

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

PETER HEDSTROM, *Dissecting the Social: On the Principles of Analytical Sociology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 188 p., index.

Peter Hedstrom's project in *Dissecting the Social* is to advance a method of social research which will "forge tighter links" (145) between the micro and the macro, and between variable-based research and social theory. "Analytical sociology" is for Hedstrom the means of accomplishing this goal, and as a result, *Dissecting the Social* is both a research methods text and an advocacy for a method of research. In these two endeavours Hedstrom does what he intends. First, *Dissecting the Social* is an articulate, concise and thorough guide to the principles underlying "analytical sociology" as a method and philosophy of social research. Second, appealing to the legacy of sociologists such as Weber, Tocqueville, Parsons and Merton, Hedstrom is as avid about advocating for analytical sociology as he is about problematizing alternate approaches. Hedstrom's text is thus part method, part manifesto for the standard of proper sociological research, a sentiment that echoes recent debate in Canadian sociology. However, an important question is not whether one simply accepts the principles on which a social research method rests, but if one can also accept the principles on which a theory of the social, or the assumptions underlying the method, rests.

Dissecting the Social promises a method of conducting a process-oriented sociology, which is appealing for its emphasis on the role of dynamism and unintended consequences in the generation of social phenomenon, rather than static, essentialist "snap-shot" explanations. Moreover, Hedstrom's text emphasizes that a thorough theoretical explanation of the social requires that links be made between the micro and the macro. But in attempting to enhance the explanatory and predictive power of social theory, Hedstrom's text relies on a positivist episteme that is arguably difficult to reconcile with his framing of social process. Moreover, Hedstrom's conception of "the social" is sociologically problematic.

Dissecting the Social is concerned with advancing a method of social research which will explain and predict social phenomenon. Explanatory social theory, Hedstrom argues, provides answers to "why" questions, while avoiding the "black box" of so much social theory that focuses on description or typology rather than explanation and causal inference. The aim of analytical sociology is therefore to advance sociology as a scientific enterprise. Accordingly, Hedstrom bolsters his arguments with ample

examples from the social and natural sciences, and his text is punctuated with vivid diagrams and graphic representations of complex social phenomenon and social relationships. The aim of analytical sociology, Hedstrom argues, is to deconstruct complex social phenomenon into its simplest components, bringing the relevant bits to the fore and eschewing the rest as colourful but extraneous for explanatory purposes. In like fashion, the crux of the analytical approach to social research can be deconstructed quite briefly.

Operating from a mechanistic mode of inquiry reminiscent of Elster, Hedstrom argues that to explain and predict social phenomenon, social researchers must focus on a phenomenon's causal mechanisms. A mechanism represents a plausible hypothesis, or set of hypotheses, that helps explain this phenomenon. In analytical sociology, the causal mechanism of interest is "a constellation of entities and activities, typically actors and their actions, that are linked to one another in such a way that they regularly bring about the type of phenomenon we seek to explain" (2). The interest of analytical sociology is, in the final analysis, individual actors and their actions. Hedstrom goes on to articulate his causal mechanism of interest in terms of the DBO (desires, beliefs, and opportunities) theory; actions are at the root of all social phenomenon, and individual actions are caused by the desires, beliefs, and opportunities of individual actors, mediated by social context. If DBO explains action, and actions explain social outcomes, then understanding the desires, beliefs, and opportunities of actors will allow the social scientist to dissect, explain, and eventually predict the social.

So, one seeks to explain the actions of actors, looking to their DBOs, because ultimately human actions cause the social. First, for the analytical sociologist to identify a constellation of actors and their actions as a "mechanism" and not something else, a pattern of predictable causality, or a regular social outcome stemming from such a constellation, is required. In other words, Hedstrom has written a text for positivist social research. His text is overwhelmingly concerned with "cause," and with "analytical realism," or the accurate correspondence between reality and research's representation of that reality. Stemming from analytical realism is a research agenda that explicitly seeks "truer" explanations of the social. Hedstrom argues that an acceptable explanation of social phenomenon should eliminate any need to ask further "why" questions, the reason why he believes DBO is the answer to "black box" studies.

Nonetheless, there is a tension between the fixity, or solidity, required by singular, "final" explanations associated with positivist epistemologies and methodologies, and Hedstrom's early claim that analytical sociology and its mechanism-based explanations of the social are process-oriented, looking at the ways in which dynamic configurations of the individual and the social cause (he emphasizes "regular") outcomes. Arguably, then, within Hedstrom's text a tension arises between a method of research that requires regularity and a theory of the social that emphasizes dynamism. The mechanism-based approach of analytical sociology explains concepts

by deconstructing social phenomenon into their constituent elements, identified and abstracted as such. However, this rests on the researcher ontologically “fixing” a concept, which must remain discrete from other concepts considered less important for explanatory purposes. Hedstrom does not, however, engage the critique that two concepts in tension, dynamism and inertia, must be reconciled if one can legitimately claim to engage both in a study of social process. As a result, there is a disjuncture in *Dissecting the Social* between what Hedstrom’s method accomplishes and what he claims it accomplishes. This is the tension between endeavouring to order the dynamic complexity of social processes, and recognizing that dynamic processes are anathema to being ordered. What is more, contingency is necessarily overlooked in fixity, and the notion that the social is constituted through multiplicity and fluidity takes a backseat to a *Verstehen* of the concepts themselves, and the dissecting of the social into a series of fixed ontological elements results in a conceptual essentialism. Social processes become nothing more than aggregates of their constituent components, the desires, beliefs and opportunities of individual actors, which interact and influence each other in conjunction with social context. One gets the image of billiard balls on a pool table.

Hedstrom’s conception of the social is also problematic. While a method of research that promises to forge links between the micro and macro might at first appeal to those tired of the “structure v. agency” debate, Hedstrom’s recourse to actors and their actions to explain the social simply takes the side of “agency,” while recognizing that action takes place in a social context and is influenced by it. Beyond the limitations cited above, it is not clear how siding with agency represents a link forged between the micro and macro, for as Hedstrom himself puts it, such links are already visible in the work of Merton, Parsons and Coleman. And so one can question whether Hedstrom is making the contribution to analytical sociology that he claims he is making.

Sociologically speaking, Hedstrom’s conceptualization of the social as an aggregate of individual action and intent is perhaps the most contentious aspect of *Dissecting the Social*. Throughout his exegesis and many instantiations, Hedstrom maintains and relies on a confusing relationship between the individual and the social, where the social influences actions, which are constituent elements of the social, and conceptually the two remain discrete. Were they not so, one could not speak, as Hedstrom does, of the influence of an “external” social context on the desires, beliefs, and opportunities that determine actions that cause social phenomenon. While the circularity embedded in Hedstrom’s explanation of the relationship between social influence, individual action, and social outcome might at first glance appear as a linkage between the micro and the macro, conceptually his text privileges the individual, while assigning the social only a marginal role in its own production. For example, Hedstrom repeatedly discusses actions, rather than practices, which is a concept that puts more emphasis on the ways in which acts themselves might be socially constituted. Such a perspective reverses the “causal” direction of Hedstrom’s analytics and focuses on the productive power of the social. Hedstrom does not do this, and instead assigns the social an intermediate

role in a configuration of intent, action and outcome, in which there is no room to recognize the imbrications of social and individual. These imbrications are vital to collapsing the distinction between social and individual, micro and macro, rather than simply showing their links. Interestingly, having dismissed the “Grand Theorists” as unintelligible in a footnote on page one, Hedstrom does not engage the broad and (theoretically speaking) far more sophisticated bodies of literature arguing that the individual is socially constituted, rather than influenced. If the individual is socially constituted, this casts a very different light on the DBOs.

Ultimately, Hedstrom’s work is emblematic of the type of sociology being taught predominately in European and American universities. (He repeatedly cites the work of heavyweights such as Craig Calhoun, James Coleman, Peter Blau and Arthur Stinchcombe.) In this respect, epistemologically speaking, *Dissecting the Social* will be most useful to an audience of positivist researchers. It is doubtful, however, that researchers more experienced with the logic of analytical inquiry and its methodological assumptions will find much new in Hedstrom’s text. This text is not recommended for those who have recently embraced the “reflexive” turn in social research; who reject notions of “cause” and final, “true” explanations of social phenomenon; who seek to understand how individuals and actions are socially constituted; or who see process-oriented sociology turning on a notion of the social richer than simply a series of discrete elements bumping against each other. But for individuals who agree that the social is reducible to the individual, and with the positivist theoretical suppositions that underlie Hedstrom’s arguments, *Dissecting the Social* will provide a thorough and passionate articulation of the methods of analytical sociology.

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