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Causal Explanation in Global Analysis: A Critical Realist Rapprochement

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The importance of reflexivity for social-scientific research is a truism. And yet reflexivity cannot be overemphasized when one moves to the global level. There are great risks of reification when one deals with global data sources, or when one extends theories developed in view of a (Western) nation-state to explain often qualitatively different transnational or global phenomena. Some scholars in the field have completely given up on the goal of causal explanation. Some even demanded that social science should integrate elements of chaos theory, because that's what the global is about – chaotic flows that cannot be packed into a neat analytical architecture. Of course these are extremes, but they indicate the particular challenges that come from engaging with global problems: How to account for the complexity, even "ontological openness" (Marginson 2008, p. 313) of the objects, their often over-determined nature, without completely giving up the search for patterns and explanations? What kind of causal explanations can one develop that go beyond the search for "general laws," which, given the diversity of social-cultural configurations in the global arena, clearly turn out elusive?

This memo engages with post-positivist Philosophy of Social Science to explore such questions. Philosophy of Social Science, after all, offers an entry to reflect and debate "what makes the good work good" (Gorski 2013, 661). At issue are thus not so much the rigors of data collection, the technicalities of method, or the analytical tricks of theorizing, but perhaps something more profound: a broader vision of how all that can be brought together for causal explanation in ways that do justice to the intricacies of transnational and global research. Specifically, I want to discuss in which ways Critical Realism offers valuable tools of reflexivity for stringing "it" together in global analysis, that is, for reaching the goal of causal explanation without causal reification. To do so, I first summarize how mechanistic approaches to causal explanation – of which Critical Realism represents one current – provide a fertile alternative to the idea of "general laws" for global sociology in general. Against this background, I elucidate more specifically some unique advantages of a Critical Realist approach to causal mechanisms.

Beyond Northern Reductionism: Mechanism Based Explanations vs. "General Laws"

While notions of causal explanation that circulate in sociology journals can be diverse and eclectic, it remains true that the positivist tradition has so far left the strongest impact (Abbott 1998). It made its first broader inroad into sociological models of explanation via the Hempel Oppenheim Scheme (Gorski 2004, p. 2). And it survives in a "less rigid", "watered-down" version of "mainstream positivism" (Steinmetz 1998, p. 172). The related notion of causal explanation stands on the philosophical shoulders of Hume, because it associates causation with the "constant conjunction" between "observable events" (Collier 2005, p. 328). A causal relationship, in this sense, is defined by two basic criteria: temporal order and regularity. Whenever event A occurs, B should follow. Accordingly, a proper causal sociological explanation requires the search for such constant conjunctions, which, in turn, are to be expressed as "covering" or "general laws," that means, as universal statements.

Despite their heterogeneity in definitions and epistemological commitments (cf. Gerring 2008; Peter Hedstrom and Petri Ylikoski 2010, p. 51), mechanism-based models of causal explanation (henceforth MBCE) challenge this positivist approach on at least two common

fronts: first, they posit that the mere “conjunction” of events “A” and “B” represents an insufficient criterion for a causal relationship, regardless of how “constant” this “conjunction” may appear in the eyes of the observer. What is left open is *how* A and B are indeed causally connected. Thus, the idea of a mechanism is entered as a third “mediating explanatory element” (Groff 2010), to provide the analytical bridge that allows to distinguish between statements of correlation and causation. As Hedstrom and Ylikoski put it, the “idea of a mechanism-based explanation” assumes that “proper explanation should detail the cogs and wheels of the causal process through which the outcome to be explained was brought about.” (Peter Hedstrom and Petri Ylikoski 2010, p. 50). What the authors mean by “cogs and wheels of the causal process” is not merely the convenience of an “intermediate variable.” Instead, they stress the importance to uncover the “entities and their properties, activities and relations” that “produce the effect in question.” (Ibid, p.51)

This commitment to specifying the mediating causal process entails a second fundamental critique of the positivist model: the latter’s belief in the generality of causal relationships, that is, “general laws.” In mere logical terms, the addition of a third mediating element implies that the same observed conjunction between A and B can be rooted in different causal processes. For example, while one might observe an almost universally strong association between gender and income inequality worldwide, there is no reason to believe that the mechanisms that connect gender differences and income inequality are the same in e.g. the Middle East, Northern Europe, or Latin America. The three-fold structure of MBCE thus principally guards against the fallacy to mistake uniform correlations for uniform causal relations. By its very logical structure, the mechanism based approach offers a context sensitive model of causal explanation.

And such context sensitivity is critical for global sociology, not just on logical, but also ontological grounds. It is well known but perhaps often too easily faded out that social structures, unlike natural ones, do not manifest in universal ways. Once we move beyond the familiar boundaries of a Western nation-state society and adopt a global perspective this ontological fact cannot be ignored. To be sure, some early global thinkers claimed that globalization is nothing else than the expansion of Western modernity at a planetary scale, and thus would entail the homogenization of societies and cultures worldwide. But such “northern” theories of globalization (Connell 2007) have been superseded by numerous empirical studies. Even in the wake of growing commonalities along certain dimensions, diversity in terms of structures and cultures persist. Adhering to a model of “general laws” is not only ontologically doomed to fail from the start. For global sociology, it would also imply a blankocheck for Northern reductionism (Ibid.), that is, for problematically projecting “causal laws” from the Western metropolises to the entire globe.

It is against this background that MBCE earns its special value for the global sociologist: it leaves misleading and potentially Eurocentric aspirations to causal generality behind, without, however, giving up the goal of causal explanation per se. By being attuned to the “locality of causal processes.” (Peter Hedstrom and Petri Ylikoski 2010, p. 53), MBCE offers global sociology a model of causal explanation that allows to side-step Northern causal reductionism.

The Problem of Causal Reification: Critical Realism vs. Analytical Sociology

So far I have bracketed the inner heterogeneity of mechanism based explanatory models. Now I want to zoom in to tease out why, within the pool of mechanist models, a Critical Realist perspective has unique advantages for global research, particularly when compared with Analytical Sociology, another realistic approach to mechanistic explanation. I shall here focus particularly on CR’s productive conception of causation.

To reiterate, mechanism based models of causal explanation share a rejection of positivist models on the grounds that the latter do not sufficiently specify how A is connected to B in causal ways. By assuming that temporal order and regularity are enough to establish a causal

relationship (whenever A occurs, B should follow), the “regularity view of causation” (Psillos 2009) informing mainstream positivism is predisposed to mistake mere correlation for causation, and thus runs the danger of causal reification. As Groff (2010) lucidly noted, this fallacy recurs with some mechanistic models under different flags. Analytical Sociology, for example, anchors its mechanism based approach in a notion of causation as counterfactual dependency (CFD). This conception modifies the regularity view of causation by substituting the criterion of regularity with that of necessity. Accordingly, a cause “is not just that which comes first, but that which must come first in the sense that had it *not* come first, the consequent effect would not have followed.” (Groff 2010). Despite this differentiation, CFD remains thereby faithful to the assumption that causation should be defined by temporal order. A mechanism, in this perspective, provides the necessary link that holds an orderly sequence together (Peter Hedstrom and Petri Ylikoski 2010, p. 54). However, if MBCE relies on the idea of causation as order, it remains vulnerable to the fallacy of causal reification, as shall become clearer by comparison with CR below. Even when one deals with context-bounded rather than universal conjunctions, the problem of differentiating correlation and causation remains.

Critical Realism—as a philosophical approach that was founded by Roy Bhaskar (cf. Gorski 2013)—advocates an alternative, productive notion of causation that allows to circumvent this problematic. Going beyond the phenomenology of order, it posits that a cause is not just something that holds the first position within a sequence of events, be it regularly or necessarily. A cause has, indeed, to cause something, which is to say, *produce* effects. Central in this context is CR’s concept of “causal power,” being defined, in basic terms, as an entity’s “ability to do or act in one way or another.” (Groff forthcoming). CR’s notion of productive causation is thus grounded in the idea that entities dispose of certain causal powers. Causation is productive, because it involves the “exercise or display of causal powers.” (Groff 2013 p.5). Given this productive notion of causation, mechanisms represent no longer just miniaturized, bounded conjunction episodes. Rather they refer to causal processes that really produce the effects to be explained. In that sense, CR’s approach does justice to the connotations of the “mechanism” metaphor as “something gear- or spring- or trigger-like” (Groff 2010). The choice of the concept sign-posts the need to go beyond the reconstruction of orderly sequences and to identify the involved powers that bring about change.

The pay-offs for developing explanations in global sociology can be indicated with a schematic example: by investigating why artists from non-Western regions can make it to the global top, a statistical analysis of mine showed that it is critical to gain solo-exhibitions in Western museums, and gaining such solo-shows in turn is strongly associated with longer physical immersion in Western art cities (Buchholz 2008). What is the mechanism that holds this association together? An Analytical Sociologist might inspect temporal sequences and underlying relations and come to the conclusion that the critical causal mechanism is the link to a powerful gallery in such cities. In fact, as statistical data suggest, there seems a clear temporal sequence from relocating to a Western city, getting an association with a gallery, and then receiving a Western solo museum show. And this sequence looks also like a necessary one: without such gallery link, an artist from a non-Western context would hardly get a solo show in a major Western metropolis, and thus, one might conclude, hardly be able to launch a global artistic career. Nevertheless, armed with a Critical Realist perspective, this would only scratch the causal surface. As background interviews made clear, the real causal mechanism is that locating to a Western art city allows the artist to establish *strong* (rather than weak) network ties with a variety of influential intermediaries. A formal gallery link is thereby just the epiphenomenon. And it does not in itself guarantee a solo-show at a museum. While the possible differences in this brief comparative scenario may appear rather subtle, they hopefully indicate that a CR powers based approach equips better to prevent causal reification. Instead of resorting to mechanism based mini conjunctions that could be in effect mini-correlations, it asks to excavate why, through which powers, certain effects come about. And this might require to dig empirically a bit deeper, beyond the identification of sequences that hold together

by counter-factual dependency – especially when operating in relatively uncharted transnational arenas of research.

Conclusion and Outlook

In this memo I explored why a Critical Realist approach to mechanism based explanation has advantages for global sociological analysis. I argued that because MBCE go beyond the fictitious search for general laws, they enable to forgo the fallacy of Northern reductionism in global analysis. I then summarized why the Critical Realist version of MBCE has the added advantage to circumvent the pitfall of causal reification, since it relies on a powers-based model of causation. In a longer article that shall come forth, I expand this discussion and point out two more contributions: For one, I argue that because CR explicitly acknowledges and integrates the role of emergent entities in its mechanistic model (in contrast to Analytical Sociology), it permits to account for the important fact that the causal status of global social configurations cannot be reduced to an aggregation of entities (be they individuals, organizations, nation-states, or regions). In this particular sense, a Critical Realist approach helps to avoid causal reductionism in global analysis. At the same time, with its complex ontology, CR makes it possible to remain sensitive to the ontological openness of emergent global entities. It thereby safeguards the analyst from the equally problematic trap of emergent determinism. While global social configurations are more than an aggregation and as such should be attributed genuine causal powers, it is necessary to respect that the strength of emergence could not be very high, that is, one is often dealing with structures in flux. CR offers tools to identify and integrate the role of emergent global entities for causal explanations without overestimating their relative causal power. CR does so also by allowing for a multi-causal perspective that does not automatically privilege the global or the local, enabling to stay attuned to the actually existing multi-faceted, multi-layered complexity of the social that the researcher encounters in the global terrain.

Throughout the essay I have treated CR's approach to mechanism based causal explanation itself as a unity for reasons of exposition. It should not go unsaid that there are internal variations and disputes of how to define a mechanism; and that there are even sceptical voices that warn of the pitfalls of the connotations of an "underlying" mechanism, or even see the very idea of a mechanism as redundant and thus not necessary. Yet, if one values the idea that causation is something that involves real powers, rather than just regularities or necessities. And if one values the notion that causation is something that often involves processes, rather than direct stimuli-effect relations, I believe that "mechanism" is the best available concept to sign-post this. Redundant or not, for the practitioner of global sociology it is a helpful sign post to engage with the intricacies of transnational or global problems of research, and – as I have sought to indicate in this memo – informs a useful approach to explain them.

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