

Actors and structures in politics

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Abstract:

This manuscript reports, with minor variations, the opening Key Lecture of the Italian Political Science Association Conference held in Trieste on September 12, 2024.

This text consists of tentative but hopefully not random thoughts on the topic of the relationship between 'actors' and 'structures' in politics. It defends some lines of research that the author regards as definitely needed in the current state of the discipline. It covers a great number of complex topics that is compelled to treat succinctly and for this owes apologies to the audience. The title includes three terms; actors, structures and politics. The first two terms do not require special clarification, except for two points. First, they are used as synonymous of the terms 'micro' (referring to actors) and 'macro' (referring to structures). Second, the text avoids to enter in the extensive theoretical literature that discuss the terms 'structure' and 'structuralism'. The term 'structure' is used for the 'constellation of political actors', as discussed later in the text. In this context, the term 'politics' means simply that the relationship between actors and structures will be seen from the specific point of view of political science. This is a vantage point of view with respect to how the problem is usually framed in sociology and economics.

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1. Introduction: problems of scale

This talk consists of tentative but hopefully not random thoughts on the topic of the relationship between ‘actors’ and ‘structures’ in politics. It defends some lines of research that the author regards as definitely needed in the current state of the discipline. It covers a great number of complex topics that is compelled to treat succinctly and for this owes apologies to the audience. The title includes three terms; *actors*, *structures* and *politics*. The first two terms do not require special clarification, except for two points. First, they are used as synonymous of the terms ‘micro’ (referring to actors) and ‘macro’ (referring to structures). Second, the text avoids to enter in the extensive theoretical literature that discuss the terms ‘structure’ and ‘structuralism’. I use the term ‘structure’ for the ‘constellation of political actors’, as discussed later in the text. In this context, the term ‘*politics*’ means simply that the relationship between actors and structures will be seen from the specific point of view of political science. This, I will argue, is a vantage point of view with respect to how the problem is usually framed in sociology and economics.

The micro/macro, actors/structures debate in the social sciences goes on since more than one century. Let me start by pointing that this debate resembles considerably a similar problem in physics: the incompatibility between general relativity and quantum electro mechanics, two extremely powerful theories elaborated more or less at the same time. Quantum theory was introduced to explain the inexplicable behavior of atoms and molecules, as revealed by the spectrum of light they emit. But quantum effects (such as the uncertainty principle) become prominent only when one considers very small systems at the atomic and sub-atomic levels. General relativity is relevant to a much higher-level scale and dominant at high speeds, great masses and enormous gravity. It works with astronomical and cosmological objects (black holes, early universe, etc.). Relativity considers objects as indivisible masses in space-time, while quantum mechanics views matter as probability waves rather than localized particles. Quantum mechanics is non-deterministic because it has to incorporate two incompatible properties into one whole. It has to explain how an object can behave as both a wave and a particle. General relativity theory assumes a strong deterministic nature. Relativity is inside the light cone phenomena (since nothing can travel faster than light), while quantum mechanics is outside the light cone phenomena allowing instant communications in ‘quantum entanglement’ experiments. Both phenomena are like two sides of the same coin, dictated just by the scale. Both theories are believed to be true for all physical things, but it remains hard to combine them, and, more importantly, it is considered impossible, so far, to resolve the issue in the

laboratory. The somehow paradoxical result is that physics, the queen of the experimental scientific method, has ended up accepting two different ontologies which both depends on the scale of the phenomena and on what instrument of measurement the physicists use.

Without any intention to mimic or assimilate the sciences of the humans, in which what is possible it is not necessary and what it is necessary is often impossible, to that of the physical world, in which possibility becomes necessity, it seems however that the two situations have striking similarities.

In the social sciences of the last century we observe a similar (growing?) incompatibility between micro and macro theory. On the one hand, we have micro theories based on individual actors' interactions (often resorting to highly sophisticated techniques) and, on the other hand, we have macro-theories based on historical process of macro constellation configurations. We have theories of how human individuals and even micro aggregates of humans interact, orient themselves, and generate outcomes. We also have powerful macro historical and social science accounts of how macro-constellations have come about and how they affect actors' interactions. However, we definitely find difficult to insert the micro actors into the macro accounts, and to insert the latter in the micro theories. In general, while micro-theory does not acknowledge the role of the macro-constellations, macro-theory does not go down enough to reach the level of individual actors' interactions.

In specific contributions such as case studies and comparative empirical research, the interaction between actors and structures is more likely to be focalized and discussed in a pragmatic way. However, at the theoretical level we can rest only on radical interpretative alternatives that favor one solution or the other. These solutions tend to cluster around three interpretations.

On the one hand, the micro-macro problem is framed in a *radical intentionalists* perspective. Only individuals act, *therefore*, any explanation has to go down to individual actors and actions - see for instance Raymond Boudon (1977), James Coleman (1990), and rational choice scholars in general.

On the other hand, we have scholars who favor a *radical structuralist* view. Structures determine so much individual choices that the latter are often no choice at all - see Louis Althusser (1965), David Easton (1990), Niklas Luhmann (1995), and macro social science in general.

A third perspective is suggested by a number of theorists that recognize the respective role of the micro and macro , but usually interpret micro and macro (or actors and structures) as being

both active and effective, that is embedded, within the individual understanding of reality - see the works of Anthony Giddens (1984), Pierre Bourdieu (1998), Margaret Archer (1995).

One may be tempted to conclude that if in more than one century we have not been able to offer accepted solutions for the micro-macro problem, then either we are not smart enough to solve the problem or the problem itself is unsolvable.

Let's note, however, that, first, these authors and theories usually frame the problem at the highest possible level of abstraction, engaged in offering an ontological foundation to the social sciences. It would probably be more productive to engage in reducing the theoretical gap between the micro and the macro without framing it as a battle between contending ontologies (what really exists out there?).

Second, sociologists (and economists) have dominated these debates. It is fair to recognize that with few exceptions political scientists have escaped facing theoretically this problem and have often relied on imported theories from these more theoretically attentive disciplines. However, there are peculiarities of politics rooted in the type of actors involved, in the unidimensional stratification of the political, and in its explicit aim to produce behavioral conformity. Perhaps these peculiarities make it easier in politics the aforementioned task of 'reducing the gap' between actors and structures. Hence, it is essential that political scientists and political theory elaborate their own contribution to the actor/structure debates starting from the peculiarities of politics and relying less on sociology and economics theories.

Third, the actor/structure dichotomy naturally drives the debate towards ontological issues; on whether structures can be seen as existing entities and on whether actors have real choices. Focusing on 'actors' inevitably leads to focus on 'acting' and the conclusion that only individual humans act is an obvious platitude. Structures do not act, but 'condition the acting', namely the 'orientations' of the actors and their 'choices'.

Some forms of conditioning are well known and amply debated and utilized in political research. To the best of my knowledge, nobody rejects the idea of a *cultural conditioning* of acting based on norms as culturally stabilized systems of meanings, conventions and customs, social norms, practices and routines, role expectations. Similarly, nobody rejects the *regulative conditioning* of acting through 'rules' (private as well as public rules). Certain actions are forbidden and sanctioned, procedures must be respected penalty the nullity of acts, torts must be repaired, etc.

On the basis of this consideration, unless we want to declare the irrelevance of the conditioning of the norms and rules, it is advisable to rephrase the actor/structure dichotomy with the acting/conditioning dichotomy. In some case this conditioning may be mild and limited, hard

and even cruel in other cases. Moreover, we need to explicitly acknowledge that both the acting and the acting conditioning 'have a causal power'. Radical intentionalists deny the causal power of structures; radical structuralists deny the acting autonomy of actors. We need not to adhere to one of these positions and keep the autonomy of acting and the conditioning of structures as both operative causal factors.

The role of 'structural conditioning' goes far beyond the case of normative and regulative structures. In this talk I leave normative and regulative structures aside and I want to discuss the possible conditioning role of '*political structures*'. That is, the role of specific configuration of political actors that contribute to define the situation in which actors are created and act. We should therefore begin asking 'who acts in politics' and what kind of actors are there. I will call this the problem of 'actors' designation'. Note that the answer to the question 'who acts in politics' would require a clear definition of what is 'political action', a problem I do not consider here, but for the claim that a micro-foundation of the political action is a vital necessity for political science, and insufficient energy is devoted to this task so far.

2. Actors' designation

Economists do not spend much time to designate their actors. They mainly deal with flat landscapes of consumers, investors, firms, taxpayers, or with institutional actors as governments and central banks. Sociologists have the challenging problem that society is stratified along many and non-necessarily overlapping dimensions: wealth, income, status, education, ethnicity, religion, etc. But even in political science, where the system of political stratification is somehow simpler and unidirectional, an accepted typology of actors is lacking. I propose to start with a tentative and simplified typology of individual and supra-individual actors of various types, differentiating them on the basis of character of their political action being:

Intentional or not (we are not really interested in non-intentional actions);

Interactive or not (whether their actions are unilateral or require interaction with other actors);

Strategic or not (whether the actor considers what other interacting actors may do);

Coordinated or not (through which means the actor coordinate with other actors)

Leading to emerging properties or not (whether these interactions let emerge new properties which are not 'intended' as a goal of the actors).

I stress that the typology that is presented in Table 1 is provisional and tentative and my thinking on this issue is far from being consolidated.

Not much needs to be said here about Individual actors given the extended literature about them. Individuals are always regarded as able to ‘act’ intentionally, unilaterally or interacting with other individuals, under condition of strategic or non-strategic interactions, coordinating when necessary with other actors through non-cooperative games, mutual adjustment solutions (Charles E. Lindblom 1965) or negative coordination solutions (Robert Dahl 1989).

Table 1: A typology of actors

| <i>Type of entities</i> | <i>Subtypes</i> | <i>Intentional</i> | <i>Interactive</i> | <i>Strategic</i> | <i>Coordinated</i> | <i>Leading to emerging properties</i> | <i>Examples</i> |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| Individuals | | Yes | Possible | Possible | Non-cooperative games, mutual adjustment, negative coordination | none | |
| Assemblages | | No | No | No | None | None | Elderly, rural resident* |
| Aggregates | Compositional aggregates | No | Yes | No | None | Some | Traffic jam |
| | Hidden-hand aggregates | No | Yes | Yes | None | Some | Markets fluctuations |
| | Intentional aggregates | Yes | No | No | None | None | Voters for a party |
| Micro groups | Meetings, Committees, Caucus, Clubs | ?? | Yes | No/Yes | Same as for individuals | Limited | |
| Networks | | Yes | Yes | No | None | Limited | |
| Movements | | Yes | Yes | (Limited) | Limited | Limited | |
| Collective actors | Associational | Yes | Yes | Yes | Political institutions | Extended | Interest groups, parties, professional associations |
| | Corporate | Yes | Yes | Yes | Hierarchy | Limited | Firms |
| | Institutional | No/Yes | Yes/no | Yes/No | Hierarchy | Limited | Protective professional mechanical bureaucracies |
| Composite actors | Association of associations | Yes | Yes | Yes, but difficult | Weak institutions | Extended | Trade Unions, Business confederations |
| | Coalitions | Yes | Yes | Difficult | Limited | None | |
| | Governance | Yes | No | No | Mutual adjustment and negative coordination | Limited | |

Source: Author's own elaboration.

I define as Assemblages groups of individuals denominated by the observer for her own goals. Properly they are not actors as they do not act per se, they lack any individual intention to regroup and clearly no collective intentionality. They are sometimes useful for heuristic purposes and interesting because, in principle, they may evolve into actors.

Aggregates are more interesting because they represent groups of people who share at least one of the core characteristics of intentionality, interactions, and strategic orientation. This is so because there are different types of aggregates. Compositional Aggregates result from interactions among individual actors deprived of intentionality and of strategic orientation (example: traffic jam). Hidden-hand Aggregates are made up by individual who have and individual intentionality but no common intentionality, their members interact with other individuals and do so often strategically (example: market interactions and fluctuations). Finally Intentional Aggregates are made up by people who share an intention but do not interact (example: group of voters for the same party).

Time prevent me a full discussion of the categories of Table 1, but with the same logic I distinguish other kind of supra-individual actors such as Micro groups (meetings, committees, caucus, clubs), Networks and Movements. The three types of Collective Actors (Associational, Corporate, and Institutional) all evidence a supra-individual intentionality, interact with other similar actors and often are driven by strategic considerations, but what is more important is that they are supra-individual actors endowed with powerful mechanism of internal coordination represented by political institutions that in some cases assume the need to aggregate the preference of the members (associational) and in other case the efficiency of coordination through hierarchy.

Finally, to complete the scheme we need to consider Composite Actors, that is supra-individual actors that result from the aggregation of other supra-individual actors. Here I distinguish Associations of Associations such as Trade Unions or Business Confederations, Coalitions and Governance.

This tentative scheme focuses on the differential capacity to act of individual and supra-individual actors. Clearly such capacity cannot be guaranteed or assumed, but must be discussed based on various sources of cohesion. The capacity for intentional, interactive, strategic coordinated action depends from many aspects: transfer of rights of individual members to leading positions; control of collective resources; level of emotional solidarity; cognitive convergence among members; mechanisms of coordination producing the integration of preference and the resolution of conflicts.

The capacity for supra-individual action depends primarily on the convergence of preferences and on the capacity of conflict resolution through political institutions. These elements guarantee the possibility to trade interest and preferences in one area to the advantages of other interest and preferences considered more important; the capacity to accept some losses in order to obtain larger overall gains (or to avoid larger overall losses); the capacity to sacrifice the interest of some member or subgroup for the greater benefit of the collectivity and the capacity to compensate the losers.

The typology of different actors succinctly delineated above is useful to the extent that it allows us to deduce empirically testable propositions concerning the potential action capacity of individual and supra-individual actors. I mention a few propositions of this type below.

Movements have a low capacity for coordination through conflict resolutions mechanisms. However, movements strong emotional solidarity and ideological commitments may make the preference of the members to converge considerably.

Corporate and institutional collective actors with majoritarian and hierarchical decision making have a higher capacity for conflict resolutions and consequently action. However, this conflict resolution mechanisms may be catastrophic if used to solve conflicts among subgroups with divergent cognitive maps and worldviews.

Associational actors that outlive their individual members are more likely to extend their time horizon in the calculation of their interest more than the single individual is. They are more effective than the individual can be in their dealing with other actors of any type and in forming even higher-level actors (Composite actors). Preferences of the collective actors are often articulated and known publicly, while individual preferences are difficult to ascertain. They often develop official ideologies or programs that facilitate greatly the individual calculation of preferences.

Composite actors that have to solve internal conflict with negotiation have a low capacity of conflict resolution than those which can resort to voting and hierarchical decisions. Unless interests converge to begin with, the transaction costs of negotiations may be prohibitive.

With some simplification, the conclusion of the discussion above is that we should not discuss the very abstract opposition between 'individual actors versus structures', but begin with the recognition of the presence of different kinds of supra-individual actors. Individuals define a first level actor. Aggregates may define a second level actor with limitations in either intentionality, interactions, or strategic action. Movements and Networks can be seen as a third level supra-individual actor. The different types of Collective actors define a fourth level actor. And finally Composite actors can be seen as still acting entities, and as a fifth level actor.

Therefore, to bridge the micro and macro approaches a theory of different actors' designation is essential. We should avoid using simple dyadic configurations such as individual-collective. They often ignore or underestimate the complex hierarchy of different types of actors that together provide the bridge between individual at the micro level and the macro-level constellations (or configurations) of actors.

In fact, the presence of supra-individual actors already produces forms of individual action conditioning. Though you can exit or voice as a member of an associational actor you are conditioned by the norms/rules, alliances, divisions, etc. that prevail in the supra-individual actors and by the rules that are active there. Individual actors may have a variety of orientations including egotism and altruism, competitive and solidaristic, antagonist and even mutual destruction. Certain actors' orientations that are perfectly acceptable at the level of the individual actors cannot be entertained at the level of the supra-individual actor. Altruistic, masochistic, or mutual destruction orientations often present at the individual level will be unaccepted in a supra-individual actor. Similarly, in interaction among collective actors in politics' the selfish assumption and the related indifference to the others' payoff cannot be sustained: interactions are 'competitive', not selfish, and you cannot be uninterested or unaffected by the payoff of other collective actors.

3. Above composite actors: constellations of actors and structural conditioning

Above composite actors any reference to actors and to action is lost. We only have political structures as complex constellations of different types of actors and these constellations do not act. The knowledge enterprise changes direction and we can only work under the hypothesis of various kinds of conditioning, no longer of acting.

Individuals aggregate in movements and parties, parties generate alliances and coalitions, and these supra-individual actors compose a structure identified as different types of party systems. Individuals also aggregate in interest and other kinds of groups which together define as structure of interest intermediation with different characteristics and properties. Individuals are characterized by political divisions and their interaction with supra-individual associations and parties generate cleavage (or divide) structures of different nature.

We observe different types of center- or periphery-oriented actors, but also center-periphery structures. All these are macro Constellation of Actors for which no category of acting is appropriate, but whose role in conditioning the orientations and choice of established and new

individual and supra-individual actors cannot, in my opinion, be ignored without paying high prices.

Some elements of the actors' constellations are produced by historical critical junctures that shape the types of actors. Other elements of the constellation may result from the stabilization of patterns of interaction among actors, by the creation of rules and norms of behavior, the persistent historical coalitions among set of actors and finally the development of inter-organizational linkages among different types of actors.

The properties that we attribute to the constellations of actors may sometimes be explained in terms of lower-level entities or properties (e.g. organizational cohesion or loyalty of the members). However, in many cases these properties cannot be related and explained in reference to lower-entity properties and they represent emerging properties of the macro constellation. (e.g. fragmentation: no single part can be regarded as fragmented but only the whole).

Existing constellations of actors shape the opportunities for action of actors and can also foster or inhibit and frustrate the creation of other actors.

A great deal of scholarship has offered theories of structural configuration of political actors and there are considerable variations in political structuring. To the limited extent that a short talk permits, let me consider a few examples.

There are considerable variations across countries in the relationship between the forms of functional representation and the forms of territorial representation depending on the complexity of the cultural infrastructure of the state and its territorial peripheries.

If the cultural infrastructure of the polity was characterized by high national cultural standardization and homogeneity, socio-political alliances tended to prevail within the context of a unitary and centralized state (see Table 2). If, on the contrary, the cultural infrastructure was highly heterogeneous, socio-functional groups and conflicts intertwined with territorial and cultural ones. If cultural heterogeneity had a clear territorial dimension, this tended to generate either secessionist pushes or territorial arrangements of conflicts (federalization) that fragmented and weakened the socio-political oppositions. If instead, the cultural heterogeneity had no clear territorial dimension, then there was no other possible strategy than its suppression or 'pillarization' into social segments.

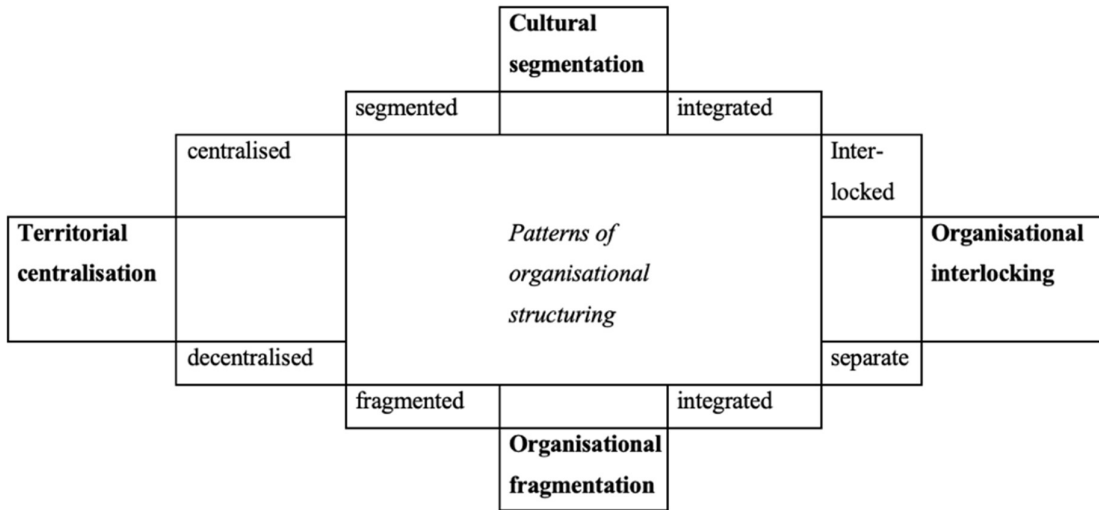
Table 2: A map of political structuring variations in cultural-territorial outcomes

| | | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| cultural infrastructure | relative homogeneity | → | unitary nation state |
| | | | secession |
| | | → it has a territorial dimension | |
| | | | federalisation (terr.units) |
| | strong heterogeneity | | suppression |
| | | → it does not have a territorial dimension | |
| | | pillarization (social units) | |

Source: Author's own elaboration.

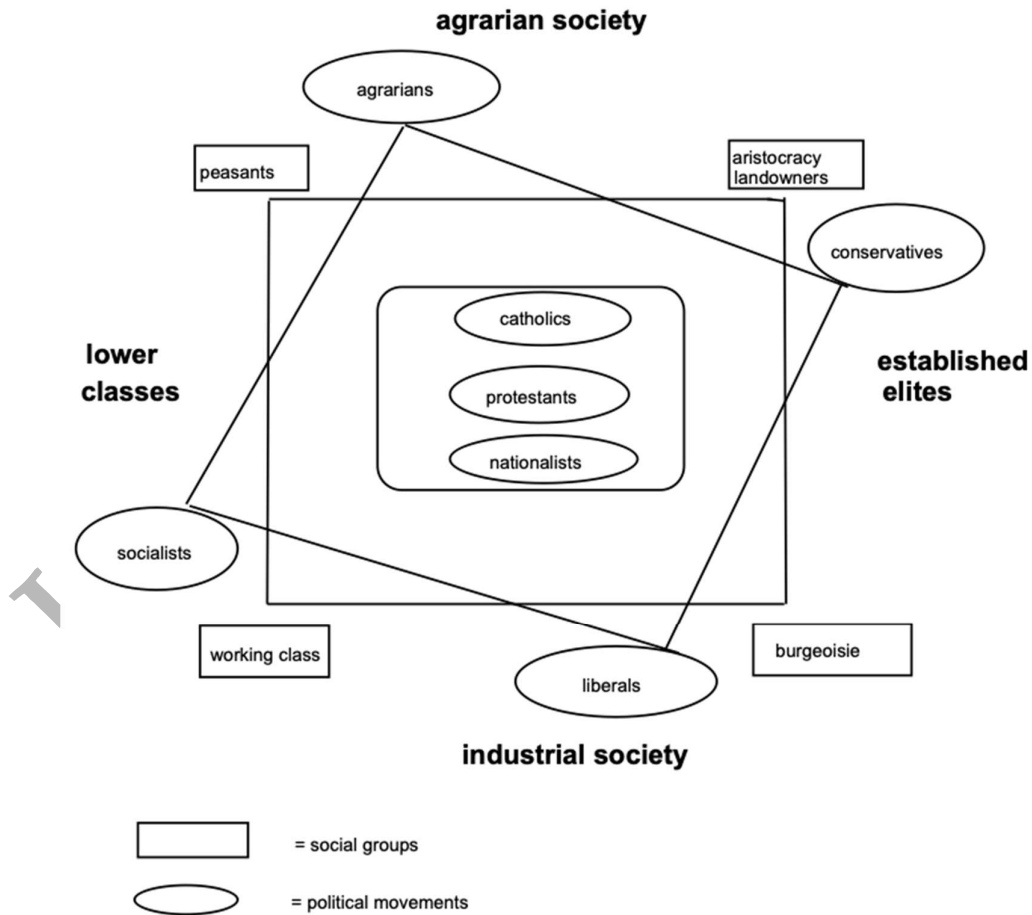
As well, historical processes affect the organization dimension and we can observe a considerable variation in the organizational development of the structures conceived as constellations of actors (see Table 3). Political organizations active in the interest and political electoral channels could be more or less divided along cultural lines (culturally segmented); more or less territorially centralized depending on the level of national integration as opposed to the persistence of territorial organizational autonomy (territorial centralization), more or less 'pluralist' depending on the level of ideological competition among different organizations in the same field (two-party systems versus multi-party fragmentation; peak associations versus a pluralist fragmentation of interest organization); finally, organizations and movements active in the different channels (parties, pressure groups, territorial movements) could be strongly interlocked across the channels or be highly independent and deprived of solid linkages to each other.

Table 3: A map of political structuring variations in organizational forms



Source: Author's own elaboration.

Table 4: A map of political structuring variations in XX century's socio-political inputs



Source: Author's own elaboration.

If social positions are easily converted into political awareness and collective action, the main social groups tend towards self-representation (in Table 4 the squares would tend to coincide with the ellipses). The peasant world would thus organize into an agrarian party; the aristocracy, the landowners, and the dynastic bureaucratic interests would organize instead for a conservative defense of their position; the bourgeoisie would express its vision of society through a liberal party; and the working-class would set up a socialist movement. This perfect coupling is rare, however: peasants and landowners may find their position very close in the defense of common interests. The working-class and the bourgeoisie, both of which represent industrial society, can share interests and forms of representation for quite a while in an early phase. Common interests can exist between parts of the peasantry and the working-class movement on the one side, or between the bourgeoisie, the landowners and aristocratic interests, on the other. The picture becomes more complicated if in the process of political mobilization, forces exist with no clear relation to the main social groups and cut across them. Denominational, nationalist, and even populist territorial mobilizations have few clear social references and were able to drain support from all the most important social groups.

The examples I have chosen to qualify these propositions can be easily related to specific and well-known national experiences. Was the process of state formation (the Spanish/British wars) responsible for the outcome that in Belgium we have a single religious denomination and plural linguistic communities, and in the Netherlands, a few kilometers away, we observe a single linguistic community and a plurality of denomination? This, of course, fostered a completely different actors' constellation.

As a result of this, the Belgian working-class manual worker could choose between voting catholic party, socialist party or Flemish party in the 1960-70, according to which identity prevailed in the political choice. But he could not have an option between a conservative versus labor alternative, as in Britain, or between a socialist versus a coalition of secular/conservative alternatives, as in Sweden. For each individual manual worker the structure of political divisions and related alternatives was given and no choice could escape it easily. Repeated choices could in principle modify the inherited structure, but every single choice could not modify it in the short term.

To live within a segmented political culture such as that of Switzerland, the choice available to actors in the prevailing consociational culture was constrained and alternatives were not easily available. It can be argued that certain individual or collective actors could refuse to accept the prevailing structural conditioning and, for instance, vote for a party who aimed at overcoming it, found associations uncompromised and uncompromising, refuse the accommodation culture

of negotiation that prevailed. However, it is likely that these deviations from the predominant structural conditioning will imply heavy costs in the short term and offer no guarantee to be rewarded in the medium-long term with the change in the structural conditions. In the long run, though, they may be able to modify the predominant actors' constellation and orientations.

The central idea of this section is that domestic political actors - and particularly the supra-individual actors we must deal with - are historically grounded in specific configurations of economic, cultural, administrative and coercion processes of confinement.

Among those who deny the causal role of structural conditioning one line of thought insists that macro constellations of actors are the result, or the precipitate, of actions and choices made in the past by individuals. It is difficult to counter such a sweeping statement. However, it is equally difficult to deny that it is impossible to reconstruct the innumerable choices of individual and supra-individual actors through a long period of time, many of which could be inconsequential and many of which could lead to unexpected outcomes and engender the modifications of actors' orientations. In any case, even admitting the possibility of the individualistic reconstruction, the question remains of the extent to which reconstructed structure limit and condition the choices that can be made in the present.

A second line of thought argues that the conditioning effect of macro structure is known and considered by actors so that their action strategy already incorporates them. They are, in a sense, elements of the available choices. In this case we need to assume that actors are fully and correctly aware of the conditioning structures. This condition of full information about the structural conditioning may be reasonable in some case, but completely unreasonable in others. More importantly, if we do not conceptualize and study the conditioning role of macro structure and its intensity (minor, moderate, strong, dramatic in some cases) how can we evaluate the way in which actors incorporate them in their action's strategies? In the absence of an explicit study of the structural conditioning, we need to assume its role within the individual actor, in which case the individualistic perspective becomes unbeatable and somehow tautological, true by virtue of its logical form alone.

The structures as constellation of actors are both the result of micro-processes that define the actions and strategies on individual/supra-individual actors and of the macro-processes that set the fundamental alternatives available and condition the actors' strategies and actions. More research should focus explicitly and theoretically on this interaction. We continue to be primarily either scholars of the macro-structures or scholars of micro-(individual) behaviors.

My claim is that in the knowledge enterprise we need to keep open both micro and macro perspectives and try to work toward a narrowing of the gap between the two rather than

widening it transforming different perspectives in methodological factional wars. And this is perhaps easier to do in the study of politics than in other fields.

4. Some (tentative) theoretical conclusions

In the end, in what specific way do structures condition actors' choices and orientations? What concretely happen in the passage from the micro to the macro. Let me conclude by venturing some directions of inquiry and some tentative hypothesis. If we accept to focus on both the micro and the macro perspectives we give birth to different and necessary strategies of research (Table 5). At the micro level and at each given time we can identify empirically relevant and qualified individual and supra-individual actors' and their preferences/values/interests. Therefore, each choice decision, each single outcome may be rationalized in term of a specific analytical profile of actors' preferences, orientations, and strategies.

Table 5: Strategies of research for a micro-macro linkage

| | <i>Analytical profiles</i> | <i>Dynamic processes</i> |
|---|---|--|
| <i>Micro (individual and supra-individual actors)</i> | Interests, preferences, strategies | Changes of interests, preferences and strategies |
| <i>Macro (collectivities and structures)</i> | Structure of constraints due to the constellation of actors, resources and institutions | Unintended developmental trends |

Source: Author's own elaboration.

At the macro level at any given time the analytical profile also corresponds to an empirically identifiable constellation of actors, resources and institutions that together constitute the structure of constraints that condition those same future actors.

A micro-macro framework links actors' options and choices to aggregate outcomes, but also links structural profiles and dynamic processes. Over time (column two) dynamic processes are characterized by the emergence of new actors, who had not participated to the earlier 'games', by new institutional arrangements and by unintended and unexpected consequences of actors' choices and by the related changes in actors' preferences, orientations, etc.

If we add a dynamic developmental perspective we then focus on how interests, preferences and strategies change over time and how the interactions between these changes and the structure of constraints produces outcomes difficult to predict and often unintended consequences. In the long run, dynamic process of development become hard to be explained by a consecutive set of analytical profiles and individual choices, even if at each moment they result into new analytical profile. It is hard to keep the four perspectives and the corresponding research strategies under control at the same time. It is, however, unwise to select only one perspective – and even worst to declare it to be the only one that counts.

We may observe changes at the level of the macro constellation of actors as well as changes at the level of actors' interests, preferences and strategies. However, the rhythm, the pace or the rate of change of the macro constellations is much slower than the rate of change of actors' interests, preferences and strategies. That is, the micro-interactions of components (actors) tend to take place at rhythms, which are more diffused in space and more rapid in time than the macro interactions. These micro interactions may find equilibria or return to equilibria or quasi equilibria much more rapidly and frequently than the macro interactions.

So, we have two levels which are interrelated, move in parallel, but at very different change speed. This suggests that a certain amount of micro-level interactions is inconsequential, disappear, or cancel each other out in the passage from the micro to the macro, from the actors to the constellation of actors. In other words, many micro differences will not make any difference for macro interactions, the latter being less numerous and much slower than the micro ones.

Therefore, a great deal of different actors' interaction situations and their analytical profile outcomes become undistinguishable on the macroscopic scale in the specific sense that there is little or no possibility for the observer to perceive any change at the macro level. The processes of aggregation of individuals in the change of scale is important because it determines a situation in which a number of possible individual's micro states are incompatible with a reduced set of macro states whose number is far less numerous than the possible combination of individual micro states.

The randomness of preference, strategies and actions of individuals is largely reduced by their being and becoming members of large supra-individual actors and of being subject to less numerous structural conditioning affecting them. A great deal of the micro interactions quickly occurring through space and time will cancel each other out and only the most robust and

redundant or compatible with the conditioning macro-structure will remain as characteristics of the aggregate unit.

The basic idea of structural conditioning is that the increase in the scale both the space scale and the time scale has a crucial impact to the extent that reduces the contribution and influence of the changes and fluctuations at the micro level.

The study of entropy in a variety of disciplines, including economics and sociology, links the number of possible microscopic situations which are compatible with a given macroscopic configuration. It is, therefore, crucial to an understanding of the complex micro/macro linkage. In one of its many possible definitions and application, entropy measures the number of microscopic changes that can be given or introduced in a macro-system without modifying it. That is, it deals with the exact contrary of what we usually do when we study the number and type of micro interactions that change the macro configuration.

It is extremely rare – in my view - that the details of the inter individuals dynamics will propagate their effects towards the higher level, while the 'average' or more frequent values of the dynamic interactions will be more robustly represented. This is what, in the end, makes it possible to analyze system of enormous complexity without knowing completely and exhaustively the details of the internal interaction dynamics.

In this case the multiplication of innumerable micro observations is a failing strategy because it will never result into the macro outcome. The fact that certain theoretically possible states of the interaction do not realize when we change the scale of observation is what we should call a 'structure', a constraint over dynamic processes.

Behind these scattered notes lies a more profound issue. The relationship between structure and actor it is not one that can be adjudicated empirically as any given set of empirical observations can be accounted for in more or less agential, or more or less structural terms. In this sense, the ontological cannot be conflated within the empirical, or the other way around. If ontology precedes epistemology, this means that we must take a stand on what exists out there (ontology) before we move to discuss how we can go about acquiring knowledge of it (epistemology). It follows from this that we cannot hope to decide about contending ontologies on the basis of what we can observe empirically, no more that we can decide between contending epistemologies (ways of knowing) on the basis of different ontologies.

If our ontology informs us on what we see in the first place and, therefore, where we look for causal mechanisms, then how can we rely on what we observe to adjudicate between contending ontologies? Therefore, in my modest opinion, different perspectives on the question of structures and actors cannot be falsified. We should therefore avoid choosing an ontology which decides our epistemology (and even methodology). Perhaps, it is wiser to renounce to a unified ontology, and, like physicists, leave open the question whether the world is made up by particles or waves, actors or structures.

I have tried to argue that the domain of politics offers perhaps some advantages in reducing the gap between these different perspectives given its peculiarities: supra-individual actors are essential and much easier to be identified; unilateral actions are difficult; interactions are forced; agreements and contracts between the parts have a limited role; there is a straightforward way to produce macro outcomes by collectivized decisions.

Just Accepted - Early View

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