of theory frames. "You can't play in our sandbox" may be a way of avoiding conflict. But that's a strategy perhaps suitable for children, not for scholars.
- And finally, sixth, theory frames help with the problem of induction. We all know that empirical findings, even theoretically interesting findings, do not automatically accumulate into broader sets of theoretical knowledge. For one obstacle, there are always too many directions of possible generalization. Theory frames represent an at least hypothetical context that gives meaning to the results of new research. Their guidance, then, makes it possible to engage in reasonable, if tentative "analytic induction."

Together, these features suggest that theory frames are critical for the development of empirical theory in ongoing research. Their typical concern with major causal factors that are relevant for sharply defined problems makes for a particular link to hypotheses about causal mechanisms. Building on previous research and its critique and being open to critical revision, theory frames contribute significantly to the integration and accumulation of research results - from the framing of projects, through the feedback from research results back to frames, and finally to their guidance in tentative analytic induction.

Theory frames therefore became a central element in the project of *Usable Theory*: Themselves often the object of do-it-yourself theory work, they are critical tools for developing hypotheses in the course of local research, and they can guide the interpretation of findings. This interaction between theory frames and theoretically oriented empirical research holds the promise of increasing the power and utility of frames and points even to the possibility of creating effective, full-fledged theory.

**Joining Two Theories of Action**

When faced with the question of how to systematize and interrelate specific analytic tools, I made a second major move in my project. I chose rational action theory as well as the social action conceptions of the classics as fundamental structuring devices.

Combining these century-old opponents was a pragmatic as well as a tentative choice. Pragmatic, because I differentiate these positions from...
divergent philosophical and ideological links that are often associated with them. Tentative, because I am willing to entertain the implications of other premises of social and political analysis when this makes sense; for instance, I am interested in causal influences of networks and institutions on individual action, even though I do not subscribe to philosophic claims that networks or social structures have ontological priority over individual action.

Building on the conceptions of Weber and Mead I argue that the most elementary and strongest versions of rational action theory need to be complemented by four belts of theoretical inquiry. These must include: first, inquiries about the knowledge available to actors; second, inquiries about the things that actors are after; third, inquiries about the norms by which they feel bound or that they are willing to break; and fourth, inquiries about the emotions underlying and entering their actions.

Only if this subjective or internal dimension of action is taken into account (the label is that of Talcott Parsons) can these long-time rivals be reconciled. But the time is ripe for this rapprochement. Douglass North - not the least influential among rational action theorists - put it this way:

There is nothing the matter with the rational actor paradigm that could not be cured by a healthy awareness of the complexity of human motivation and the problems that arise from information processing. Social scientists would then understand not only why institutions exist, but also how they influence outcomes. (North 1990, as cited by Terry Moe in 2005)

I do not claim that the quartet of chapters in Usable Theory, which inquire into the actors’ knowledge, their normative orientations, their changing needs and wants, and their emotions, transforms the rationalist model into a full-fledged theory. In fact, what I have to offer in these chapters amounts in part to reasonable theory frames - about knowledge and norms - and in part only to preliminary considerations for the building of such frames - about preferences and emotions. I am, however, convinced that such inquiries vastly increase our ability to construct more realistic theory frames, whether we build on rational choice models or other premises.

Cognitive, normative, and preferential orientations as well as their emotional underpinnings and linkages are significant elements of social action as well as of wider social formations. They play two distinctive roles in explorations of social causation.7 First, the four features of the internal dimension of action are constitutive elements of individual action and interaction as well as of more complex social phenomena. For instance, our perceptions and interpretations, whether they are by and large realistic or incomplete, stereotypical, and even illusionary, are - together with normative orientations, preferences, and emotions - constitutive of roles, but also of neighborhoods, of families, of political parties, as well as of nations and their interests. In this first sense, the causal relevance of the internal dimension of action is indirect. It helps constitute the groups and organizations (as well as their interests) for which we may claim causal powers. Second, knowledge and ignorance, norms and clusters of norms, changes in preferences, and passionate as well as calm emotions can exert caus effect directly, be it by themselves - ignorance suggests many examples - or in conjunction with other elements - think of eyes and ideas sharpened or dulled by emotionally infused preferences.

Complex social formations are of special interest to us. Fortunately, we have a full-fledged theory that deals with action, interaction, sentiments, knowledge, as well as needs and wants and that can explain the emergence of norms, patterns of conformity and deviance from them, leadership, subgroups, morale, and effectiveness in problem solving in small groups. I am thinking of Homans's theory of groups (Homans 1950, and Riecken and Homans 1954) and later refinements.

Homans's is not a comprehensive theory. Obviously, it is confined to face-to-face groups; but it also treats the surrounding world and its impact on group life as a given; and it leaves many aspects of group life out of consideration - for instance the substance of emerging norms or the violent or peaceful character of group action. That is, it leaves out quite a few things many care a lot about. Thus Homans did predict in the late 1940s - after he contrasted family roles in Tikopia and in a Boston suburb - that the family roles of the American middle class would change; but he failed to anticipate the revival of the women's movement.

Importantly, however, small group theory shows how action and interaction, shaped by the internal dimension of action, congeal into an "emergent" social phenomenon. Equally important, it also demonstrates that emergent social formations, here small groups, exert tremendous influence on individual social functioning. This was, after all, why for a couple of decades social psychology generated excellent research on small groups. Their influence was taken as a convenient stand-in for the impact of society at large. That, of course, would not do; but small groups of different kinds do offer examples of complexly composed causal agents shap-

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7 As Alexander Wendt has shown in his discussion of the interplay of cognitive premises and conceptions of the national interest (1999).
ing individual action as well as the components of the subjective dimension of action.

This suggests a third critical insight about social causation: Causal relations often run in important ways from complex social formations to individual action and its constituent elements. In the quartet of chapters that deal with knowledge, norms, preferences, and emotions, it was clear from the beginning that these components of the internal dimension of action are partly shaped by wider social structures. A good deal of our knowledge does not come from our own perceptions and ideas. Norms are taught, even imposed, and then often internalized. Many tastes and preferences are acquired, learned in social contexts. And even emotions are subject to social instigation and control.

This means that the ideal of reconstructing all phenomena in the social world from individual action and its component properties eludes us – even for elementary action itself. Reconstructing meso- and macro-structures and -processes based on understanding individual action was a major ambition of many theorists. That ideal may well not be attainable in principle, perhaps for strong ontological reasons. Or it may elude us until we have much better hunches and insights about how individual and collective action relates to structural and cultural conditions.

Here it is instructive to look at the permutations of the thought experiment called “The Prisoner’s Dilemma.” In its first incarnation it showed how easily the rational pursuit of self-interest could yield negative results for the actors involved as an ensemble. Many variations later, we often see it and related models used for rational reconstructions of the emergence of norms that are very similar to naïve functionalist explanations of social norms. As even two rational action theorists observe critically, “The individualist literature on the emergence of norms typically paints a rosy portrait. Time and again, it tells how previously unrelated individuals facing common problems or opportunities (or both) converge – under specific conditions, to be sure – to create norms that facilitate cooperative behavior.” (Hechter and Borland 2001, 204) The move from one dominant interpretation of the Prisoner’s Dilemma and related models to another very different one illustrates the problems of deriving meso-outcomes from micro-analysis.

Inquiring into the internal or subjective dimension of action, then, yields significant results for the strongest versions of rational action theory. It also has strong implications for the most radical expressions of the “cultural turn.” The difficulties that gave force to the linguistic, constructivist, and interpretivist movements are real indeed. They are rooted precisely in the complexities of the subjective dimension of action that I have indicated, and I have no intention of denying or diminishing them. It is the commitment to the goal of causal explanation that separates the position I advocate here from interpretivist resignation and certain radical postmodernist programs. To be sure, cultural studies focusing on interpretation can make very valuable contributions to nuanced understandings of the meaning situations and actions have for the participants. What is rejected is not such hermeneutic work that points to irony, hyperbole, or to the focusing and truncating effects of dialog and debate. This is most welcome. What is rejected is a retreat from causal argument.8

In spite of the complexities of the subjective dimension of action, we have seen that causal arguments remain possible, even at the level of elementary action and interaction, but also beyond it. True, they remain partial and often require the notorious “other things being equal” clause even though we cannot say which all of these “other things” are. Still, partial causation can often be made plausible in a rough and ready way, and it can be further pinned down with well-executed local research. Theory frames that are repeatedly used and refined may offer good guesses about the factors causally relevant for different problems and alternative outcomes.

Peculiar features of meso- and macro-phenomena

The larger and more comprehensive “levels” of social life display a number of distinctive features that have important consequences for the chances of social causation. It is hard to advance critical arguments about repression and emancipation without making claims about the causal mechanisms involved in these issues of domination and subordination.

8 Our ways part radically if everything social becomes the subject of willful imagination. The retreat from causal argument often remains ambiguous. It may be merely implied in critiques of “positivist” social science. Thus, Seidman (1994, 120–1) seeks to replace a “sociological theory” that “articulate[s] a language of social action, conflict, and change in general” with a morally committed “social theory,” presented as diverse narratives that are proud of their particularistic roots. But the retreat from causal analysis can also be explicit, as in Clifford Geertz’s substitution of interpretive understanding and “thick description” for a dismissed “laws-and-causes social physics” (Geertz 1973, 5; 1983, 3; see also earlier Winch 1958). The ideals of interpretive description and of social theory rooted in diverse moral commitments are radicalized in claims that social reality itself is but a text and that “theoretically ... a given text is open to as many different interpretations as there are articulate readers” (Brown 1994, 233; Brown 1987; see also Derrida 1981). Refraining from causal argument is often inconsistent. It is not easy to sustain, especially when the primary impulse is moral critique. It is hard to advance critical arguments about repression and emancipation without making claims about the causal mechanisms involved in these issues of domination and subordination.
of developing theory frames, explanatory propositions, and full-fledged theories. I begin with two Durkheimian themes that concern the meso- and macro-levels of social reality. Here is the first: The variability of individual action, which is grounded in the subjective dimension of action and its multifarious ways of shaping motivations, attitudes, and behavior, is not fully replicated at the meso- and the macro-level. Macro-patterns are often more stable and predictable than micro-events. The contrast between suicide rates as properties of collectivities and the complex motivation of individual suicides was famously exploited by Emile Durkheim (1897/1951). He viewed going into the psychology of individual motivation as similar to wading into a swamp from which one is unlikely to return in good shape.

The second Durkheimian theme I have in mind takes off from the first and offers a general explanation for the reduction of variability as we move from the micro- to the meso- and macro-levels of analysis. We encountered it already when considering the impact of groups on individual action and its components. To repeat: Causal relations often run in important ways from complex social formations to individual action and its constituent elements. This can be extended with a significant addition: Meso- and macro-contexts are in many ways causally relevant for the lives of individuals and small groups, while they themselves are largely beyond the reach of smaller units. An illustration from macro-analysis is found in the impact that large and largely accepted institutions have on their corresponding “social fields.” This explains the contrasts of how self-interested behavior is treated in market behavior, political work, or family life.

In fact, it seems we can quite often — as a reasonable rough rule — expect a double causal asymmetry in the relations among micro-, meso- and macro-phenomena. While micro-elements are constitutive of meso- and macro-phenomena and while meso-elements have a similar relation to macro-formations, we often find that causal shaping and causal constraints seem to run predominantly in the opposite direction. That means that micro-variability is often contained by meso- and macro-patterns.9

These ideas — based as they are on hunches as well as shrewd insights — seem to enhance the prospects of theory-oriented research and successful theory construction at the meso- and macro-levels of analysis in comparison to elementary action and interaction. It seems possible to construct explanatory propositions at the more comprehensive levels without recourse to well-established micro-theories, while the reverse — the understanding of the subjective dimension of action without recourse to assumptions about comprehensive social and cultural contexts — appears more problematic.

The implications of these ideas led many to invest great hopes in conceptions of meso- and macro-structures as systems with stable equilibria, possibly responding predictably to environmental conditions of subsistence. It is indeed apparent that comprehensive social patterns are characterized by powerful interdependencies of elements.10 An example are the ramifications of a long-term rise in material welfare in poor countries. These affect marriage and divorce, socialization of children, kinship networks, the lives of older people, and much, much more, while related changes in family structure, education, consumption patterns, and savings seem supportive of social and technical innovation as well as of economic productivity. Such interdependencies seem indeed to suggest use of a system model for macro-analysis.

However, there are good reasons to consider systemic conceptions of the structural and cultural macro-contexts of social life as deeply flawed. A model of “society” as a largely self-contained system characterized by equilibria with strong maintenance mechanisms and perhaps underwritten by a consensual culture may have had some plausibility for reconstructing the simplest forms of human social life. Yet it is at odds with pervasive “outside” influences we find in all known macro-contexts of social life, be they due to conquest, one-sided political and economic power relations, migration, diffusion, etc. It is at odds with persistent cultural and structural inconsistencies and contradictions, which we find in centuries-old empires as well as in modern industrial and knowledge-based rich countries. It is at odds with the facts that the interdependencies, which do exist, are often rather loose and hard to anticipate and that they allow for multiple equilibria of quite varying degrees of stability and fluidity.11

9 When I discussed this with a friend who works in molecular biology, his response was: “Yes, of course: once contained within specific systems, the behavior of elements becomes less variable and more predictable.” This cross-disciplinary argument may be of interest to us, even if biology works with better integrated systems than social analysis does.

10 I focus in the following on macro-contexts, leaving the meso-level largely out of consideration, even though there are some indications that meso-level analysis may hold specific promises for advances in focused theory frames and delimited causal analysis (Rueschemeyer 2009, 245, 276, 298-299).

11 I think for instance of the equilibria which sustained the outstanding educational institutions in the California of the nineteen-sixties as well as the equilibria that now seem to make many urban educational systems doomed to fail — apparently forever.
Systemic conceptions also held the promise that macro-contexts of social life would yield to a-historic analyses that interrelate external conditions, technology, and fundamental systemic requisites and pre-requisites. Similarly situated societies would then exhibit similar features. Yet the idea of a convergence of the structure and functioning of rich countries has been challenged and virtually dismissed. And the idea of "multiple modernities" (Eisenstadt 2000, Wittrock 2000) has gained ground. History abounds in dramatic differences among macro-social and macro-cultural patterns. These differences point to long-lasting differences in historical paths, obviating hopes for explanation that disregards historical antecedents.12

If we look into the possible sources of such long-persistent differences, some critical themes for macro-causal analysis emerge. Prominent among them are strong contrasts in systems of inequality and their lasting ramifications, the organization of power and state formation, religious differences, and the establishment of ethno-racial boundaries; the latter is often associated with the institutionalization of economic and political inequality as well as of religious orientations and practices.13

Virtually all of these contrasts in macro-social formations involve social institutions, which have found in recent decades increasing analytic attention across the social sciences. Understood as complexes of norms and practices that have very strong, often overwhelming backing, institutions are a major part of all macro-social formations. They share three features of interest in this discussion: First, they are one of the major mechanisms shaping and constraining individual action and interaction as well as the functioning of such meso-level social formations as voluntary associations, families, and business firms. Second, they often last long and thus reflect contrasting past causal conditions, giving prominence to historical causes in macro-social analysis and rendering differences among societies and civilizations intelligible. Third, even though they have strong

12 Furthermore, fundamental incompatibilities of social structures and normative orientations make for divergent patterns across societies and cultures, a phenomenon that Isaiah Berlin has called "value pluralism" (Berlin 1997). He contrasted for instance the public morality Machiavelli distilled from his understanding of ancient Rome with the Christian moral views that came to see the teaching of Machiavelli as the ultimate in public immorality. Berlin's view of value pluralism is, incidentally, not far from the conception of different types of societies developed by Talcott Parsons in his Social System (1951).

13 On long-lasting developmental effects of colonialism, which were mediated by the creation of ethno-racial boundaries, see Mahoney (2010). On long-term effects of state structures and the difficulty of creating effective states purposefully in a relatively short time see Lange and Rueschemeyer (2005).
management depending on degrees of job security, worker-management relations, and so on.

Finally, and most obviously, experimentation is virtually never available; and using instead correlations of variables or multiple and varied historical sequences raises the problems of "black boxes" and the more familiar doubts about post hoc, propter hoc where skeptics see only strings of unrelated events instead of causal sequences.

Does that mean that ambitions for theoretical advance have only scant foundation? I do not quite think so. The most likely prospect is indeed that even in the long-run future we will have to content ourselves with focused theory frames, which remain limited in scope and cannot easily be linked to one another, rather than proceed quickly to more and more full-fledged theories, which we can also better connect and integrate with each other than was possible until now. The difficulties sketched are the major factors why in the past our advances took the form of focused theory frames rather than the form of full-fledged theories, capable of explanation and contingent prediction. And this is not likely to change radically.

However, while focused theory frames may be considered a poor analogue to full-fledged theories, we do have the chance to improve theory frames. How does this come about? By inspiring hypotheses in local research that may be confirmed or at least made plausible by the empirical evidence, by searching to identify the boundaries of their applicability, and by incorporating these results in revised theory frames. That theory frames provide in addition an opening for tentative analytic induction leaves some hope for ever greater approximations to full-fledged empirical theories.

Yet even a successful set of interrelated hypotheses with clear empirical implications gives us only incomplete, partial explanations and predictions, as we have seen in the case of group theory. This requires that such theories of limited scope be put into broader contexts, which in turn calls for analyses capable of explanation and prediction or at least rough estimates of the relevant factors. The discussion of particular features of macro-contexts suggests a further limitation; and one of a different kind. Our best hunches about macro-social formations suggest that if larger systems inescapably diverge from each other, reinforced by path dependencies, it will be difficult to come at the macro-level to systematic rather than historically delimited understandings. If macro-contexts are critical for an adequate theoretical comprehension of less inclusive units and processes, their historical character may well leave all or much of our analytic work historically contingent – for a long time and possibly in principle and forever.


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