

EXPLAINING SOCIAL PROCESSES: PERSPECTIVES FROM CURRENT SOCIAL THEORY AND HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY

Jiří Šubrt, Alemayehu Kumsa and Massimiliano Ruzzeddu, Springer International Publishing, Switzerland, 2020

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The title of this book, *Explaining Social Processes*, is a homage to one of the sociologist Charles Tilly's final publications by that same name in which Tilly offers his methodology for analysing social processes. Tilly presented us with a collection of his essays on social processes from a wide range of subjects while focusing largely on approaches to method and explanation. A similarly dynamic collection and approach has been proposed in this work, which considers a diverse range of subjects and theorists who have either directly or indirectly addressed the concept of social processes. The book provides a detailed overview of the various current and historical approaches to the subject in a thematic manner with additional analysis provided by the authors themselves. This collection, rather than presenting an entirely new sociological theory, claims to offer a 'critical eclecticism' of specific conceptual elements which are then subject to a 'critical reconfigurationism' (p.2).

In *Explaining Social Processes*, which consists of a collaborative effort from Jiří Šubrt, Alemayehu Kumsa and Massimiliano Ruzzeddu, the authors seek to suggest links between various sociological theories surrounding the subject of 'social processes'. By considering the works of foundational sociologists such as Norbert Elias and Anthony Giddens, the authors re-examine the theoretical division of the concepts of individualism vs holism inherent in sociological analysis whilst demonstrating that such considerations are relevant within current scholarship. Throughout, the question consistently asked by the authors is: how has the long-term processual approach has been adopted by the social sciences and in particular historical sociology? This theme effectively brings together what would otherwise be considered a book of two parts: an examination of the previous sociological scholarship of long-term processes and a consideration of contemporary issues of social processes in the modern world. The book also addresses key concepts including power, ideology, ignorance and globalization and provides a summary of the relevant theories and their proponents as well as addressing their limitations.

As a founding member of Charles University's Historical Sociology department, Jiří Šubrt's work has focused on areas of contemporary sociological theory, including the theories of comparative sociology as well as long-term social processes. His latest publications have focused on the issue of individualism versus holism within sociological theory which corresponds to one of the fundamental themes of this publication: overcoming the conflict of this dualism through a focus on social processes.

Alemayehu Kumsa is currently an assistant professor of the sociology of organization management at Škoda Auto University, having previously taught at both the Institute of Middle East and African Studies and the Institute of Ethnology at Charles University. His focus on the sociology of development and globalization are well represented within the final chapter of this book and reflect the focus of his various previous publications.

Massimiliano Ruzzeddu is Vice-President of the World Complexity Science Academy (WCSA) and a tenured sociology researcher at Niccolò Cusano University. He has published on a wide variety of topics within sociology, with his most recent theoretical works focusing on the epistemology of social theory in Italy. His contributions to this book surround the themes of 'identity building' and the 'sociology of ignorance'.

There are two main theoretical elements to this book, the first of which considers the individualism versus holism debate within the historical and contemporary sociological scholarship and the second focuses on how sociological processes can be applied to major contemporary sociological issues such as globalisation.

Through a presentation and critique of the scholarship and background of each theoretical approach, the authors introduce these diverse subjects to the reader whilst interweaving possible solutions through a combination of theoretical approaches.

The book begins by setting out its aim to overcome the theoretical dichotomy between individualism and holism through the utilization of processual perspectives. The authors identify this theoretical conflict as still a prevalent debate in modern sociology and therefore align themselves with the perspective that 'sociology is above all a science of social processes' (p.2). In doing so, the work is not intended to introduce an entirely new theoretical approach but rather to link together the theoretical approaches found in selected sociological works through a combination of 'critical eclecticism' and 'critical reconfigurationism' found within each subchapter.

The opening chapters address the individualism versus holism debate through the major topics of figurational theory, structuration and the concept of the 'homo sociologicus' (p.25). By highlighting Norbert Elias' figurational theory as a method to overcome the contradiction between Weberian and Durkheimian sociology, the authors indicate the important contribution Elias made to the subject. Other theorists mentioned, including George Simmel and Anthony Giddens, are divided into two categories: those who postulate a "third" placed as a connecting bolt between the individual and society' (Simmel's concept of *Wechselwirkung*), and those who place the individual and collective as alternating within 'a single explanatory framework' (Giddens' theory of structuration) (p.9).

An examination of Giddens' own efforts to reconstruct social theory through structuration reveals not only its origins as a critique of Parsonian functionalism but also its theoretical weakness: Giddens argues individual actions create structure and structures affect individual action which indicates that individuals can alter existing structures which therefore presents an individualistic perspective. Durkheim's concept of the 'Homo Duplex' is then offered as another

potential solution to the individualism versus holism problem by situating that dualism within the self as both an individual ‘rooted in our corporeality’ and fundamentally socialised to be ‘an extension of society’. By applying the concept of ‘duplex’ to social structures, the authors argue that the activity of the individual is aligned rather than opposed to ‘supra-individual social structures’ and which are therefore integral to both, solving the contradiction of individualism versus holism.

Ralf Dahrendorf’s concept of the ‘homo sociologicus’ is first addressed through an assessment of the various theoretical approaches to social roles in 20th Century academia, such as the anthropologist Ralph Linton, the psychologist Jacob Levy Moreno and the sociologist Erving Goffman amongst others. The concept of the social role in sociology was restricted largely to discussions in the 1970’s which, it is argued, was the result of a broader rejection of holistic structural functionalism and a reorientation towards the concept of humans as autonomous, independent actors (see Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu). The convincing conclusion drawn by the authors is that such discussions of social roles are worthy of reconsideration as it allows for a link between individualism and holism to be formed through a “‘third” element” reflected by “social role playing” (p.33).

We turn next to a chapter addressing Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory; in particular the idea of parallel sub-systems creating interconnected and interdependent structural links. Luhmann proposes that despite the benefits of systematic differentiation, society is limited by the lack of integration systems between the systems. Whilst this is an interesting chapter, the relationship between Luhmann’s theory and the individualism versus holism debate is not critically assessed beyond acknowledging Luhmann’s avoidance of the issue by resituating individuals as part of their environment rather than their social systems. The position of this chapter within the broader analysis is therefore less obviously connected to the first half of the book although it does present an alternative approach to social processes. This approach diverges from the more obvious Parsonian functionalism and is referred to several times later in the book.

The book then shifts in focus towards the problems of memory and identity with an initial examination of the topic of time as a sociological issue. Time has been the subject of limited study within sociology however theoretical approaches to the distinction of social time and astronomical time are thoroughly assessed in this chapter. In providing an overview of the study of time within sociology, the authors identify the four major approaches to the concept whilst directing the reader towards the conclusion that temporalized sociology in fact underpins the entire field of historical sociology and its emphasis on long-term social processes.

The issue of memory is introduced into the individualism versus holism debate as a reflection of the division between collective memory and individual memory. The division is emphasised as being both a psychological and sociological division, with the sociological and historical foci centring on the notion of holistic collective memory which was rooted in Durkheimian theory and developed further into the concept of historical consciousness. By drawing comparisons between the research on memory within the fields of psychology and sociology, an interesting overlap between psychological theory and social processes is shown and particularly emphasised through Luhmann’s systems theory. Concerning identity building, the sociological approach is well detailed here with emphasis placed on the Complexity Theories of identity formation and the difficulty found in identifying a singular representation of the self from cultural conditions.

The next major theme to be addressed is that of historical sociology as the major representative of the processual sociological method and in particular the issue of long-term developmental processes. Here the authors return to Norbert Elias' work on the 'Civilising Process', not only situating it within its theoretical and historical context but demonstrating that his work has great relevance as a modern processual methodology despite some criticisms of ethnocentrism. Elias' attitude to time is also examined although the limitations of his theoretical approach are presented as an important paradox for a scholar whose focus lies on the long-term processes.

The concept of power within social processes was also addressed by Elias in his seminal work on the civilising process however instead of interrogating individual theories, power is here analysed through the different schools of thought on the subject including anthropology, sociology, political science and economics. Power is considered through the long-term perspective both in terms of scholarship (the chapter opens with a consideration of the various meanings of 'power' from Aristotle to Michael Mann) and in terms of the effects of concentrations of power on societies. Following this interesting and well-designed examination of the forms and sources of power, the relevance of such examinations is thrown into sharp relief with a final consideration of the changes to power in the globalised world and how recent political events may expedite these changes.

Modernity and the concept of the 'information society' are next introduced as important contemporary societal processes which occur as humanity shifts from industrial production to the production of information. The contradictions between the Parsonian functionalist model of society and Daniel Bell's three divided spheres model reiterate previous chapter's contemplations of the individualism versus holism debate. Once again Niklas Luhmann's systems theory is incorporated in order to emphasise the differential perspective on modern social processes. Elements of these social processes include the risks that result from modernisation, the problems with interdisciplinary communication and the narrowing of specialisms within the scientific and wider fields.

Ignorance is another aspect of current social processes which is examined to great effect in this book through the categories of 'intentional ignorance' and 'unintentional ignorance'. This second category is identified as an underexamined aspect of the study of ignorance and which encompasses both the lack of information and strategies for managing these circumstances adopted by the social actors themselves. The authors conclude that it is an individual's social positioning which constitutes the driving force behind these strategies and can be witnessed within politician's attempts to connect with the 'people' in populist contemporary politics.

The final chapter deals with a very topical issue in sociology: globalisation. In reflecting on the various components of globalisation, we are invited to consider that social processes are an essential tool for sociologists to understand the rise and transformation of this phenomenon. The question posed at the end of the chapter of whether globalisation should be viewed as either a homogeneous process or a heterogeneous one echoes a need in sociology to approach such topics using multiple forms of analysis. The argument is therefore once again convincingly made for the use of social processes at the core of historical sociological analysis.

Explaining Social Processes adopts a systematic and thoughtful approach to the various social processes under examination and allows the reader to fully grasp the development and current

status of each theoretical approach. In addition to the presentation of the works of key theorists, the book introduces the reader to potential links between theories of social processes as well as their relevance to modern sociological analysis. As a champion of the processual method, this book will provide a thorough introduction to sociological processes for students encountering the subject for the first time or indeed considering their relevance in the broader sociological perspective. Professional scholars will also find that the approach of ‘critical reconfigurationism’ provides a fresh perspective to this much-studied subject.



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