

# Analytical Marxism and Methodological Individualism

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This short essay evaluates the credentials of a particular type of reductive explanation to be found in social scientific discourse, viz. methodological individualism. It is asserted that forms of reduction modeled after or borrowed from sciences such as biology are ill-suited to the analysis of social phenomena. This is because these phenomena are usually accounted for in terms of categories that are ontologically inseparable from each other. Thus no single category or concept can be claimed as being “more fundamental” than the others. The essay was originally written as a course paper that dealt specifically with methodological individualist claims in the analytical Marxist tradition. However those not familiar with this particular tradition within Marxism, should still be able to follow the main argument.

Analytical Marxists present themselves as “reformists” within the Marxist tradition, with regard to methodological (as opposed to substantive) aspects of Marxist theory. I am inclined to agree with their claim that Marxism is distinguished from other types of political economy mainly by its substantive claims and not by its methodology. This does not mean that Marxist scholars cannot be distinguished on the basis of their methodological approaches, but only that the Marxist tradition may offer us good and bad social scientific practices. There is nothing in its being Marxist that makes it immune to bad methodology or the sole proprietor of good practices. Of course even if one divides theory into these two aspects (substantive and methodological) one cannot assume that the two do not influence each other. Certain types of methodological approaches may preclude the addressing of certain substantive issues. The insistence of neo-classical economics on mathematical formality with the ensuing curtailment of questions that can be addressed is a familiar case in point.

Having said that, I now analyze a specific philosophical position of the Analytical Marxists, viz. methodological individualism (hereafter MI). The point of contention is whether MI is a suitable approach to address question posed within the Marxist tradition (or for that matter within the broader social science tradition). It should be mentioned that I see the MI project of Analytical Marxism as a part of a larger program within social science (or economics at any rate): the reduction of macrophenomena to microfoundations (for e.g. see van den Bergh and Gowdy 2000). The latter itself is a reflection in social science of the larger reductionist project in modern science (one that has admittedly been extraordinarily successful), e.g. the reduction of cellular function to molecular behavior. In fact one of the leading proponents of MI, Jon Elster, explicitly makes this connection: “To go from social institutions and aggregate patterns of behavior to individuals is the same kind of operation as going from cells to molecules”. (quoted in Levine et al 1987, p.71). I disagree with this analogy for reasons elaborated below. As an aside, even in biology the relevant reduction (from cells to molecules) has not been without accompanying controversy (for e.g. see ref 4). I argue here that one can make a distinction between strong MI and weak MI. Strong MI is controversial and incompatible with Marxist (or for that matter any sound) social theory, while weak MI is not really a new approach and is already substantially practiced by Marxist scholars. This point is also discussed by Howard and King in the context of the work of Jon Elster and John Roemer (p.403-405).

## *Strong MI*

The claim is that the human individual constitutes the appropriate fundamental unit for the analysis of social phenomena and that therefore all macrosocial effects (such as class struggle, revolution or inflation) can be (and should be) explained in terms of individual actions or properties. This does not proscribe relational properties (such as weak or powerful), which are defined only with reference to another individual (i.e. strong MI is not the same

as atomism). To return to Jon Elster's analogy, strong MI seems to claim that the ontological relationship between individuals and society is the same as or substantially similar to that between molecules and cells. But this does not seem to be a defensible claim. Molecules, as conceived of in biochemical theory, can exist independent of cells. But an individual independent of society is a queer construct. This is not because any particular individual cannot exist independent of other individuals or social institutions but because the brain he or she possesses is ontologically inseparable from other humans (or for that matter from the non-human environment). Some properties possessed by the brain (language being the most prominent example) are inherently relational and dependent upon society. Mayer asserts in the context of refuting Leibowitz's critique that "whether parts or wholes come first" (i.e. the ontological critique) is a "red herring" for Analytical Marxists and that the basic suppositions of Analytical Marxism- that only individuals can act- does not imply a position on this matter (Mayer 1989, p.431). This seems disingenuous. The assertion that only individual level explanations are valid is incompatible with a view that recognizes the mutually determining nature of the individual and society since any explanation involving an individual act would have to invoke categories or concepts larger than the individual. Arguably, one can even assert that "individuals" and "societies" are not just mutually determined, they are mutually constituted i.e. one brings the other into existence.

Moreover, even if one were to agree that only individuals can act, it does not follow that only those explanations are valid that reduce all phenomenon to who did what and when. Individual actions themselves are further reducible to human beliefs, desires or motivations, which are in their turn merely macro-level names for physical brain processes and so on into the mystic depths of particle physics or string theory. The axiom that only individuals can act imbues human agency with an almost non-material significance. Materialist philosophy would claim that individual consciousness or agency (or desire, belief etc) is itself a macrophenomenon to be explained by further reduction (I do believe that the felt unity of conscious experience poses a hard problem for materialism but this is not the place to into that). Thus it follows that there is no privileged fundamental unit of explanation that can be resorted to under any and every circumstance. The nature of the problem (an "in principle" type of constraint) as well as the nature of empirical data that can be obtained (an "in practice" constraint) should decide the appropriate level of reduction. Thus for example, individual soldiers in an imperial army may march into battle believing in things such as glory of Empire, personal sacrifice or duty, altruistic notions of restoring freedom to the enslaved or simply because they love a good fight. The sum of such individual motivations does not add up to an explanation of imperialist warfare.

### *Weak MI*

This position does admit the value of uncovering microfoundations for macrophenomena important within the Marxist tradition. Roemer's example of the persistence of racist wage differentials under capitalism might be an example (Roemer 1986). However "explanation", under weak MI, is not equated with reduction to individual actions or even to relations between individuals. It is admitted that microphenomena may have macrofoundations (individual preferences and actions are affected by institutions), it being an empirical question as to what constitutes a satisfactory explanation for a particular (micro or macro) phenomenon. This position is referred to as anti-reductionism by Levine et al but the name is a bit misleading since in fact it is not opposed to reduction, but only refuses to accept a particular form of reduction (macrosocial phenomena to individual actions) as the only valid form of explanation. Thus certain ideas within the Marxist tradition such as the law of falling rate of profit may be amenable to explanations at the level of the individual capitalist (and indeed Marx provides one such explanation in terms of technological progress and competition between capitalists). However the analysis of the consequences of many individual acts that lead to accumulation of capital or production of surplus value may require the unit of reduction to be an aggregate entity such as a class (once again to reiterate, the individual is also an aggregate entity, at least in the materialist

framework). This indicates that the most fundamental (smallest?) unit of explanation need not be the "right" unit, something that the proponents of MI themselves believe in. The example offered by Levine of the description of the Second World War in purely physical terms is a case in point.

References:

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