

INTERROGATIONS #5
10/6/2004
Methodological Individualism

1. Matt Nichter

The multiple realizability of macro-level types does not, in my opinion, prove that “the explanations provided by the macro-theory [in which such types occur] will not, EVEN IN PRINCIPLE, be reducible to a micro-account” (Reconstructing Marxism, p. 120, my emphasis). For multiply-realizable macro-level types may be reducible to highly-complex disjunctions of micro-level types. (Indeed in such cases the complex, disjunctive character of the reduction would be precisely what explains the multiple realizability of the macro-level type.) Though successful reductions may take the form of an identification of a single macro-type with a single micro-type (e.g. ‘water = H₂O’), they need not be so simple.

That said, I’m willing to bet a kidney that neither fitness, nor profitability, nor the aggregate rate of unemployment, nor the vast majority of social-scientific concepts can, in fact, be identified with disjunctions of micro-level types, however complex. In other words, I believe that methodological individualism, in the form defended by Elster, is clearly false. But, to reiterate, I don’t believe it is false merely as a result of the fact that multiply realizable macro-level types exist.

Whether or not these multiply-realizable macro-level types are reducible to some complex disjunction of micro-types is itself an empirical question. **[I am not sure if I can fully articulate my hesitation with your formulation. It is hard to imagine precisely what it would mean to say that a concept like “fitness” could be reduced to some highly complex set of disjunctions. What would that mean? We can make explanatory statements about fitness, in which fitness constitutes a real mechanism that explains things about evolution. I don’t really understand what it would mean to replace that simple claim with the virtually infinite number of micro-reductions of each-and-every instance of fitness. Perhaps you can explain this more clearly in class.]**

‘Radical holism,’ as Wright, Levine, and Sober define it, is a straw man. The idea that “macro-social categories...are not merely irreducible to micro-level processes...[but are also] unaffected by these processes” is absurd. But one need not accept it to believe in, for example, sui generis “collective agency.” To consider just one possibility: if one takes an instrumentalist view of the practice of belief attribution (a la Daniel Dennett’s ‘intentional stance’), the ascription of beliefs and other ostensibly ‘mental’ phenomena to various kinds of group may be perfectly legitimate. **[You’ll have to explain more fully what you mean, precisely, by an “instrumentalist view of the practice of belief attribution.” I am sure that there are**

philosophical positions about explanation in which such an attribution would not just be a shorthand for some more complex claims about the intentionality of the participants in the group, but surely in a realist philosophy this would not be the case. To attribute an “intention” to a group would mean that this would have to constitute a mechanism generating group actions. That does seem sloppy. Such views certainly run contrary to common sense (since groups do not have minds) and may well be false, but they are not merely the product of intellectual “sloppiness” or “rhetorical excess.”

2. Wayne Au

I find it difficult to comment on this week’s readings, mainly because I picked up Elster’s piece first (randomly), read it, and had my stomach turn in the process. His chapter seemed to be full of what I personally would characterize as misreads of Marx’s texts and thinking/analysis that is all around generally non-dialectical. **[He is self-consciously “non-dialectical” because he believes that “dialectics” is an incoherent position (on the grounds that it is ultimately teleological and fails to specify mechanisms.) To criticize Elster one should do more than point out it is undialectical; it is necessary to show where he encounters explanatory failure by virtue of his rejection of “dialectics.”]** That some theorists can claim both Marxism and methodological individualism in the same stroke seems highly inconsistent and politically questionably to say the least. **[What he really says is something slightly different: “what is of enduring value and explanatory relevance in Marx are those elements that can be formulated in methodological individualist terms.” That may still be wrong, of course, but it is not transparently unsatisfactory.]** This does all point to an issue too big to deal with here and beyond the scope of the class: Just what makes a Marxist a Marxist? Or more relevantly, what general properties constitute a Marxist *type* that allows for the particular *token* of Elster’s (or Sensat’s for that matter) methodological individualism? I always hold dialectical materialism as my bottom line, but clearly that is just my *token* of Marxism amongst a bevy of others. **[Elster would probably say that the question “what must one believe to be a Marxist?” is a silly question. The question should be “what ideas linked to Marx remain powerful and useful”. The other question is one about doctrines not scientific theories.]**

Thinking about types and tokens dialectically, **does a *type* at one level of analysis become a *token* at a different, “higher” level of analysis? And vice versa? [Tokens are concrete instances of types – types are always more abstract than tokens. My dog Ozzie is a token instance of the general category “Dog”. This is not the same as micro-macro. “Toke”/“Type” is one way of talking about the problem of levels of abstraction – from very concrete to very abstract. I am not sure that the actual term “toke” is used for every case in which one specifies a concrete instance of some more abstract category, however. I don’t think, for example, that “breeds” of dogs are treated as token-instances of the more abstract category “dog.” A token-dog is a specific concrete dog – like Ozzie-- not simply a less abstract category than “dog.”]** Meaning that, given the above discussion of different *tokens* of Marxism for instance, can’t we think of Marxism generally as one *token* of political/economic theory as

representative of another political/economic theory type more generally? I'm trying to draw a corollary to the human anatomy metaphor that was used in the readings as well I suppose, where each level of analysis (sub-atomic, atomic, molecular, cellular, organ, body...) operates on its own level in systems that are qualitatively different than the systems at other levels, yet they all constitute each other (going "up" at least) in a quantitative sense. **[These levels mean something logically quite different from the Marxism-is-an-instance-of-political-theory. The Marxism classification system is a question of thinking about the level of generality or detail one wishes to describe something, but not the part-whole problem of micro-to-macro levels.]** This relationship was mapped in mathematical equations in the readings. Similarly, this raises two more questions for me: 1) **Can there be so many varying *tokens* within a *type* that the *type* may cease to exist as a general constant? [I think the relevant language here is "sub-types" and "types" – basically you are talking about classification systems. And in this context there is no constraint on the number of possible subtypes of a general type. Mammal remains a relevant biological type even though that there are thousands of subtypes.]** And, 2) **If there are enough *tokens* with similar characteristics, at what point do they constitute their own *type*? [The expression "similar characteristics" is precisely what one uses to define "types" – so long as those "similar characteristics" are such as to justify an abstract concept.]** I know I seem stuck on this issue, but to me it is a central point of all the readings as we try to understand individuals (*tokens*) and their social formations (*types*) - along with the philosophical implications of our theorizing of this issue.

3. Ana Cristina Collares.

The discussion of this week is related to the question of micro-macro analysis and takes as its subject Marxist theory. Marxist theory was traditionally known as structuralist, i.e., as a theory where social structures "conducted", in a certain way, individual action. Then, John Elster introduced the perspective of the "analytical Marxism", claiming that although Marxist methodology is not a good one because it deals only with macro-social structures, the theory can be viewed from the point of view of micro-analysis, because it has powerful insights about individual motivations and preferences for action.

Given that, my interrogation focus on the relationship between micro and macro structural analysis in sociology. First of all, I would like to go back to the questions of last week and think about the observational theories that are related to these two levels of analysis. Both levels propose hypothetical models that presuppose unobservable entities. In the micro-level, the "homo oeconomicus", that take decisions to act based on instrumental rationality. At the structural level, the entities that are composed by individuals and its interactions but that are "more than the mere sum of the parts".

Can we say that there are specific theories of observation that fit especially these models of interpretation of reality, i.e., are there observational mechanisms that produce results that can only be analyzed under one or other perspective? **[This is a nice point to think through: do claims about unobservable macro-mechanisms imply a different theory-of-observation than claims about unobservable micro-mechanisms. Certainly**

it is the case that methodologically we face different tasks in the two cases – but that is true across any distinct type of mechanism. But I do think something else is going on here. In the discussion last week the idea of a “standpoint” seemed to impact on observation in two main ways: 1) via the way it shapes agendas, the questions asked, and 2) the way it shapes the actual capacity to make certain kinds of observations. The first of these would be equally relevant to micro- and macro-observation, but the second seems more deeply linked to the micro. That is the second issue is connected to the problem of lived experience (experiences connected to particular social positions which then yield a standpoint in social observation and social theory), and one might want to argue that this has more systematic implications for micro-observation than for macro observation.]

Following this, I would like to understand better how “the elaboration of micro-foundations... can facilitate the task of resolving empirical anomalies in research” (Levine, Sober and Wright, p.125). Is it because it raises new possible explanations for empirical research, or because it proposes a more analytical way of looking into reality (i.e., one that understands the whole by looking at its constituent elements)? **[I am not so sure your two alternatives are entirely distinct. I think the search for micro-foundations helps resolve empirical anomalies because it has the prospect of identifying mechanisms which account for the anomalous observations, but the specification of “mechanisms” here means identifying the way the “constituent elements” of wholes, and their interactions, constitute the mechanisms that generate what we observe as wholes.]**

What is the difference, in macro analysis, between postulating, on one hand, an individual action that is constrained by processes of socialization, by culture and tradition, and on the other hand describing facts that have a nature *sui generis* (like Durkheim does), different from the mere sum of individual acts and relations? Are we talking about two different “explanatory theories” in this case, or are we just choosing different methods to describe empirical objects? **[The first point you make is about the impact of wholes on behavior of parts – of society on the behavior of individuals. The second is about the effect of individuals on society. Right? Both of these explanatory problems involve specifying a concept of “wholes” that have properties which are real. Now, the potentially contentious idea in your statement is the notion of a sui generis “nature” of wholes. This is a very slippery. My view is that there are no properties of wholes that are not generated by the “sum” of the parts and the “interactions” of the part. Sum + Interaction is all there is. There is a massive difference, however, between seeing wholes as just the sum of parts and adding the extra ingredient. This also is the way – I think – to explicate the idea of “society” constraining individuals: individuals are constrained by the action of other individuals and the patterns of inter-actions that we call “relations”.]**

When I talk about that, I am remembering the paper presented by Emyrbaer and Gorsky (I think) in the PCS brownbag last year, where they proposed to use the theory of *habitus* in Bourdieu as a substitute for Becker’s theory of rational action. When we talk about things such as *habitus*, are we just indicating how preferences are formed to guide

rational action, or are we indicating underlying structures that constrain action? Or yet it depends of our choice of “explanatory level”?

4. Matt Desmond

As Sensat succinctly put it, proponents of methodological individualism advance two claims. The first is ontological and asserts that all social phenomena are “comprised of individual-level objects.” The second is ideological and asserts that all social phenomena must be explained by reducing them microscopically to individuals, their properties, and their relationships (p. 193). Levine, Sober, and Wright’s primary critique of methodological individualism is that social phenomena are *multiply realized*, that is, “many distributions of properties of individuals...can realize the same social type” (p. 118). Thus, social phenomena are void of simple type correspondences. What is multiple realizability? Is the claim that social phenomena have too many reductionist steps to finally arrive at individual-level explanations? Or is the claim that social phenomena possess a multiplicative, synchronic, and independent existence from individuals? **[Multiple realizability means that you can have an identical state of affairs at the macro-level which is generated by an indefinite number of different micro-states. A simple analog with brain-states and mental-states illustrates this point: the mental state of holding a particular idea in your head – the idea of George Bush – corresponds in each and every case with some concrete configuration of neurons. But there is no reason to believe that my neuron configuration shares anything in common with yours other than the fact that they both support the mental state in question. This is not a question of the complexity of reductionist steps, but of the very meaning of the idea that there is a coherent “type” at the micro level that corresponds to the type at the macro-level.]**

In Wright’s conception of the macro- and micro- distinction, the former seems to be comprised of the latter. The model is additive, as is the case in where “organisms are aggregations of interconnected cells; cells are aggregations of interconnected cellular structures,” and so on (p. 374), such that “Class structures are aggregations of all the relations among these micro-level class locations at some more macro-level analysis” (p. 379). **[“Aggregations of” is not additive: aggregations of = sum of the elements + all of the interactions among the elements. The interactions are crucial here.]** How does this model mesh up with the idea of multiple realizability? **[I think multiple realizability is a somewhat different point, for it implies that the elements that make up the formula $aggregations = sum + interactions$ can be different across two “wholes” even if the wholes constituted by those aggregations are the same type of whole (i.e. have the same value on whatever variable we are using to classify and describe wholes.)** If Wright’s model is additive, could not a methodological individualist assert that the reductionist program is possible here?

In the readings for this week, the macro and the micro are conceptualized as distinct realms, that is, one may “limit” or “transform” the other, but there was not ontological move to advance a blending of the two separate realms. To illustrate, Levine and

colleagues write, “There are four possible explanatory connections between social phenomena and individuals’ properties: first, individual properties can explain social phenomena; social phenomena can explain individuals’ properties; third, individuals’ properties can explain individuals’ properties; and fourth, social phenomena can explain social phenomena” (p. 121). The individual explains the social or vice versa, but they are conceived as distinct realms (at least philosophically). Can we go beyond the separation between the micro and the macro by seeing the former *in* (ontologically) the latter and vice versa? **[But doesn’t saying that the micro is “in” the macro just mean that the macro is made up on micro-elements and all of their interactions? And doesn’t this mean that the micro-elements and all of their interactions also explain the macro – i.e. tell why it is the way it is? I am not sure I see the distinction you are arguing for.]**

5. Matt Dimick

The “multiple realizability” argument seems to constitute the strongest case against methodological individualism. Multiple realizability means that “many distributions of properties of individuals—their beliefs, desires, resources, interrelationships—can realize the same social type” (p. 118). It is an argument against methodological individualism because certain social (macro-structural) phenomena (or types) may not be reducible to a single micro-property, which methodological individualism says will be possible. In fact, Wright, Levine, and Sober initially state the difference between anti-reductionism and methodological individualism as whether “properties of and relations among aggregate social entities are irreducibly explanatory” (p. 109). However, on closer inspection, I found the counterclaim slightly less strong than I first perceived it. Wright, Levine, and Sober, for example, aren’t making any claim that macro-social phenomena are *in principle* irreducible (unlike methodological individualists, who say that social phenomena are reducible in principle). Rather, they say that “anti-reductionists do not prejudge in any given problem whether macro-level (social) explanations are finally reducible to micro-level (individualist) accounts” (p. 115) and that the “feasibility of type-reductions is an empirical question. It *could* be the case that type-reductions actually are possible in this domain” (p. 119). The conclusion is a little jarring to me: for an anti-reductionist, the social world *might* be like the methodological individualist assumes it is. **[This is simply a way of saying that it is possible – but no one has yet made a credible case that this is so – that macro-social phenomena are like chemical compounds with respect to their constituent atom-elements: compounds – like all macro-phenomena with respect to their micro-constituents -- are aggregations constituted by sum and interaction of their parts. But in the case of chemical compounds it is also true that every type of compound is uniquely derived from the sum and interaction of specific type-components. So the reduction is possible. There is a type reduction in chemistry. It seems wildly implausible that this is so in sociology.]**

Granted this, I begin to wonder whether we should take macro-social phenomena so innocently. For example, it seems possible, even likely to me, to be able to describe

the “state apparatus” as a set of relations, or rights and duties specified at the individual level, among state actors and between state actors and non-state actors. Even the case of explaining economic growth in terms of competitive market relations, though we can think of diverse mechanisms at the individual level, doesn’t seem to be a knock-down case. I don’t think I have the confidence to say that there is not a common process or property working at the micro-level that could be found (does it matter if this is only statistically true?). In addition, the force of the multiple realizability argument also seems to rest on an assumption that methodological individualists take “macro-social phenomena” seriously. But I wonder how much scientific value many of them place on such categories. Maybe I am just being naïve about how unlikely the prospect of reducing macro phenomena is or about how seriously methodological individualists take macro phenomena.

On my gut level, I react negatively to methodological individualism, but for me maybe the qualms end up turning on the issue of whether, as Wright, Levine, and Sober put it, relations among individuals are explanatory or not (the *other* dimension in the typology). In other words, whether the social world is just the sum of its parts or whether the whole (the social world) is more than the sum of its parts. And I suspect that many other people feel the same, otherwise there would not be so much talking past one another. If this is the case, was the debate won a long time ago, since no one appears to take atomism seriously or dispute that relations among individuals might be explanatory? And am I just getting hung-up on the use of the word “individualism” since it evokes atomism to me? **[There are some very slippery issues lurking here, and some people come pretty close to atomism. Thus, when I invoke interactions – and thus relations – as explanatory, G.A. Cohen says that a “relation” is itself nothing other than person X acting on the basis of their own internal states and person Y acting on the basis of their internal states, in a situation in which X’s internal states are affected by Y’s actions (and X’s anticipations of Y’s actions). But X’s internal states are also affected by the weather and everything else that is outside of X. So that begins to dissolve the distinction between a relational and atomistic explanation. Even in the billard ball world of Newtonian mechanics it is the case that the billard balls affect each other – they bump into each other and impart forces – but that doesn’t mean that the explanation of the “whole” is anything other than additive with respect to the parts.]**

On game theory: in game theory, we can model how expectations about others actions can be established through an iterative learning process that results in a kind of social norm, rule, or other institution. Later, younger generations participate in “the game” based on learning the norms taught by earlier generations. The younger generations play in the game, so to speak, based on the expectations of others’ actions, but these expectations were learned in a different way than the earlier generation. We appear to have the same macro-phenomenon (same equilibrium) but different micro-mechanisms for how this equilibrium is maintained. Can game theory therefore be used to criticize methodological individualism? (I guess the intergenerational learning feature is not a strict deduction from game theory; a game theoretician might say that each generation learns in the same way. Still, in game theory, you can use different models of individual decision-making, ranging from orthodox rational choice to Bayesian learning to strict

evolutionary-type models. Maybe I'm more skeptical of the possibility of reductionism than I thought.) **[Strictly speaking, I think, the learning process is not really part of the game theory model as such – it requires some additional elements from cognitive psychology or something like that. The game theory model asks things like: given a game's structure of pay-offs, what are the equilibrium strategies possible in the game? Is there a dominant strategy? You could then add to the model a particular learning function and then ask things like: how quickly will the actors converge on an equilibrium under the assumptions of the learning model? In computer simulation versions of game theory, things like this play a big role. Bowles has some very interesting evolutionary game theory models where he builds into the model "mistakes" and "random decisions" to see how robust equilibria are to deviations. All such things can still be framed in methodological individualist ways, I think.]**

6. Mara Mara Eisch-Schweitzer

The readings this week began with Elster's methodological individualism, that "all social phenomena – their structure and their change- are in principle explicable in ways that only involve individuals – their properties, their goals, their beliefs and their actions." Levine, Sober, and Wright, contest Elster's claim of methodological individualism by contrasting it with atomism, anti-reductionism and holism. Of particular interest to me was the way that the type/token distinction was used.

It seemed to me that Wright again used the type/token distinction in *Class Counts*. If I am understanding the process correctly, it seems that class formation was constructed as a type which allowed for three different tokens perception, theories and preferences. Would this be correct? **[That really isn't the "type" vs "token" distinction. Types refer to some general theoretically-defined category; a token is a concrete instance of it. This contrast occurs across all subject matters: A University is a "type", UW> is a token instance of that type. We are all humans (a type); each of us as a living, breathing specific person is a token instance of that type. The type/token distinction bears on the problem of "multiple realizability" of a macro-state by a myriad of possible micro-states. The idea here would be that while it is the case that the attributes of every concrete token are explained by that token's concrete micro-properties, there may be no general micro-properties that will explain the equivalent attributes of the corresponding "type".]**

Wright went on to create a mirrored, but layered, analysis of class structure where the micro/individual level constitutes and is mediated by the macro/structure level. Is it correct to say that the macro and micro levels are distinctly independent of each other, and at the same time dependent on each other for existence? **[I am not sure it ever really makes sense to say that a macro-level is truly "independent" of the micro-level – or at least the notion of "independence" is pretty elusive. Of course it is independent in the sense that one can talk about the macro-level, describe various attributes of it,m**

without invoking any micro-properties: you can describe a dog and talk about how it acts in the world and generates various effects without talking about its cells. Still, it isn't really "independent" of its micro-processes.

7. Brett Burkhardt

While advocating methodological individualism, Jon Elster (1985) claims that "[t]o explain is to provide a *mechanism*, to open up the black box and show...the desires and beliefs that generate aggregate outcomes (5)." Later, when discussing "sub-intentional causality" and belief formation, he draws a distinction (first made by cognitive psychologists) between "hot" and "cold" mechanisms (18-19). Hot mechanisms are based on an individual's psychic motivational processes. Examples given are wishful thinking and cognitive dissonance reduction. Cold mechanisms are based in "purely cognitive processes and biases" that do not involve motivation.

Given Elster's use of the term 'mechanism' above, and his advocacy for opening the "black box" of individual's actions and desires, the hot and cold mechanisms supposedly involved in "sub-intentional causality" seem to be quite different things. More specifically, hot mechanisms seem to be more mechanism-like, and thus better able to open the black box, than so-called cold mechanisms. **[I am not sure why "motivations" seem more mechanism-like to you than other aspects of subjectivity? I don't see your intuition here.]**

In trying to explain aggregate outcomes by way of individual desires and beliefs, citing processes such as cognitive dissonance reduction or "sour grapes" seems acceptable. These processes provide a plausible explanation of why, in a given set of structural or interpersonal relations, a person would have incentive (or reason?) to adopt certain beliefs. **[I think that these sorts of things are not really "incentives", and probably also not really "reasons" – since reasons are generally invoked when you are given explanations-through-intentions usually. Cognitive dissonance is a psychological process through which beliefs change without the actor having the intention for the beliefs to change.]** So for example, Elster mentions a tendency for people in exploited classes, recognizing little or no possibility of social advancement, to adapt to and accept their exploitation through "sour grapes" rationalization. The result is explained by an incentive offered to the exploited individuals (or any individuals in that same situation). **[The belief change is the result of some process of psychological adaptation which in some sense is seen as "functional" for a person's peace of mind, but this is not the same as an incentive. An incentive is something that increases the pay-offs for doing something.]**

Cold mechanisms, on the other hand, seem to have a very different quality. As noted above, they are "purely cognitive processes and biases (19)." Motivation does not enter the picture. As examples, Elster describes logical fallacies. While cold mechanisms may indeed have important effects on belief formation, they do not really allow us insight into the black box in the same way as hot mechanisms do. Cold mechanisms, such as logical fallacies, seem to be too reliant on particular individual

histories to be labeled mechanisms. **[If they are dependent on individual history they could still be a mechanism; but also, logical fallacies, cognitive failures, etc. are not just idiosyncratic – they are predictable failures because of the way psychological processes of cognition work.]** For example, making a logical fallacy is likely the result of past learning, the exact source of which can never really be pinned down. So to get into the black box by way of cold mechanisms seems to be the beginning of an endless (and not very productive) search for the origin of the soundness or coherence of an individual's logic. This sounds very different from the 'mechanisms' proposed by critical realists. **[Logical fallacies are things like making generalizations without understanding the ceteris paribus conditions of the generalization. It may be that personal history might explain why someone makes a particular mistake at a particular time – but this is like a personal history explaining why person X got cancer. This does not imply that the micro-mechanisms involved cannot be specified.]**

8. Elizabeth Holzer

How should we adjudicate between micro- and macro- explanations?

Elster's model of methodological individualism has one distinct advantage to the (nevertheless more reasonable) model that Levine et al. propose. It provides clear criteria for adjudicating between competing micro- and macro-level explanations of a social phenomenon—according to Elster the micro-level explanation is more fundamental and therefore, more significant (assuming, of course, that the micro-level explanation isn't sloppily constructed or endeavoring to explain the unknowable). Alas, Levine et al. argue convincingly that methodological individualism is a poor methodological position. They propose in its place a method that considers both micro- and macro-level explanations fair game, with the proper explanation to be determined empirically on a study by study basis. As a critical tool that encourages researchers to consider whether micro- or macro-factors are *missing* in a model or research program, the anti-reductionist stance is a solid and insightful alternative. But I couldn't find any explicit markers that a researcher could use to adjudicate between two plausible but incompatible explanations, one micro- and one macro-. Are there some? And if not, perhaps this is better thought of as a critique to existing methods, rather than an independent methodology. **[It is hard to answer this question in the absence of specific examples. I personally don't think that there is in general any special problem posed by the adjudication of conflicting macro vs micro explanations that are not also present in adjudicating among competing micro-explanations or competing macro-explanations. It is always tough to really adjudicate rival explanations. In each case the strategy depends upon postulating some effects that discriminate between the rival explanations.]**

For example, consider the following:

Micro-explanation of poverty: Poverty exists because of flawed personal attributes of poor people that make them unable to compete effectively. The level of poverty is a function of the distribution of such micro-individual attributes.

Macro-explanation: Poverty exists because of the structure of opportunities generated by the economic and political institutions of the society. The level of poverty depends upon these macro-institutional arrangements.

It would be difficult to adjudicate between these, but I don't see why it would be fundamentally harder than adjudicating between two rival micro propositions that claimed that different attributes are responsible for poverty.]

9. Matías Scaglione

Micro-foundations, behavior and capitalists "laws of motion"

I agree with Wright, Levin and Sober's critique of Elster's attempt to translate Marx's work into a methodological-individualist framework. I think that Elster's methodological-individualist reading of Marx ended up creating analytical narrow boundaries that, for instance, turn the quite simple observation that "the ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life" (Marx to Meyer and Vogt) into a behavioral/psychological account of workers and capitalists' preferences (p. 22). It seems to me more fruitful, even if we are hardcore subjectivists, to assume that Marx is in this passage and throughout his work talking about *objective interests* (by objective interests I mean those that arises from *material* rather than from psychological or ideological motives), in the sense that the ordinary English worker hates a competitor who lowers his standard of life insofar as the Irish workers lower the *average wage* of the English worker (likewise, the English bourgeoisie would welcome the Irish workers, insofar as they help them to keep or increase their *profit rates*). Should we blame Marx for not being "subjectivist" or the subjectivist researcher for not trying to address a materialist author in his *own terms*? **[There are, I think, two problems with your proposal to translate Marx's statement into a subjective translation of a purely objective fact: (1) "hate" is stronger than, "has their objective interests hurt by". It implies that there is an emotionally charged character to the conflicts generated by these objective relations between English and Irish workers, and it is hard to see how one can explain the emotional charge without a micro-psychological mechanism of some sort. (2) The hatred directed at Irish workers represents a cognitive failure on the part of English workers, for it is not in fact "competition from Irish workers" that objectively explains the lower standard of living as a result of this competition, but the fact that English capitalists organize the competition in a particular way. The hatred of Irish workers is thus the result of psychological-cognitive processes in a double sense: the hatred is generated by psychological processes, and the failure of workers to identify the proper causes of their problems reflects a cognitive failure. Both of these – I think – need micro-explanations to be properly elaborated.]**

Although I fully sympathize with the core notion of the micro-foundational analysis, and despite its superiority vis-à-vis methodological individualism, it seems to me that Wright, Levin and Sober's proposal relies *too much* in a subjectivist approach to

the study of social phenomena. I think that this kind analysis is insufficient to study Marx's mature work on political economy (i.e. the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Grundrisse* and *Capital*). Marx's mature work was intended to study "[t]he economic conditions of existence of the three great classes into which modern bourgeois society is divided [i.e. capitalists, land-owners and workers]" (*Contribution*, Preface). The development of the concepts of commodity, money and capital led Marx to what he believed were "laws of motion" of the capitalist mode of production. Assuming (i) that we try to follow Marx's exposition and method as close as possible, I would like to discuss **[I have divided up the sentence here to facilitate the comments]**

(ii) whether such "laws" could be explained by identifying "a set of decisions made by individuals with particular beliefs, preferences, information and resources" (Wright, Levine and Sober, 119); **[If the "laws of motion" of capitalism depend in part upon actions and choices of people, then part of the explanation of the laws would involve the list above. It may be that the interesting parts of the theory are not about such micro-mechanisms because they may not provide any insight into variation over time and place, for example. But since the laws of motion involve struggles, and struggles involve collective action, it is hard to see how the theory can advance without such micro-elements as part of the theoretical structure.]**

(iii) whether subjective individual micro-foundations can analytically coexist with objective interests; **[I think the issue is this: by virtue of what are "objective interests" explanatory? One way in which they are explanatory is that they may significantly help to explain subjective interests. One way of defining objective interests is in terms of the optimal strategies of actors with respect to the material wellbeing (where this is understood in some appropriate way). Objective interests are one of the things which help explain what strategies actors actually adopt. Objective conditions – not interests, but conditions – can explain things in other ways. But I am not sure why one would use the term "interests" with "objective" unless it was meant to help explain subjective interests.]**

and (iv) whether the micro-foundational analysis is able to distinguish the superiority (if any) of subjective or objective interests in Marx's political economy. **[I'm not sure what you mean here.]**

10 Dan Warshawsky

In this week's readings we are exposed to the macro-micro binary. More specifically, what should the role of macro level analysis (society) and micro level analysis (individual) be in the social sciences? **[Just a small point here: the binary form of the argument is just a simplification – there are also meso-levels, and all sorts of other gradients. The micro- to macro- gradient of levels of always specified with respect to a particular problem of analyzing systems of mechanisms and effects. Just think of it as a part-whole problem: since a given whole may itself be a part in some larger hole, there is an indeterminate number of part-whole**

sequences.] Additionally, what is the relationship between politics at large and academic focus on the micro as a general context for scholarship?

For clarity, I will initially describe how I see the four main terms of atomism, methodological individualism, radical holism, and anti-reductionism differing. According to E. O. Wright's article, "Marxism and Methodological Individualism," both atomism and methodological individualism reject the notion that properties of and relations among aggregate social entities are irreducibly explanatory. In contrast, both anti-reductionism and radical holism accept the notion that properties of and relations among aggregate social entities are irreducibly explanatory. Additionally, both anti-reductionism and methodological individualism accept the claim that relations among individuals are explanatory, while both radical holism and atomism reject the notion that relations among individuals are explanatory. In all, it seems that two main characteristics distinguish the four terms. Are the properties of and relations among aggregate social entities irreducibly explanatory and are relations among individuals explanatory?

Throughout E. O. Wright's articles, he describes the specifics of each of the four types of macro and micro level analyses. By the end of his analyses, it is clear that methodological individualism is weak and problematic for social science analysis. The idea that all macro level explanations should be reduced to individuals and their characteristics seems like an interesting perspective initially, but it lacks the ability to show broader structural processes. There are surely important characteristics of "neo-liberalism," "globalization," and capitalist oppression that must be shown on the macro scale as well. **Isn't abstract theory just as important as micro level analysis in these examples? [The macro/micro contrast is not at all the same as the abstract/concrete contrast. Macro-analysis is not more abstract than micro-analysis. Indeed, rational choice theory is incredibly abstract and micro. And a lot of historical-institutional analysis is macro and concrete. Micro/macro is the part/whole issue, not the concrete/abstract issue.]** Below, E. O. Wright summarizes the relationship between macro and micro level analysis and why methodological individualism is fatally flawed.

Micro-foundations are important for macro-social theory because of the ways they help focus our questions and because of the ways they enrich our answers. But there is much more to science than their elaboration. If social types, as we suspect, are multiply realized, then micro-foundational accounts, important though they may be, cannot suffice to capture the explanatory power of macro-level analysis (E. O. Wright 127).

Now that methodological individualism and holism have been identified, and methodological individualism has been deemed inadequate, another important question has been left unanswered. What is the relationship, if any, between academic interest in methodological individualism and the political context of the past few decades? For example, as communism and fascism developed across the globe in past decades, macro-level theory was utilized to show how contemporary society had failed. Following the demise of most communist and fascist regimes, emphasis on the individual surfaced again. As recently as Margaret Thatcher's conservative 1980s regime, she declared that

groups do not exist, only individuals. So, I wonder if political emphasis on the individual has any relationship to academics' increased interests in micro-level analysis.

Thus, my first two questions seem relatively easy to answer. Micro-level analysis, especially methodological individualism, is flawed if they are focused on replacing macro-level analysis completely (especially in terms of explanatory powers). However, I am unsure how much, if at all, other academic disciplines, such as economics, has contributed to our discussions of methodological individualism. It almost seems as if they are completely disengaged and uninterested in our perspectives on methodological individualism, atomism, anti-reductionism, and radical holism. Additionally, I am unsure if there is any connection between academics' increased interest in the individual and broader political reemphasis on the individual (Margaret Thatcher). **[I am not sure if there has actually been a pervasive increase in the interest in micro-level analysis. There has always been a strong current of individualist analysis in the social sciences, including sociology. Weber was a defender of micro-analysis, for example, and his theory of action is really quite individualist (although not rationalist). The general hegemony of economics as the most powerful social science has perhaps increased the appeal of micro-analytic models and methodological individualism in the past quarter century, but this has happened more in political science than in sociology.]**

11. Graham Clure

Is it fair (or, useful) to say that your (Prof. Wright) view, that structures and agents can interact ("Structures are objects of human intervention" (Class Counts, 387)) holds to a common sense philosophy, which does not venture into metaphysical territory, and that arguments for either holism or individualism as the "proper" method of social scientific explanation do engage with metaphysical issues? It seems commonsensical to describe relations between macro- and micro-structural entities, e.g. that Great Britain had imperialist relations with India, and Gandhi changed that relationship. When I say that methodological questions become metaphysical, I mean by this that it is posited that, say, only Gandhi was *really* an individual, and he interacted only with other individuals, John Smith, etc. etc. This, however, seems to pave the way to further reduction, ad infinitum/absurdum; for in adducing an absolute locus of action, one proceeds from multiple, common sense loci, e.g. nations, classes, people, psychologies of people, physical factors (either constituting psychologies or external conditions of scarcity or abundance of resources), to one only among these. Thus, we might arrive at a strict materialism and concomitant determinism (wasn't Althusser a Spinozist?), which seems at least somewhat incompletely explanatory. Does this result from making a metaphysical distinction, viz. what really constitutes a causally efficacious individual, or locus of action? **[I imagine you are right that my stance is grounded in a commonsensical philosophy – I certainly have not studied metaphysics and find that kind of discussion very murky. But there is also a kind of commonsense to the reductionist idea as well, since only individual persons have minds and make**

choices, and this does seem to suggest – in a commonsense sort of way – that large entities, like Corporations, are really just shorthands for the people in the Corporation interacting and making the decisions which we then attribute to the corporation. There may, therefore, be competing commonsense intuitions in play here.

12. Fabian Pfeffer

In this week's interrogation I want to try supplementing the critique of the reductionist claim made in methodological individualism (and the question would accordingly be if my objections are justified).

a) Is there a 'conceptional necessity' [I think you mean "conceptual necessity"] in methodological individualism for the empirical adequacy of the reductionist claim?

Wright, Levine, and Sober (1985) have made the point that the question whether social (macro) phenomena are reducible to 'type concepts' on the individual (micro) level is an empirical one. Given that multiple realizations of social types are not only conceivable but most probable, the 'type-type reductionism' (p. 118) of methodological individualism seems flawed. My feeling is that this call of empirical adequacy is actually inherent to the logic of the reductionist claim in methodological individualism. The logic applied in reductionism inevitably leads to an infinite regress reducing all phenomena to physical laws. Setting the 'stop point' on the level of individual action (or psychological mechanisms) is therefore an entirely arbitrary act. In fact, as arbitrary as setting the 'stop point' on the aggregate level. Therefore, if there is no logical argument why the individual level has to be chosen as the only valid explanatory level, empirical considerations have to be taken into account. (Besides: Resorting to the pragmatic claim, that the explanatory scheme put forward in methodological individualism best parallels 'human understanding' also seems flawed. There are many examples of supra-individual actors like unions, corporation, etc. which possess actor-like qualities and whose 'behavior' does - for pragmatic reasons - not have to be explained by regressing to individual behavior.) **[The reason for saying that whether or not type-type reductionism is possible is an "empirical" claim is that I do not see any a priori reason why type-type reduction for some problems is impossible. In chemistry we do reduce compounds to their constituent elements: water is H₂O. There may be some logical principle that explains why this is possible in chemistry and not, say, in sociology, but I am not sure what the logical brake would be. And thus I invoke the "empirical" claim that a reductionist needs to show empirically that the multiple realization problem does not occur.**

On the issue of "pragmatic claims": most methodological individualists are perfectly content to use macro-entities in their explanations and treat the micro-mechanisms as a black box. Thus few methodological individuals refuse to talk about firms or unions or states and their actions and strategies. What they say is that this is a short hand because the complexity of the micro-reduction makes it

impossible to specify all of the micro-processes involved, and for some purposes pragmatically the macro-explanation will do. But it is always incomplete.]

b) Does reductionism particularly fail when it comes to the micro-macro link? What about entering the interaction ‘individual - macro-structural setting’ into the equation?

Wright (1996) assesses “both sides of the micro-macro linkage”. On one side, let’s call it the ‘micro-macro link’ (i.e. the micro-foundations of macro phenomena), he establishes that a macro phenomenon results from not only the serial aggregation of individual behavior but also the interaction of individuals. “The whole equals the sum of the parts *plus* all of the interactions among the parts” (p. 403). On the other side, let’s call it the ‘macro-micro link’ (i.e. the macro-mediation of micro-processes), he points out that there are interactions between micro- and macro-factors which have to be taken into account. I suggest that the combination of these two central insights yields another crucial methodological refinement: The ‘micro-macro link’ should not only include serial aggregation plus interaction of individuals but also the **interaction of micro- and macro-factors** (as Wright has already proposed for the “other” side of the micro-macro model). To render this more graphic, let me use a very simple example. If the explanatory issue is the vote distribution in the US presidential elections, methodological individualist will be content with counting the votes Americans have cast. Nevertheless, everybody knows that the election of the President of the United States does not result from the sheer accumulation of the number of votes cast for each candidate, but follows very detailed rules specified by the electoral system (which even turned out to allow granting the presidency to someone who has not gained the majority of votes). The rules of the electoral system have to be seen as a macro-structural factor, clearly external to individual action, even external to interactions on the individual level. **[Elster would, I think, reject your characterization of the mechanisms by which electoral rules function. We know that there are times and places in history where rules-on-the-books do not actually operate in the actual practices of elections. For the rules written in constitutions to actually impact on the course of elections, individuals living in the system have to believe in them, believe that they will be enforced, and orient their actions towards each other in light of those beliefs. The system is stable – and called “an institution” – when these expectation mesh in such a way that no one has an incentive to deviate from those beliefs. This is a specific kind of equilibrium condition. Masahiko Aioki (a quite interesting Japanese economist) has in fact defined “institution” just this way: as an equilibrium of interlocking beliefs and expectations. This sort of treatment goes pretty far in dissolving the apparent affects of macro-conditions on micro-action: the expression “specific structural or institutional features” in the quote by Mayntz then becomes a shorthand for “a particular equilibrium of individual beliefs and expectations.”]** This is just a very simple example for what Renate Mayntz (2004) means when she notes that “specific structural or institutional features are decisive for the generation of aggregate macro effects by the motivated actions of individuals” (p.251). Therefore, “the main cognitive challenge is to identify the structural and institutional features that organize [...] the actions of different actors so as to produce the macro effect”. Methodological

individualism not only fails to consider this point, but - due to the reductionist claim - also explicitly rules out the influence of macro-structural settings when it comes to the aggregation of individual behavior.

Comment for Eric: Throughout my interrogation I draw on Mayntz (2004: 249-252). I have included this article in my email (just for the case, I also include the link to the online version below) also because I feel that this article could serve as an extremely valuable text for our next session on mechanisms.

Mayntz, Renate. 2004. "Mechanisms in the Analysis of Social Macro-Phenomena." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 34:237-259.

http://pos.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/34/2/237?maxtoshow=&HITS=10&hits=10&RESULTFORMAT=&author1=Mayntz&searchid=1096997887179_65&stored_search=&FIRSTINDEX=0&sortspec=relevance&journalcode=sppos

13. Eva Williams

John Elster (1985) in his book *Making Sense of Marx*, uses Marx's writings to both criticize his Hegelian stance as well as to suggest that some of Marx's writings in contradiction with this "invisible hand" position in fact lend themselves to Rational Choice Theory/Models. According to Elster social theory runs the risk of "spurious explanations" when identifying or relying on macro level explanations for explaining social phenomenon. Spurious explanations, those that appear to explain the phenomenon, but in fact have no bearing, occur when either a separate variable is responsible or "when the effect is brought about by some other cause that preempts the operation of the cause cited in the law. Both of these risks," explains Elster, "are reduced when we approach the ideal of a continuous chain of cause and effect, that is when we reduce the time-lag between explanans and explanandum" (5). Yet, as Levine, Sober, and Wright point out, "there is no reason to believe in general that there will be a single micro-foundation for any given macro-social phenomenon...the fact that there are many micro-states for a given macro-state is precisely what makes individualist reductionism impossible" (122). However, before determining that, philosophically, therefore nothing is knowable, "The issue," according to Levine et al, "is not whether the individual level of analysis can be eliminated, but how it should be linked to macro-level social analysis"(115). Yet the ensuing discussion of "types" and "tokens" seems to move us away from explanation of the link between individual actors and macro level phenomenon vis-à-vis social action and its antecedents or consequences and into the realm of descriptions of phenomenon. **[You are completely right here that the type/token discussion is a shift into descriptions of phenomena. This is, however, relevant to the explanatory problem. The idea is that even if it is true that (a) every token macro-phenomenon is explaining by a corresponding set of token micro mechanisms, it may not be the case that (b) the macro-type of which the token is an instance is explained by a micro-type. Since in science we want to explain properties of types, this means that there may be no way of specifying a set of micro-mechanisms or micro-laws capable of**

explaining the relevant type at the macro-level. This is how the type/token problem gets linked to the micro/macro explanatory problem. (what I wrote here is probably not all that clear, I fear.)]

14. Mark Cooper [added after I was done commenting]

I find Levine, Sober, and Wright's typology to be a bit overstated, and overstated in a way that makes approaching the precise philosophical differences between certain forms of explanation more difficult than in might need to be. While atomism and radical holism are obviously overstated in such a way to create foils for anti-reductionism, I am unclear where the line between useful holism and anti-reductionism (as described) might be drawn. If the critique of radical holism implies that the explanation of social phenomena by other social phenomena is legitimate only when it works through the micro-individual level, it is unclear to me whether this means that each individual mechanism must contain such, or whether within deeper and deeper mechanisms at some point individuals must be found. While I don't find anything too objectionable in the statement that, "the elaboration of microfoundations is necessary for rendering a social theory credible," I think what level of mechanism constitutes a "microfoundation" is important. Likewise, the question of exactly how much micro-foundational analysis is needed in macro-theory seems an important one. More may be better, and "reducing the time-span between *explanans* and *explanandum*" may also be good, but I can imagine that in some cases of macro-theory such analysis would not be as useful as continued exploration of the explanation of social phenomena by other social phenomena. I next want to return to Elster's claim that, "if the goal of science is to explain by means of laws, there is a need to reduce the time-span between explanans and explanandum...as much as possible" It seems in some circumstances though, that moving down from macro- to micro-analysis does not, in itself, reduce this time. In many circumstances I suspect the opposite would indeed be true: to understand the true functioning of the mechanism we need to take into account relations between social phenomena that are shaping lower levels of social phenomena. In this sense, moving down may be detrimental to understanding the mechanism; though this does not justify the complete abandonment of locating the role of individuals in social processes. Perhaps this an unnecessary return to issues raised with critical realism. While Elster notes such potential problems, he appropriately notes that, "methodological collectivism can never be a desideratum," he is unwilling to admit the existence of cases in which more useful explanation can be found, "from the laws either of self-regulation or of development of these larger entities." This is all agreeable to Marx's, "history is the result of human action, but not of human design," yet how much human action is useful in explanation seems to be a significant point not only within anti-reductionism, but also between it and methodological individualism.