

Boudon Reexamined

Nuts and Bolts for Contemporary Sociological Science

Gianluca Manzo (Ed.)



Boudon Reexamined presents a selection of short essays by leading scholars from several generations who critically engage and enter into dialogue with the work of Raymond Boudon. Each chapter focuses on a specific topic from his extensive writings. Readers will follow this intellectual trajectory through analyses of early correspondence with Lazarsfeld and Merton, his typology of sociological styles, and his contributions to contemporary analytical sociology, including the notion of middle-range theory. In addition to already well-discussed aspects of Boudon's work, namely his understanding of methodological individualism and the theory of ordinary rationality, the book also explores less frequently discussed topics, including his early interest in formal modeling in sociology and his understanding of the link between interdependence structures and social change. Included in the following pages are new assessments of Boudon's well-known analyses of the inequality of educational opportunity and intergenerational social mobility, as well as his lesser-known substantive contributions to the study of relative deprivation and his early dialogue with game theory. The book also outlines Boudon's study of classical authors, especially Tocqueville, before two final chapters conclude by examining how Boudon's works can be used to teach sociology at the undergraduate and master's levels. Our hope is that *Boudon Reexamined* provides readers with a fresh assessment of his legacy – how his work can be applied to conduct theoretical and empirical research in contemporary sociology, as well as to promote high-quality scientific standards for new generations.

Gianluca Manzo is Professor of Sociology at Sorbonne University and a Fellow of the European Academy of Sociology. His research applies computational models and social network analysis to the study of social stratification and diffusion dynamics. He is the author of *La Spirale des inégalités* (PUPS, 2009) and of *Agent-based Models and Causal Inference* (Wiley, 2022). He also edited *Analytical Sociology: Actions and Networks* (Wiley, 2014) and the *Research Handbook on Analytical Sociology* (Edward Elgar, 2021). More information is available on his webpage: www.gemass.fr/member/manzo-gianluca/.



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Chapter 5

Middle Range Theorizing

Hartmut Esser

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L'intelligence
du social

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The great books of the sociological tradition are either works of theory and epistemology or empirical studies structured by a profound theoretical or epistemological reflection. Émile Durkheim's first three books, *The Division of Labour in Society*, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, and *Suicide*, each fall into one of these three categories. This heritage represents an impressive growing legacy of authors and works that foster an understanding of social life through the formation of new concepts, models, and interpretations, thereby providing a pathway to deciphering the thickness and chaotic nature of human societies.

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MIDDLE RANGE THEORIZING

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MERTON AND BOUDON

Sociology is not in a good state, and that is not only its own fault. There has always been a demand for “grand” social theories and readable and historiographical interpretations of social developments on the one hand, and small-scale empirical reports on local social conditions and changes on the other. In between, there is a large gap with questions that are always limited in terms of content and, if at all, theoretical ad hoc concepts whose “range” is unknown or limited. A long time ago, Robert K. Merton pointed out a solution to this unsatisfactory situation, which has been very well appreciated, not only in sociology: the concept of Theories of Middle Range (TMR; Merton 1949). For him, these are generalizations of certain conditions and interrelations for substantively delimited areas without an explicit reference to an all-encompassing “general theory” behind them. Examples would be relative deprivation, the concept of role sets, or the spreading of rumors and self-fulfilling prophecies. According to Merton, one should continue to work on such limited models and, instead of waiting for the grand design, proceed in small steps of empirical research and theoretical generalizations. Over time, this *could* result in a sociological “grand theory” that is more than just an empty conceptual scheme, as with Parsons or Luhmann, or a vague “theorizing”, as is so widespread in contemporary sociology, but also not just a confusing collection of disconnected empirical results. The concept of TMR was immediately well appreciated, probably also because of the encouraging prospect that even small steps could contribute to find the desired masterpiece of a comprehensive sociological theory and that it is by no means necessary to wait for the singular genius – as Newton or Einstein once did for physics.

Raymond Boudon once also took up the concept of TMR – like many other parts in his great affinity with the approach and thinking of Robert K. Merton

(Boudon 1991). He praised it highly and followed Merton, particularly the suggestion to pay special attention to TMR if progress is to be made. Both initially agree on two central points: The gap between “grand theory” and everyday empirical work *must* be closed; and work on concepts of TMR is, as Boudon explicitly writes, “indispensable” to come closer to the ideal of an analytical-explanatory overarching sociological theory. In particular, both agree in their understanding of what constitutes a “theory” at its core. Merton makes this statement right at the beginning of his classic essay:

The term sociological theory refers to logically interconnected *sets of propositions* from which empirical uniformities can be *derived* (Merton 1949, p. 39; emphasis not in the original).

And Boudon has this to say about it:

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... a “scientific theory” is a *set of statements* that *organize* a set of hypotheses and relate them to segregated observations. If a “theory” is valid, it “*explains*” and in other words “consolidates” and *federates* empirical regularities which on their sides otherwise appear segregated (Boudon 1991, p. 520; emphasis not in the original).

These are clear commitments that definitely go beyond the “theorizing” of the “bad sociology” so deplored by Boudon: Even theories of only “middle” range *must* always already be correct and empirically proven “theories” in the sense that they are “logically interconnected” statements that *explain* a state of affairs and can thereby “consolidate” and “federate” the otherwise unconnected empirical regularities in its justification that goes beyond the particular case.

The problem that then arises specifically for sociology is all too familiar: there are no general “laws” at the level of social structures, and even the few regularities that one could think of, for example, as “quasi”-laws, are not without exceptions. Even then, they still depend on many, mostly unmanageable, assumptions. For example, that there are no wars between democracies, the standard example in Cartwright (2020, p. 271ff.) in her discussion of the problem of TMR (see below). This brings this question of the existence of general “laws” into even sharper relief – what is the point of striving towards that overarching general sociological theory as a guideline for all specialized work with limited scope, if this basis of an overarching axiomatic system of sociological laws does *not* exist and never *can* be?

According to Merton, and also Boudon in his contribution specifically on TMR, the path of further development consists in the gradual elaboration and expansion of provisional models of medium scope and range. The vast

majority of those who have dealt with the concept of TMR have been happy to follow this approach, for example with pleas for the limitation of dealing with concrete institutions at the “meso” level or in the now common equation of TMR with the concept of “mechanisms”, the uncovering of the causal process behind the observed covariations and patterns of empirical relationships for particular areas.

A DIFFERENT VIEW

This all sounds quite plausible: Instead of waiting for the great, all-encompassing sociological theory in which all empirical phenomena can be integrated, one should try to gradually come closer to the general sociological theory step by step through modest work on explanatory sketches.

But is this truly good advice? Karl-Dieter Opp was one of the very few to criticize the route proposed by Merton, and he did so vehemently (Opp 1970). He calls the concept a misapplied “sociological dogma”. The core of the criticism relates to the “strategy for the construction of a general sociological theory” brought into play by Merton (Opp 1970, pp. 243f., 252f.).

Opp distinguishes between a direct and an indirect strategy of theory development. The direct strategy consists of the *immediate* attempt to provide a (“general”) theoretical *explanation* with as much explanatory power as possible for *all* the respective explananda, which, if it does not succeed, must be modified and replaced by an alternative theory. This is the usual procedure according to the rules of scientific discovery and may *immediately* lead to theoretical progress. There is also an indirect strategy: the construction of a theoretical explanation at a provisional and less demanding level of general validity before attempting a more far-reaching theoretical explanation. The indirect strategy corresponds to Merton’s stipulation of embarking on the long step-by-step march towards a general sociological theory by continuing to work on the existing theories of “intermediate” scope.

Opp gives several historical, logical and methodological reasons for the direct strategy. Probably the most important argument is that without an immediately applicable theoretical framework of the most general possible range, there would only be (further) confusion in the concrete analyses of the research objects, which are *always* limited in scope. Moreover, one could add, it would be an impossible attempt to *inductively* reach a “general” theory solely by collecting and generalizing empirical evidence in the detailed work on the respective TMR, without a theoretical justification of its own *beforehand*.

Therein lies the fundamental difference to the concept of TMR and the indirect strategy proposed by Merton: there *is* the possibility of a general nomological

explanation according to the HO-scheme with a *wide* range even without an axiomatic system of universal sociological laws. And that is why one cannot and must not proceed indirectly, but rather strive for an explanation right away.

Opp, like many others at the time, was thinking of the now well-developed macro-micro-macro model of sociological explanation (hereinafter referred to as MSE), as presented by Coleman in the first chapter of his *Foundations* and popularized as the “Coleman Boat” (cf. on the largely overlooked predecessors in the development of the model, to which Opp also belonged: Raub 2021). The MSE emerged not least through Boudon’s significantly earlier contributions. And it was particularly in the context of his work on social action and social change that it acquired its current structure (Boudon 1981, 1986).

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From the outset, Boudon’s special feature was the reference to Weber’s microfoundations and thus also to the *interpretative* and *cultural* dimension of the MSE with categories and aspects that can only be accommodated with great difficulty, if at all, in the narrow and wide variants of Rational Choice Theory (RCT). These include the well-known four types of action and the reference also to “ideas”, which, unlike “institutions” and “interests”, cannot be dealt with in a theory of rational action, as is the case with Coleman in his *Foundations*. It is not without reason that Boudon himself called his version of the MSE the “Weber-Model”.

Against this background, Boudon then also proposed, almost unnoticed, a different concept for Merton’s important question of generalization of a found “local” solution to an explanatory problem: that of “Structural Models” (Boudon and Bourricaud 1982). This means that successful HO-explanations already found in the direct strategy can be generalized for a particular area by abstracting the basic structural pattern to similar cases and thus extending the scope of the respective model, while the range of the explanation can already be general anyway or even grow. The model of “Exit, Voice and Loyalty” by Hirschman (1970) is cited as a prime example. We will return to this briefly at the end of this essay.

OBJECTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The outlined concept of structural models or, more generally, the model of sociological explanation as an alternative to the concept of TMR and indirect strategy put forward by Merton overlaps with several objections and various proposals to classify the concept of TMR in the various currents of the sociological and philosophy of science debate. The key points of three particularly significant contributions will be addressed: James S. Woodward on the fundamental possibility of HO explanations, Nancy Cartwright on the

advantages of dispensing with the search for overarching theories and Alban Bouvier on approaches that could already give direction to the work on TMR, such as the contributions of “analytical sociology” in particular, but which are also more or less limited or can remain too vague.

JAMES S. WOODWARD

The contributions of James S. Woodward (2000, 2005) are the most likely to criticize the deductive-nomological explanatory scheme. The core argument is that the “general laws” necessary for an HO explanation do not exist and that they are also unnecessary. There are always exceptions and only conditional validity, and for the purpose of “generalizing” a theoretical hypothesis it is sufficient that the relationship is “invariant” beyond the individual cases, especially if there are targeted experiments with a controlled manipulation of the relevant conditions that remain robust against different interventions and variations.

Woodward’s general objection would concern the concept of direct strategy, which is always and immediately “general” nomological explanations at its core, as well as all other concepts that presuppose HO explanations, especially the model of sociological explanation. But it is not really a relevant objection: “generality” and the properties of “law-like-ness” are, like everything else in the empirical sciences, unprovable. But there are agreements on rules and procedures in which it is possible to test whether they exist according to these agreements: methodologies of causal analysis and evidence for the conditionalization of the conditions of validity. Experiments are particularly suitable instruments for this, and at their core are targeted interventions and manipulations, which also include practical applications. The results are fairly robust and “invariant” correlations. And that is ultimately all the knowledge that is needed to be able to make an explanation according to the HO scheme and thus follow the direct strategy.

Any remaining philosophical reservations can never be dispelled anyway. This also applies to Woodward’s proposal for experimentally-proven invariance. Probably the most important aspect is that in all cases, the explanatory hypotheses must go beyond the individual case, and the broader this range is, the better. This also includes the fact that it is precisely this generality that determines, among other things, the explanatory power of a theoretical hypothesis, including the logical content of the hypothesis, the valid empirical interpretation of the theoretical constructs via measurement hypotheses and, finally, certainly also the validity in targeted tests and the robustness of the findings after experiments with intervention and manipulation.

Nancy Cartwright (2020) approaches the concept of TMR from the position of the developed natural sciences, which are often cited as a model for the possibility and fruitfulness of axiomatic deductive theory systems. She brings the concept of TMR into play from developments in the natural sciences, which are increasingly deviating from the traditional view and dealing with more “local” questions and partial solutions and would consider this sufficient, for example in chemistry and biology. Cartwright’s starting point is the question of the conditions for an appropriate evidence-based evaluation of political programs, that is, the actual consequences of practical measures based on certain theories, for example, in the field of education or the design of political institutions.

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The core of her answer lies in the aspects put forward in the context of the concepts of “analytical sociology”, first and foremost, the reference to “mechanisms” as “generating” processes of a causal event behind the empirical processes on the surface. Cartwright identifies a number of questions and difficulties with the various approaches: Are all relevant factors covered? Have the activities required for implementation been taken into account? Are covariations really “causal” relationships? Or are there not rather special contexts that provide for an interactive-processual conditionalization of the effects? For Cartwright, all this amounts to *equating* the concept of TMR with the concept of “mechanisms”. This is now a common interpretation. The question is whether one can really see it this way or whether the prerequisites of a general HO explanation must also be fulfilled when referring to “mechanisms” and whether the question of generalization is thus posed differently than just “pragmatically”.

In this context, Cartwright outlines the elements necessary for such a concept below the major theories. These consist of a mixture of elements known from the methodology of MSE: Causal explanations, microfoundations, and a sequential situational logic, all intended as uncovering the initially hidden processes and corrective explanation when there are anomalies or conditionalizations that have not been thought of and that would block generalizations. However, this in turn would require a series of conditions that are difficult, if not impossible, to fulfil, such as the inherent plasticity of interrelationships and the “untidiness” specific to social processes. It is difficult to think of general “laws” anyway. At best, there are “middle range laws”, bound to particular contexts.

However, she continues, this does not in any way imply a discouraging attitude towards working on such projects of inevitably “medium scope” at

best. Instead of chasing after the futile goal of the all-explaining grand theory, it is more advisable to concentrate on the cultivation of successful practices in research communities and to be satisfied with the instrumental usefulness of partial solutions: a “community-practice-centered-instrumentalism”. Criteria of coherence and plausibility are more important here than a goal of approximating the truth as a regulative idea that is ultimately never really achievable. It would be the abandonment of what Weber, Merton, Popper, Opp, Boudon and others regarded as the self-evident scientific-theoretical basis and regulative idea of the social sciences in particular.

ALBAN BOUVIER

Alban Bouvier’s contribution (Bouvier 2023) goes in a similar direction: Even if there are many indications that science is messy and divided, this by no means implies that the real world already is and that science then only reflects this in its disunity. Nor does it mean that the standards of scientific work, the regulative idea of approaching the truth, and the goal of a unity of the (social) sciences, must be abandoned. On the contrary, the idea of TMR should not lead to a situation in which we are content with less precision and less targeted scope of statements, and possibly pass off and rationalize the relaxation gained as an advantage of flexibility, openness, and pluralism – as has obviously happened in economics and biology in the meantime. For the social sciences in particular, Bouvier sees the danger of negligent or deliberate “balkanization” and he insists that this should not be allowed to happen. He calls this variant of the reaction to the many difficulties the “weak option” of dealing with the problem of “unity” (Bouvier 2023, p. 12), an option that Merton himself had inaugurated in his proposal and which so many were then all too willing to follow.

The background to Bouvier’s plea for the revival of an orientation towards a particular methodological thoroughness, especially for social science, are two developments that both understand and describe themselves as “analytical sociology”: the orientation towards the approach of James S. Coleman, which he proposes in his magnum opus *Foundations of Social Theory* (Coleman 1990), and the variant of analytical sociology as it would become recognizable with the *Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology* (Hedström and Bearman 2007). Bouvier describes the Coleman approach from the *Foundations* as the “strong option” and that from the *Oxford Handbook* by Hedström and Bearman as an “intermediate option” between the weak and the strong alternatives (Bouvier 2023, p. 14ff.).

The fundamental differences between the two variants are easily identified: In the *Foundations*, Coleman pursues a strong methodological rigorism with clear requirements such as logical content, precision, and parsimony of a theory (see Raub et al. 2022). The overarching theoretical basis is a particularly narrow version of RCT, which Coleman also applies to phenomena with which this becomes more questionable – such as (unconditional) trust, commitment, or authority beyond interest and control alone, both the central categories in Coleman and his narrow version of RCT.

The Oxford variant adopts some of the basic guidelines of this “rigorous” sociology, but loosens them up in some key points: Explanations according to the HO-scheme are not really possible; it is much more productive and sufficient to uncover “mechanisms” by revealing the inner connections. A particularly precise micro-theory is also neither possible nor necessary, and certainly not the narrow version of RCT as used by Coleman. Moreover, there is a whole wealth of phenomena that can hardly be theoretically grasped any further, such as those so extensively described in Jon Elster’s work (Elster 1979, 2000). The solution is the transition from almost any attachment to the concept of the HO-explanation and, in particular, to RCT in the so-called DBO approach, in which the microfoundation is only carried out via the enumeration of the three conditions of RCT (Desires, Beliefs, Opportunities), without further consideration of the respective relationships to explain the selection of an activity (Hedström 2005).

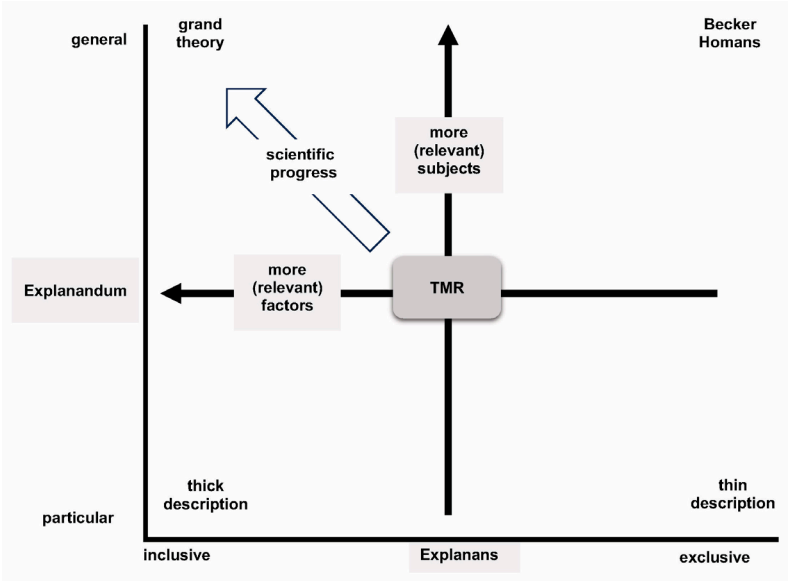
According to Bouvier, this brings this variant of analytical sociology closer to the other pole and Cartwright’s ideas: renouncing explanations, turning to instrumentalist behaviorism and abandoning stronger methodological standards precisely at the point that is crucial to the goal of (general) explanation in MSE: its microfoundation. However, one could also imagine that there would be something like “*intermediate* theories of middle range” in a “hierarchy” of more or less far-reaching theories, those of the more open type of the Oxford approach in contrast to the weak solutions in parts of economics in the meantime, chemistry and biology, and the strong, but also narrow version in the Coleman variant of the MSE (Bouvier 2023, p. 14). Bouvier is obviously not thinking of a wide and at the same time strong solution. But *that* would exactly be the solution to the problem: a general and inclusive, but *also* explanatory social theory for the concrete and always *particular* explananda.

A SYSTEMATIZATION

The result of the various contributions can be summarized simply: “General” explanations of sociological issues can be made without reference

to an (axiomatic) “general theory”. The “generality” and regularity of the explanation results from the respective action-theoretical microfoundation. But otherwise everything is more or less “limited”, “local” or “particular”, even occasionally: “singular”, as in historical explanations and the reconstruction of the “situational logic” of unique events. The central problem with TMRs, as with structural models, is the question of how to *transfer* solutions once they have been found to structurally *equivalent* cases and what the relationship between “limitation” and “generalization” looks like. Hedström and Udehn have developed an illuminating typology for this problem (Hedström and Udehn 2007, fig. 1).

Figure 1: Theories of Middle Range for Generality and Inclusion



The typology refers to two dimensions: the particular explanandum and the conditions in the explanans, the initial conditions and a general nomological theory according to the HO-scheme. The vertical axis describes the generality of the explanatory problem (from particular to general), the horizontal axis the scope of the explanatory conditions included for a particular explanation – from the inclusion of all possibly relevant factors to the exclusion of only one dominant condition).

In this field, four constellations of theories and analyses with different scopes of explanation are specified: first, “story telling”, where particular processes are only narratively enumerated without further consideration of explanatory conditions; second, “thick description” with the inclusion of

explanatory conditions as well; third, exclusive general explanations; fourth, inclusive general explanation. Accordingly, there are generalizing explanations limited either to a few explanatory factors or including all conceivable relevant conditions. Examples of the thin description would be the simple historical “narrative”, while the thick description could be Goffman’s analyses of role behavior in typical social settings. For the exclusive general explanation, the approaches of Gary Becker or George C. Homans would be examples, and for the inclusive general theory, a “grand theory” of social systems, such as Parsons or Luhmann.

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The TMRs are located in the middle of the typology between the two axes. They reflect a certain “middle-range”-state of research in each case: no longer just particular, but also far from general, not just concentrated on one dominant factor, but also not yet complete in terms of the explanatory conditions. Merton’s proposal then boils down to the fact that the development moves to the top left of the diagram via the further elaboration of existing or new TMRs with the aim of creating an explanatory theory that is as general as possible (see the block arrow).

However, “grand theory” here does not mean the empty “theorizing” so criticized by Boudon, but rather the development of an overarching social theory that is as axiomatized as possible, with which in principle all sociologically significant explananda can be explained, including as many relevant conditions as possible. Simple story telling and “thick” descriptions would of course still be possible within this framework, but one would already have the possibility of embedding their findings in an overarching explanatory framework, and the explanations would also be able to refer to conditions that do not occur in the narrow exclusive approaches and may also lead to certain anomalies and blind spots in the explanation, such as those that Bouvier associates with the weak or the intermediate option (see just above).

EXPLANATORY POWER: THE THIRD DIMENSION

The concept looks quite plausible, and implicitly most contributions to the TMR have followed this idea, especially in the assumption that Merton’s proposal would be an early anticipation of later concepts, such as in particular that of “mechanisms”. What is missing in all of this, however, is what Opp so clearly emphasized in his criticism of the indirect strategy: irrespective of all the differences in the scope of content of the explananda and the inclusivity of the explanatory factors taken into account, the *explanatory power* of the underlying theoretical foundation is also of central importance. However, this would be a third dimension of the evaluation of the state of research and

The explanatory power of an approach consists in this conception of *three* dimensions and with regard to the possibilities of theory development from its theoretical potential, not necessarily from empirical evidence. In the context of MSE, this potential relates to two areas: the microfoundation, and the theoretical architecture in the micro-macro transition. The *microfoundation* concerns the respective theory of action with different limitations and possibilities of modeling, such as the narrow and the broad version of RCT. The *theoretical architecture* refers to the coverage of different parts and levels of the MSE. The three most important are: Conceptual systems, aggregations as the individual effects in the MSE and social systems as “emergent” effects of the whole MSE. These form a kind of *hierarchy*: categories are conceptual systematizations without further explanatory power. Aggregate relationships consist of relatively simple statistical operations, such as variable relationships in regression equations. Systems refer to more or less complex forms of interdependencies and interrelations of all kinds, such as markets, groups or organizations. In Figure 2, these references are shown on the left side for the *horizontal* dimension of generalization and the theory-immanent *scope* by its architecture, and *vertically* for the dimension of explanatory power in the *range* of the respective microfoundation and analytic instruments. A truly “general” sociological theory should therefore always have to be a “system”-theory. Conceptual systems have unlimited scope, but the smallest explanatory range. Aggregations would be “intermediate” in between.

In this respect, the transition from conceptual systems for the description of socially relevant functional “spheres”, as in Parsons AGIL-scheme, orientation hypotheses for dominant factors, as in Bourdieu, or for the ideas of the “constitution of society”, as in Giddens, to aggregations as explanandum, for example in mobility research, as in Goldthorpe, would already be clear steps towards more explanatory power and range - the scope of the content-related area kept constant. Ultimately, the goal would be a sociological systems theory with the highest possible generalization, the coverage of all (relevant) conditions, and the highest possible explanatory power. Accordingly, it would go beyond conceptual contributions alone, but also beyond a “sociology as population science” with its restriction to variables-relationships or processual linkages in contagion and diffusion models. The *immediate* reference to the level of systems would be the perspective of the methodology of the MSE and the direct strategy for theory formation and theory development. In this way, questions can be addressed for all levels, on systems and on aggregations and for all forms, contents and areas of sociological explananda: singular and particular as well as broader or completely universal questions such as the universal anthropological foundations of the “human condition” and its development

– as Gintis (2017), for example, has attempted to do in a broad crossover beyond the boundaries of biology, economics and sociology.

The theoretical progress from the constellation of TMR given in Figure 1 can now also be represented in its movement this field of scope and range: The shift in theory development as an expansion in the *scope* according to generality of *explananda* and inclusiveness of *factors*, but *also* of the explanatory *range* in the explanatory power of the respective theoretical framework in all its parts, its *theoretical potential*.

SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES AND THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Against this background, the different approaches and directions in sociological theory development can be categorized for the central aspect of sociological explanation: the *range* of *explanatory power*. We follow the three guidelines discussed above: Opp’s call for a direct strategy of theory development, the general methodology of sociological explanation now available with the MSE, and Hedström and Udehn’s typology extended by the dimension of explanatory power in Figure 2 just above.

COLEMAN

We take *Coleman* and his concept of MSE in the *Foundations* as the reference for the further comparisons (MSE/RCT/Coleman as combination of the Model of Sociological Explanation, Rational Choice Theory and Coleman). It is the solution to the question of the development of a general and possibly unifying social theory that Bouvier criticized as overly “strong”: the use of the MSE in conjunction with a particularly strict variant of RCT, the economic theory of exchange and markets, in a hitherto unknown consequence to a variety of sociological explananda, including those that are outside the narrow field of economic issues. This means that his approach can be regarded as comparatively “general” for the explananda covered, but also as decidedly “exclusive” for the factors considered, because only a very narrow form of RCT is used in each case. However, this is precisely what lends it a particularly high explanatory power: extreme parsimony, combined with a particularly high risk of falsification (cf. Raub 2024).

GOLDTHORPE AND HEDSTRÖM

Coleman’s social theory is, by his own admission, a *systems* theory. Two other approaches are *not*. First, Goldthorpe’s “Sociology as population science”. It is

limited to aggregates and causal chains of socio-demographic processes. In doing so, it ignores all interdependencies (according to relations in “interest” and “control”), the core of Coleman’s systems theory. This lowers the explanatory power and thus the range of its validity for entire fields of sociology of relevance – such as the *system*-integration of societies as opposed to the *social*-integration of their individual members, or unconnected decisions as opposed to game-theoretical constellations of strategic interdependence. The scope of the fields of work is correspondingly limited: gender gaps, social inequality, educational decisions, mobility, migration, and integration, narrowed down to processes of inclusion in education and the labor market or emotional identification of migrants with the receiving. These topics dominate large parts of current sociology. Both the scope and the range are correspondingly small, because everything relates only to aggregates and statistical measures, to “variables”. In the diagram, the approach is therefore also below Coleman (MSE/RCT/Goldthorpe). In contrast, no difference is assumed for the scope of the underlying microfoundation: It is a comparatively narrow and strong version of RCT, the value-expectancy theory, with also much about the processes can be explained as with Colemans approach.

The DBO approach according to Hedström (MSE, DBO, Hedström) is broader in its generality and inclusivity, that is, its scope: There are no a priori limitations in the explananda, neither in the explanatory factors. This refers to the particular position of the DBO approach to the many peculiarities of social action, “anomalies” or “heuristics”, as described by Elster, where there has been no attempt to systematically incorporate them into an explanatory microfoundation. RCT is, in this approach, generally rejected as too narrow, and its precision and logical content are abandoned in favor of a loose orientation towards three possible influences on the choice of an action: desires, beliefs, and opportunities. The (causal) function of their effects, which is essential for an explanatory theory, is thus left open. Therefore, the explanatory power of the DBO approach hardly differs from that of a “thick description”, verbally as a “narrative”, via statistics of distributions, or as results of the extraction of patterns from fairly large stocks of “big data” or agent-based models without reference to general theories of action. The DBO approach is therefore at the bottom of the diagram, that is, less than what one might already have with theories of only “medium” explanatory power. This inclination of the DBO approach towards instrumental-behavioristic positions has tended to become even stronger over time (cf. Hedström 2021).

Goldthorpe and Hedström thus represent approaches *below* the standard already achieved by Coleman: a systems theory with high explanatory power. With these approaches, no development in the direction targeted by Merton

and Boudon could be expected. So “Coleman” after all? As already mentioned, Boudon considers the approach to be too narrow to enable a comprehensive and integrative social theory. Above all, he criticizes the fact that in some applications the possibilities of strict RCT are clearly overstretched and aspects are taken up that go beyond the scope of the particularly strict variant of RCT that he uses: trust, commitment, authority, zeal, for example, and especially the cases in which they are triggered *spontaneously* and are *unconditionally* valid against *any* rational consideration or inclination.

BOUDON: BEYOND!

This was then also the gateway for much criticism of the *opus magnum* of Coleman’s *Foundations*, for example in the distinction between power and authority, where, following Weber, it is also about mental *ideas* of the “legality” of inequality, which cannot be accommodated in the concepts of RCT regardless of all efforts. In essence, this involves two types of changes to RCT: extensions of RCT with the addition of other motives and expectation functions versus a complete change in the microfoundation with the development of models of action selection that include RCT and other “action types”, such as routines and emotions, as special cases and can explain when one and when the other type applies. This would enable mutually “corrective” (“deep”-)explanations as well as a nomologically-based integration of different theoretical programs into the MSE, such as those of interpretative, institutionalist, or pragmatist approaches as conditionally special cases alongside RCT in its different variants.

This threshold of a microfoundation extended by interpretative and cultural aspects was actually only attempted by Boudon within his framework of an explanatory sociology, guided by his proximity to Weberian sociology (Boudon 1981, 1986). This is characterized in the diagram by the greater inclusivity of his version of the MSE than Coleman’s, in particular the possible increase in explanatory power and thus the range beyond that of Coleman’s narrow RCT (MSE, RCT+, Boudon).

It should also be added that Boudon himself did not implement this program to any great extent. It was more a question of potential extensions of the range. He did attempt to do so in various works, but more implicitly, and in passing: in connection with his work on educational decisions with the assumption of differences in risk aversion in the event of loss of status and in his RCT reconstruction of processes of relative deprivation under the assumption of “weak solidarity”. There has also been a direct attempt to extend the microfoundation beyond the RCT: the assumption of a “cognitive” or “axiological” rationality of moral feelings (Boudon 2009). This proposal was

very controversial. But it was one of the few and first attempts to overcome the limits of both narrow and broad RCT and to include other *types* of action than rational choice.

The elaboration of a conditionalizing-integrative *and* explanatory theory of action would be a solution to the problem of Elster's findings on the many anomalies of RCT: the inclusion of the various types of action and heuristics in an explanatory overarching microfoundation – in contrast to lowering the demands on an explanatory theory as in the DBO approach. It would also be another solution to the problem for theory progress that Bouvier sees: The approach is not too narrow and not too strong as in Coleman, but also not too broad and not too weak as in the DBO approach. It would be progress in a more inclusive and at the same time more explanatory direction than the other two positions.

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Raymond Boudon has always seen this perspective, especially in his early contributions to the development of the MSE, but also in some concrete applications. His prime example of a structural model, the alternative concept to that of TMR (see below), also has to do with this: "Loyalty" as a mental attitude is difficult to capture with RCT, especially when, as with similar constructs such as trust, commitment or solidarity, we are dealing with "unconditional" attitudes that are also independent of the specific circumstances as rational benefits, costs and risks.

However, the development in the microfoundation of action theory in the direction of conditionalization and overarching integration has not stood still either. For some time now, there have been attempts to reconnect the microfoundation of MSE to Weber's differentiation of action types, to the significance of "ideas" and culturally shaped "meaning", also inspired by Alfred Schütz's theory of everyday action and the connection to developments in cognitive social psychology and recent neuro- and AI research.

This is indicated in the diagram by the entry MSE/DPT/MFS. This refers to two developments: first, the so-called "dual process theories" (DPT), which can explain when cognitive deliberation takes place during action selection and when automatic triggering of action programs happens; and, second the "Model of Frame Selection" (MFS), which additionally provides for the symbolically controlled activation of certain mental models of a "definition" of the situation according to the "Thomas theorem" ("frames") and the willingness and ability to execute certain complete patterns of action sequences ("scripts") as the starting point for every action. These topics have been discussed and empirically investigated in *cognitive social psychology* for some time, e.g. by Chaiken and Trope (1999), Fazio (1990), in *sociology* DiMaggio (1997), Miles (2015) or Vaisey (2009), Lizardo et al. (2016) could be mentioned for the

DPT, as well as for the MFS Esser (1993, 2009), Kroneberg et al. (2010), Esser and Kroneberg (2015) and, more recently, Kroneberg and Tutić (2021), Tutić (2022) and Tutić et al. (2023). There are also attempts to extend *economic* RCT in these directions, as in Rubinstein and Zhou (1999), Bicchieri (2006), or Gintis (2017) with a kind of culturalized game theory. These approaches could significantly expand the *scope* of successfully explained explananda and the conditions that can be used, as well as the *range* of explanatory power of the microfoundation of the MSE.

Overcoming the limitations of TMR would therefore lie in the further development of the *microfoundation* of the MSE in particular. Everything else that is “limited” would be questions of the valid *description* of the bridge hypotheses, the correct *measurement* of the constructs, and consistent *analytic* conclusions, especially in the transformation of the individual effects to the level of the respective collective explananda by a more complex theoretical architecture than aggregations in “Variable.-Sociology”. Nothing particularly new, therefore, or something that we would have to wait a long time for, especially not an axiom system of sociological “laws”.

CONSEQUENCES

The outlined concept of an understanding of TMR that is *directly* oriented towards theory development and integration, as Opp was practically the only one to introduce it into the debate at an early stage, would, one can assume, have been entirely in the spirit of Raymond Boudon. He did not take it up any further however, perhaps because, for all his verbal approval of Merton’s original concept, he was obviously not really happy with it after all. He then answered the question of the possibility and the particular task of a “general”, but not “grand” explanatory sociology in a different way than by proposing a step-by-step detailed work on theories of “middle” range and scope: with the concept of *Structural Models*.

These are typifying and abstracting generalizations of successful deductive-nomological general explanations of certain particular or local empirical relationships according to the well-known HO-scheme. In addition to the prime example of such a structural model by Boudon and Bourricaud of “Exit, Voice and Loyalty” by Albert O. Hirschman (1970), the model of the race-relation cycle by Park, that of mobility traps by Wiley, of segregation by Schelling, the threshold models by Granovetter, critical masses by Oliver, Marwell and Texeira, group relations by Blau and many more could also be mentioned. They all are limited or particular in scope, but *not* in range. They are also *not* preliminary attempts, *not* well-rehearsed practices, *not* just

successful instruments only with stable evidence that are tried out or changed step by step.

Structural Models are something else than “TMR”. They are *successful*, general *explanations*, possibly also after lengthy step-by step attempts. The key is the validity and applicability of a sufficiently “general” and precise explanatory *microfoundation* and a sufficiently complex *theoretical architecture*. You certainly have also to work through this step by step to make progress. Perhaps there is no other way in science. But there is something different from the blind attempts in Merton’s proposal to work busily on the TMR without knowing in which direction it should go.

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ACCLAIMS

This remarkably well-structured volume accomplishes two feats at once. It offers a critical engagement with the multiple facets and contributions of Raymond Boudon's sociological oeuvre, for example: the modeling of relative deprivation, the generative approach to social stratification, the plea for methodological individualism, the analysis of unintended consequences and social change, the epistemology of sociological investigations, and the reflection on rationality and belief formation. Through this critical engagement – here is the second feat – this volume tackles substantive and methodological issues central to contemporary developments in the discipline of sociology, whether the focus is on formal models, simulation work, counterfactual reasoning, social mobility and its measurements, the significance of Rational Choice, or our understanding of processual dynamics.

Ivan Ermakoff, Professor of Sociology,
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Without indulging in praise, this collective volume – bringing together 18 substantial chapters – aims to shed light on the enduring legacy of Raymond Boudon's sociology. It addresses a notable gap: the lack of a detailed, multifaceted examination of the work of one of the foremost figures in both French and international sociology. The reader will find not only an assessment of Boudon's intellectual contributions but also a critical appraisal of their limitations and the avenues they open for further research into contemporary issues. The book will appeal both to specialists familiar with the evolution of Boudon's thought over time and to those wishing to discover it, explore it in greater depth, or draw upon it for teaching purposes.

Gérald Gaglio, Professor of Sociology,
Université Côte d'Azur

This book is a splendid tribute to Raymond Boudon, one of the most important sociologists of the second half of the 20th century. The contributions, in their appreciative and critical aspects alike, clearly bring out the intellectual depth and challenging nature of Boudon's work and its continuing relevance in the study of modern societies.

John H. Goldthorpe, Emeritus Fellow,
Nuffield College, University of Oxford

This collection of papers, expertly curated by Gianluca Manzo, is as wide-ranging and thought-provoking as Raymond Boudon himself. It is sure to stimulate interest in a now-sometimes-forgotten giant of French sociology.

Neil Gross, Charles A. Dana Professor of Sociology,
Colby College (Maine)

This Memorial Festschrift honors Raymond Boudon (1934–2013) by considering his contributions to conceptualization, theory, and empirics, as well as their associated methods, across foundational topical domains in sociology and guided by expert commentators. It is not only a superb assessment, and its value will grow in three main ways. First, like most Festschriften, it provides a portrait of the growth and trajectory of Boudon's ideas, embedded in his relations with other scholars, both teachers, peers, and students. This portrait will grow over time. Second, as the historian David Knowles wrote about the *quaestiones quodlibetales* of the medieval university (especially the University of Paris) and the debates held during Advent and Lent when anyone could ask any question of any master, Festschrift discussions are a valuable index to what is “in the air” – in this case both when Boudon was working and now. Third, Boudon believed in the promise of mathematics, and it will be possible to trace over time the progress of the $X \rightarrow Y$ relations in the book, as they travel from general functions to specific functions.

Guillermina Jasso, Professor of Sociology,
Silver Professor of Arts and Science, New York University

This book is not a hagiography. Unusually, its title truly reflects its content. Twenty-two sociologists from different countries and different generations take a fresh look at the work of Raymond Boudon. In keeping with his approach but without complacency, they highlight the theoretical and methodological contributions of his sociology, its limitations, its errors, its relevance for teaching sociology to the new generations, and the perspectives that remain open in several thematic areas.

Dominique Vidal, Professor of Sociology,
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