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Putting Coleman's Transition Right-Side Up*

Abstract: Coleman states that social phenomena cannot be directly accounted for by their social antecedents without analyzing three intervening steps: what motives the antecedents create, how these affect individual behavior, and the transition from the acts of interdependent individuals to social phenomena. The last is most important. I agree, but *Foundations* has its causal link upside down. Reanalyzing some of his cases, I try to show that macrostructures are not the product of microfoundations but the existential conditions that circumscribe individuals' choices.

I.

I consider Coleman's *Foundations of Social Theory* a major contribution to social science, even though I disagree with its major premise. I think Coleman is wrong in claiming that social phenomena must be explained on the basis of the rational actions of individuals and not in terms of antecedent structural conditions. My discussion is confined to one topic, albeit one of central importance to the theory and directly related to the premise I question, namely Coleman's analysis of the transition from the rational actions of individuals to the social structure that is his *explicandum*.

He (1990a, 2) states at the outset that the principal task of the social sciences is the explanation of social phenomena, not of the behavior of individuals. This is precisely my conviction, but what he means by "explanation of social phenomena" differs sharply from what I consider proper social explanations. Since the rational behavior of individuals is the foundation of macro phenomena, according to Coleman, explaining how they develop requires a three-step procedure: (1) ascertaining how the antecedent social condition influences individual values and motives; (2) tracing the effects of these individual motives on individual behavior; (3) and only then explaining the influence of the social antecedent on the social outcome as mediated by the rationally motivated behavior of individuals.

Coleman is a methodological individualist but by no means a naive psychological reductionist. He emphasizes that the third step, from the behavior of individuals to social outcomes, must not simply aggregate the rational actions of

* This paper will appear in changed form in my forthcoming *Structural Contexts of Opportunities*.

individuals but dissect their interdependence, because this interdependence makes an essential contribution to the resulting social system (300-13, 376).

This tree-step scheme is initially developed by Coleman (6-10) on the basis of a criticism of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Specifically, he finds fault with Weber's central thesis that a necessary condition for the development of capitalism, which cannot be explained on purely economic grounds, is the Calvinist doctrine's 'worldly asceticism'. Coleman criticizes Weber's interpretation that the Reformation, notably Calvinism, was necessary for the rise of capitalism as a short-cut that ignores crucial intervening steps. An adequate explanation requires specifying (1) how the Calvinist doctrine affected individuals' religious values; (2) how these beliefs motivate ascetic conduct in one's vocation; and (3) why such conduct of interdependent individuals was essential for the rise of the capitalist system.¹

In his criticism of Weber, his scheme replaces one causal nexus (structure-structure) by three (structure-motive, motive-behavior, [interdependent] behavior-structure). Coleman's subsequent analysis, however, is largely confined to the third step – the influence of interdependent individual behavior on structural conditions. His first step, which I consider central to sociological theory – the limits structural conditions impose on people – is hardly analyzed, and the same is true for the influences of people's motivation on their behavior. Most of his attention concentrates on the third step – the transition from the behavior of interdependent individuals to various macro phenomena, such as collective action, organization of a union, or legislation in a parliament. My criticism will also center on this transition, after summarizing some of Coleman's own analysis of cases of transition.

II.

He introduces the subject with a simple example of a transition (128-30). If an individual obtains a service from another, such as some advice or a loan, he feels obligated to reciprocate by exhibiting deference to the other and compliance with her wishes, which enhances her social status. Such recurring processes in a collectivity give rise to a stratified status structure. In a more complex case based on his research in two schools (136-42), he uses data on homework, absences, and grades for every tenth-grade student to derive the differentiated power structure in the two schools. The illustrations indicate that data on individuals can be used to derive attributes of social structure, albeit those of fairly small collectivities in these cases.

Of special interest is Coleman's (381-4) analysis of how a commune (or a committee or other small group) that requires consensus to take collective action

¹ It seems ironic to accuse Weber of ignoring the role of values in human behavior, inasmuch as his methodology, in contrast to Marx's or the early Durkheim's, stresses the importance of *Verstehen* in sociology – the need to interpret human conduct and social life in terms of a meaningful understanding of people's social values and motivations.

achieves it, even on issues originally favored only by a minority. To reach consensus, members of communes or other groups engage in, often very prolonged, discussions that provide opportunities for airing many related issues, in the course of which there is much give and take and many individuals modify their initial opinions. Such opinion changes are in effect exchange processes which weigh the number favoring an issue by the strength of their interest in it. This enables a minority to win unanimous agreement on issue of central interest to them by winning the agreement of others in exchange for agreeing with those others on issues of great interest to them but of lesser interest to the minority. This process that weighs different persons' votes by their commitment to an issue is considered by Coleman (386-7) to make the results more equitable.

Similar processes occur in legislatures, in this case not to reach consensus but to gain majority support for a bill that initially does not command a majority but is of great importance to some members (Coleman 1966). If a few legislators have a strong interest in a bill that most others do not particularly favor or even oppose, the few may win majority support for their bill in exchange for voting for various bills that are of great interest to other legislators. For instance, the United States Congress passed for many years the Oil Depletion Allowance,² although only a minority of Senators and Congressmen from oil-rich states had an interest in it, as the result of such trading of votes from a majority of legislators in exchange for voting in support of bills they favored.³

These illustrations may suffice to convey the imaginative analysis in which Coleman dissects the interdependent actions of individuals in order to show that they are related to structural conditions. It may be noted, however, that most of the social structures he examines in detail are those of quite small collectivities. A commune or a parliament consists of, at most, a few hundred persons, whereas macrosociology tends to concentrate on populations of hundred thousands if not millions. To be sure, he also furnishes some examples of transitions producing large-scale systems as the result of the organizing endeavors of many interdependent persons, such as workers organizing themselves into unions, the development of corporations, or emergent norms, described as "a prototypical micro-to-macro transition" (244).

However, most of his detailed analysis, particularly that formulated quantitatively, involves very short-range transitions. Thus, the development of cooperative norms typically starts with bilateral monopoly (represented by an Edgeworth box) and goes on to three actors, sometimes jumping from there to a perfectly competitive market (Coleman 1990a, 249-58, 328-35, 670-98). Moreover, in an ingenious simulation of an iterated prisoner's dilemma to study sanctions to enforce cooperative norms in groups varying in size from three to ten, Coleman (1990b) found

² A law giving special tax advantages to oil companies for their endeavors in drilling for oil.

³ Another illustration is that small orthodox Jewish parties in Israel have been able to get support for bills in the Knesset enforcing orthodox religious practices in a largely non-orthodox nation because neither major party could form a government without support from some of them.

that the effectiveness of sanctions to sustain norms depends greatly on small group size. The tiny range in size is hardly a micro-macro transition, and the adverse effect of group size on cooperative norms fails to support his claim already mentioned that the "emergence of norms is in some respects a prototypical micro-to-macro transition" (244).

I fully agree with Coleman that sociologists must analyze the connections between the macrostructures of entire societies or communities and the daily relations and transactions in the multitude of settings in which our social life actually takes place. Whereas I agree with him on that, I think his linkage of the two is upside down and needs to be put right-side up. Population structures are not produced by the interpersonal relations and conduct in innumerable face-to-face encounters (except that past ones may influence structural changes⁴), not even if their interdependence is taken into account.⁵

On the contrary, it is the social environment – the multidimensional composition of the population – that governs the life chances of individuals, both by supplying opportunities for and imposing constraints on their social relations, occupational choices, and outcomes generally. I conceptualize macrostructure as a population's multidimensional differentiation – specifically, its various forms of heterogeneity, like ethnic heterogeneity; of inequality, like economic inequality; and the correlation of various social differences, such as how strongly race and income are related.

Since the population structure of a large society or community is far removed from daily social life, the transition must be traced to ascertain how much of society's macrostructural conditions penetrate to the level of personal encounters and experiences and how much of them are dissipated by segregation on intervening levels. Thus, how much of society's ethnic heterogeneity influences life chances and social life depends on whether it mostly penetrates into suburbs and neighborhoods or entails ethnic segregation among them.

III.

I want to illustrate briefly that reversing the micro-macro into a macro-micro transition restores the plausible causal nexus, at least if macrostructure is conceptualized as population distributions in multiple dimensions. A widely used case, which Coleman (300) himself criticizes, is the assumption of classical economics

⁴ For instance, fertility differences among ethnic groups affect the future population composition.

⁵ This statement and the following analysis apply to macrostructures conceived in terms of people's distribution among social positions, such as Marx's class structure, Durkheim's division of labor, as well as my concept of a multidimensional population structure. The analysis may not apply if social structure is conceptualized in cultural or interpersonal terms, such as in terms of "common-value integration" (Parsons 1937, 768) and thus culturally determined (Parsons 1966, 113), or as "rules and resources ... produced and reproduced in interaction" (Giddens 1986, 25), or as "interaction ritual chains" (Collins 1987, 195-98).

that laissez-faire capitalism develops because the independent actions of unrelated traders create perfect competition in a market. His criticism centers on the interdependence of individuals, which is both the source of social capital useful in competition and an impediment to the perfect competition assumed to exist by neoclassical economic theory.

My particular concern is not merely that individuals are interdependent but that complex institutional structures are required to create the framework within which economic transactions take place, including government commissions, courts to maintain law and order, legislatures, stock exchanges, and many others. Furthermore, the very principle of free competition makes it likely that the most successful competitors become oligopolists or monopolists unless laws preventing it, such as anti-trust laws, have been enacted, and often even then. Capitalism depends on a flexible institutional structure in which recurrent innovations can develop, and competition does not survive unless legislation successfully protects it.⁶

The trading in a legislature of votes on one issue for votes on another is a very suggestive case of the micro-macro transition early analyzed by Coleman (1966). A very impressive paper, but is it really a micro-macro transition? Is it not the result of the institutionalized election system? In the United States, party discipline is very weak, which greatly facilitates trading votes, and which is undoubtedly related to the very long political campaigns in our country that are privately financed by rich individuals and committees, such as PACs (Public Action Committees). Candidates must collect large sums from numerous contributors, which cannot but obligate them to these contributors, thereby undoubtedly providing additional incentives for trading votes.

The election conditions are quite different in other Western democracies, in many of which party discipline is much stricter and candidates are greatly dependent on their party. In Germany, for example, election campaigns are much shorter and the candidates in them are financed by their parties (which are largely reimbursed by the state). In Britain, parties not only primarily finance the short campaigns but also determine which candidates are assigned to various districts, creating a strong basis for party discipline. The weak party discipline and particularly the dependence of candidates on obtaining huge sums for their campaigns in the American election system is not the result of the trading of votes but the cause of its greater prevalence here than in other democracies.⁷

In short, the trading of votes is in my view a macro-micro transition, resulting from the ways American election campaigns have become structured and domi-

⁶ On the conflict of interest between those of capitalists and those of the public, see Adam Smith 1778, 314-17. The century-old fight of major corporation executives against free competition is implicitly revealed in Fligstein's (1990) historical analysis of changes in corporate control.

⁷ The strength of orthodox religious parties in Israel is a different case. Since neither of the two major parties has achieved an absolute majority for many decades, small religious parties achieve disproportionate influence since a major party's ability to form a government depend on their support.

nated by large private economic contributions rather than by political processes, as in other democracies. Even the wide-ranging discussions in a commune are likely to turn into free-for-all shouting matches unless a formal structure is adopted to regulate speaking time and order. Thus, Coleman's great idea that the give and take in discussion groups and the trading of votes in legislatures improve equity by weighting votes by the strength of commitment presupposes a social structure that sets wider or narrower limits on individual transactions and hence indicates a macro-micro transition, not a micro-macro one.

IV.

To summarize: A macrostructure, conceived as a population's composition (specifically, a multidimensional social space of positions among which a population is distributed) is not the result of deliberate rational actions of individuals. Nor does it emerge from the social interaction and practices in multitudes of small groups. The rational choices and conduct of interdependent individuals cannot determine the population composition of their environment. The multidimensional social space that constitutes our social environment governs people's opportunities and limits them, such as their occupational chances, their likely associates, their probability of joining social movements and organizations, and their life chances generally. To be sure, structural conditions determine only the probabilities of various outcomes in a population, not the specific outcomes of particular individuals, but they limit our choices. Hence, the transitions from rational interdependent choices and actions of individuals to macrostructures that Coleman so perceptively analyzed must be reversed, as structural conditions are the antecedents that circumscribe people's opportunities and constraints.

In the long run, however, there is some feedback. Today's population structure governs people's life chances of all kinds, their probabilities of entering different careers, marrying ingroup or outgroup spouses in various respects, and, indeed, the likelihood of any social experience. However, the acts of individuals today exert some influence on the population structure tomorrow, though largely by inadvertence and in the aggregate (except for actions of the most powerful persons, like members of the government or major corporation executives). The decisions of the members of various groups what jobs to seek, whether and where to migrate, if and how to vote, if and whom to marry, how many, if any, children to have, and most of their other choices and actions, when prevalent, produce changes in the population structure or its substructures. They may alter the ethnic composition, for example, or increase the income inequality.

A final question that should be raised is whether the difference between Coleman's analysis of transitions and mine of reverse transitions is one of perspective or whether the two represent different theories which imply distinct empirical predictions that make it possible to choose between them. Although the rational-choice and the macrostructural approach represent general theoretical perspectives, both of us have also developed contrasting substantive theories, such as

Coleman's analysis of transition and, less rigorously, mine of reverse transition. To be sure, I have certainly not specified a system of logically related propositions that constitutes a proper theory of reverse transition. However, my hypotheses of reverse transition are sufficiently distinct from Coleman's hypotheses of transition to have empirical implications that should make it possible to discriminate between them.

Take the exchange of votes in legislatures as illustration. Coleman's hypothesis implies that the trading of votes in the United States Congress made legislators more independent and undermined party discipline, which prolonged campaigns and made it necessary for candidates to finance them by soliciting increasingly large contributions from private individuals and committees. My reverse transition hypothesis implies that political campaigns became increasingly prolonged, more expensive, and financed by ever larger contributions from private individuals and committees, which weakened party discipline, and these conditions promoted the practice of individual legislators to trade votes. In democracies where parties maintain control over short elections, in good part by largely financing them, stronger party discipline impedes the development of trading votes by individual legislators. Empirical studies of historical data should be able to discern which of these opposite sequence of events implied by the two hypotheses is more likely.

I shall conclude by contrasting Coleman's theoretical objectives with mine. Coleman analyzes the rational choices of interdependent individuals in order to derive from them the social structure that develops. I analyze the structure of population distributions in a collectivity to derive from them people's opportunities and constraints. My theory does not seek to account for the choices of individuals, whether all are rational, which I question, or not. The multidimensional structure of social positions does not determine particular choices but only the probabilities or rates of various outcomes in a population, such as rates of social mobility or of intergroup relations. Comparing structural contexts of populations to ascertain how they affect prevailing social patterns is precisely the task of sociology. Coleman's concern with rational choice does not make him a psychological reductionist, like Homans, but it does make him an economic reductionist.

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