Social Mechanisms and Grand Theories of Modernity – Worlds Apart?

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Abstract: In this article I argue against the widespread opinion that social mechanisms and “grand” theories of modernity are conflicting approaches to social theory. My main thesis is that even though they clearly differ, they exhibit complementary strengths and weaknesses. Accordingly, I argue for a cooperative solution to the question of their coexistence within sociology. Very briefly, I present what I call a Weberian solution to this query. I claim that a GTM should be conceived of as a constellation of SMs. In this way, GTMs can be both more properly articulated and tested empirically whereas SMs can be reconnected to the classical project of sociology, namely to construct a comprehensive theory of modernity. I illustrate the fruitfulness of my Weberian solution with a particular case, the sociology of freedom.

Key words: sociology, social mechanism, grand theory of modernity, Weber, freedom

Analytical and classical sociology: friends or foes?

In this article I argue against the commonly held opinion that social mechanisms (hereafter SMs) and “grand” theories of modernity (hereafter GTMs) are conflicting approaches to social theory. My main thesis is that even though they clearly differ, they exhibit complementary strengths and weaknesses. Accordingly I argue for a cooperative solution to the question of their coexistence within sociology.

The article sets off from some observations concerning the situation of the sociological discipline today. Many sociologists would agree that producing GTMs is the classical and founding ambition of sociology. However, sociologists working within the field of “grand” social theory should be alarmed by some of the shortcomings of existing GTMs. In particular, they should worry about the frequent lack of precise specification of the “middle range” social processes mediating between the dualism of structural macro-principles and the existential micro-conditions that typically characterizes such theories. Also, they should worry about the weak empirical foundation of many GTMs. The last decade the SM-approach has strengthened its position in sociology. The analytical program in social theory, with its emphasis on empirical testing and focus on the intermediary causal social machinery linking
the macro-level and the micro-level, possesses the capacity to remedy both weaknesses of GTMs. Nevertheless, a problem with the SM-approach is that it has abandoned the classical sociological ambition of producing a comprehensive theory of modern societies. Consequently, just to replace GTMs with SMs will impose a considerable cost on the discipline. From this follows the question that this article tries to answer: can the classical GTM-approach and analytical SM-approach be aligned, and if so, how? For reasons that soon will be made clear, I call this Whitman’s challenge.

In what follows, I will argue in favor of what I call a Weberian solution to Whitman’s challenge. Very briefly, I claim that a GTM should be conceived of as a constellation of SMs. In this way SMs can bridge the gap between structural macro-principles and existential micro-conditions of individuals in GTMs. Decomposing GTMs into constellations of SMs also makes it easier to derive empirical consequences from GTMs and thus test them empirically. Furthermore, incorporating SMs into GTMs will reconnect the analytical approach with the classical ambition of producing a comprehensive understanding of modern society. Finally, this solution respects the distinctive character of each of the two forms of social theory.

I will proceed as follows. After giving a brief presentation of the analytical and classical programs of social theory, I discuss some of their respective shortcomings. Taking these as my points of departure, I then argue for a cooperative Weberian solution to Whitman’s challenge. In the concluding part I illustrate the fruitfulness of my approach with a particular case, the sociology of freedom. Going about this way I hope to give a contribution to reconciling two bodies of social theory that I think have much to learn from each other.

**The analytical approach: Social Mechanisms**

The analytical approach to social theory can trace its origins at least back to the 17th century and the attempt by philosophers such as Descartes, Hobbes, Locke and later Hume to apply the principles of the scientific revolution to the study of man. Several of the founding fathers of modern social science have also inspired this approach, such as de Tocqueville (Elster 2009; 2004), Marx (Elster 1985; 2000), Weber (1978) and Simmel (1992). Nevertheless, as a clearly demarcated program in social theory, analytical sociology is a rather recent invention established after the second World War by social theorists such as Merton (1967), Coleman (1990), Schelling (2006), Elster (1989b; 2007) and Boudon (1991), and recently codified by Hedström and Swedberg (Hedström 2005; Hedström and Swedberg 1998b).1 The regulatory

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1 For a brief overview of the history of analytical sociology, see Manzo (2010: 132-139).
idea of analytical sociology is to model sociology after the natural sciences (and in particular physics and chemistry) as an explanatory science that explains empirical observations by subsuming them under general principles. Hence the founding question for analytical sociologists is: how did observed social phenomenon x come about?

Conducting research analytical sociologists typically proceed in two steps. The first is to “establish the phenomenon”, as Merton (1987) says. This means to produce reliable empirical observations of important social phenomena such as typical beliefs, network structures, cultural tastes, social norms and common ways of acting (Hedström 2005: 5; Hedström and Bearman 2009: 3). The next is to provide an explanation of these observations. Ideally, explanation would follow the logical syntax of subsumption under general laws (“If p then everywhere and always q”) according to the deductive-nomological model associated with Hempel (1965). However, sociologists have yet to come up with any social laws, and most probably never will (Elster 2007: 32-36; Giddens 1984: 343-347; Hedström 2005: 15-20; Merton 1967; Searle 1984: 71-85). Hence to keep up with the explanatory ambition and not having to fall back on mere “thick phenomenological description” (Elster 1989a: vii), analytical sociologists have invoked a substitute for laws: SMs. Thus adherence to explanation by SMs is what unites the analytical approach.

Several definitions of what an SM is have been proposed (for overviews, see Gross 2009: 359-362; Hedström 2005: 25). Here I will follow Elster’s (1999: 1; 2007: 36) definition, according to which an SM is an easily recognizable and frequently occurring causal social pattern triggered under generally unknown conditions or with indeterminate consequences. “Frequently occurring” implies that SMs are context-independent; they are instantiated across social space and historical time. In this respect they satisfy one important criteria of the nomological approach: to subsume the particular under the general and thus explain more with less. However, because SMs in contrast to laws are triggered under unknown conditions and in cases where two or more SMs are triggered often with indeterminate net consequences, they cannot be used to predict social outcomes ex ante, only to explain them ex post facto. Now to be more precise about what is meant by a “causal pattern”, a SM denotes a constellation of entities (human actors), their characteristics (desires, beliefs and opportunities) and activities (actions and interactions) that in a regular way produces particular outcomes (social facts) (Hedström 2005: 25). Thus analytical sociology is also closely associated with methodological individualism and reductionism: to explain by disaggregation. Furthermore, and guided by the ambition of disaggregation, analytical sociologists often differentiate social mechanisms into three main categories, inspired by
Colemans (1990: 8-10) influential “dipping” model (Hedström 2005: 115-116; Hedström and Swedberg 1998a: 21-23): Macro-to-micro SMs (type 1) describe how social structures influence the characteristics of individuals (beliefs and desires) and their situation (menu of opportunities) (for example how one’s position in a social structure influences one’s beliefs). Micro-to-micro SMs (type 2) describe how the individual’s characteristics and situation jointly produce individual actions (an example is rational decision making under informational and situational constraints). And finally micro-to-macro SMs (type 3) depict how the (inter)actions of many individuals’ add up to produce collective social outcomes (an example is decentralized exchange processes terminating in a social equilibrium).

From this brief presentation we can now deduce the analytical vision of what social theory should be: a steadily accumulating toolbox of social mechanisms that can be invoked and elaborated on by sociologists wanting to explain empirical observations made within the many specialized subfields of sociology (Hedström and Udehn 2009: 42).

The classical approach: Grand Theories of Modernity
The classical approach, not surprisingly, goes back to the classics Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Tönnies and Simmel, and has been prolonged after World War two by postclassical sociologists including Parsons, Adorno, Bell, Luhmann, Habermas, Foucault, Beck, Giddens, Bauman, Sennett and Castells. The desideratum orienting the classical approach is to produce a scientific theory of modern society in its totality. Thus in contrast to the analytical program this approach is oriented not at explaining partial social observations but at describing the overall characteristics of contemporary modern societies – their constituent parts. Hence the founding question for classical sociologists is: what does it mean to be modern?

A bit surprisingly, however, we look in vain to find clear definitions of what a GTM is. For instance, it is not included in the typologies of sociological theories presented by Merton (1968: 139-155), Alexander (1982: 3 and 40) and Hedström & Udehn (2009: 29). Nonetheless, the following definition captures the most important features of GTMs: A GTM is a conceptually articulated, empirically tested and comprehensive conception of contemporary modern society. Let me briefly describe the basic elements going into this definition. First, “conceptual articulation” means that a GTM must be articulated in a coherent theoretical vocabulary developed at an adequately high level of generalization designed to capture what I will call the structural principles of modern societies (more soon). Second, empirical testing implies that producing GTMs is not a kind of armchair sociology. GTMs must be exposed to empirical testing, and if they don’t fit the data, they must be rejected or revised. Third, “contemporary modern society” means that a GTM picks out the kind of society we live in today as its object. This is a criterion of actuality. So far, nothing separates GTMs from other forms of social theory such as SMs. What marks GTMs out as an independent form of social theory, however, is the fourth element: comprehensiveness. A GTM does not portray this or that separate institution of society – such as the family, politics or law – or this or that isolated social phenomenon – such as gender, power or social stratification – but society as a whole. That is to say, a GTM tries to articulate what I will call the structural principles of contemporary society. Structural principles I define with Giddens (1984: 17) as the “most deeply embedded structural properties implicated in the reproduction of social totalities”. Hence they are the most general principles organizing the lives of the members of society and exhibit two properties: breadth – they apply to most members of society and regulate many aspects of their activities – and depth – they influence outcomes allocating resources and burdens essential both to their objective life chances and subjective identities. In its most ambitious version, a GTM describes the dominant cultural values, institutional orders and personality-types of contemporary society and the logic of their interconnectedness. In a little less ambitious form, a GTM focuses mostly on social institutions, in line with Parsons’ (1951) delineation of “society” (as opposed to culture, personality and the biological organism) as sociologists’ major field of study.

Now we are in a position to see what the classical vision of social theory is: a continuous debate over the constituting structural principles of modernity.

Some points of convergence
Despite clear differences of opinion regarding what social theory ought to be – a toolbox of explanatory social mechanisms versus a continuous discussion of what it means to be modern – and despite much mutual hostility between practitioners of the two approaches (Elster 2007: 446-447; Hedström 2005: 12-13; van den Berg 1998) – the analytical and classical approach actually have quite a lot in common. Let me draw attention to six points of convergence. First, both approaches are hostile to all forms of “mindless” and “abstracted” empiricism (Mills 2000); that is, of making sociology the endeavor of aggregating more and more data without fitting them into coherent and highly generalized conceptual schemes. Second, and for that reason, both approaches agree that developing social theory is absolutely necessary if sociology is to progress as a discipline – although they differ regarding what kind of social theory they have in mind. Third, both analytical and classical sociologists want to bridge what Goldthorpe (2007: 4) designates the “scandal of sociology”, namely the “manifest lack of integration of research and theory” in sociology. Thus both social mechanisms and structural principles are forms of theory that can pilot the design of empirical studies and guide the interpretation of empirical observations. Fourth, both the analytical and classical approach may potentially counteract the fragmentation of sociology into a set of hermetically sealed sub-fields. Both SMs and GTMs, namely, are forms of social theory that stretch across sub-disciplinary borders and hence can facilitate communication between them. Fifth, SMs and GTMs are both bodies of sociological knowledge characterized by a high level of generalization, which is also why we call them social theory (Alexander 1982). In the case of SMs we have to do with context-independent causal processes, in the case of GTMs with structural principles organizing a very high number of social processes. And finally, this high level of generalization means that both programs construct abstract models that cut off many layers of diversity and details from the concrete social world (Hedström 2005: 2-3; Hernes 1998). As a result, SMs and GTMs clearly differ from various versions of “thick descriptions” (Geertz 2000) and inductive, “naturalistic” (Blumer 1969) and “grounded” (Glaser and Strauss 1999) approaches that stay much closer to concrete social phenomena.

These points of convergence notwithstanding, there are important points of divergence between the analytical and classical approach. To see this, I will now criticize analytical sociology from the standpoint of classical sociology and vice versa. I will start with the major shortcoming of SMs as seen from the perspective of GTMs.

The problem with Social Mechanisms
Even for those who accept the main tenets of the analytical approach, several issues remain to be clarified. For instance, notions such as social causality, intentionality, reductionism, methodological individualism, action, and even the concept of a mechanism itself are highly debated (Abbott 2007; Bunge 1997; Gross 2009; Hedström 2005; Manzo 2010). Important though these internal discussions are, I will here nonetheless take the position of an outsider and present an external critique. One such line of critique, which I find to be of little relevance, is the charge of neo-positivism. The analytical approach does not depend on strict social laws and it accepts a “hermeneutic” starting point in so far as actions and their consequences are to be explained by understanding the subjective motives that cause them. Rather, I will address another shortcoming, which I find to be much more troublesome, namely that the analytical approach has renounced what must be said to be sociology’s original ambition: to construct a theory of modernity. Let me explain.

One way to demarcate different kinds of social theories is by the category of questions they provide answers to. Thus SMs provide answers to the question what social process brought about this or that particular observed social phenomenon. To illustrate, in Elster’s recent book *Explaining Social Behavior*, a comprehensive introduction to the analytical approach, we find a list of typical “analytical” questions (Elster 2007: 1-5): Why do gamblers believe that when red has come up five times in a row, red is more likely than black to come up next? Why do more Broadway shows receive standing ovations today than twenty years ago? Why are parents much more likely to kill adopted children and stepchildren than to kill their biological children? Why do supporters of a Socialist party sometimes vote Communist and thereby prevent their party from winning? Similar questions are found in *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*, edited by Hedström and Bearman: Why is divorce contagious (Åberg 2009)? Why do people trust each other (Cook and Gerbasi 2009)? Why are successful cultural products orders of magnitude more successful than average products (Salganik and Watts 2009)? How are peoples’ choices conditioned by other peoples’ choices (Rolfe 2009)? Now these are all important questions, and I would be the first to admit that sociologists need theories that can generate explanations to such queries. Be that as it may, one category of questions is glaringly absent from the above lists, namely this: what are the main principles of social organization in the kind of society we live in today? As a result, if sociologists collectively adopted the analytical approach, they would no longer be able to answer the “grand” question raised by the founding fathers of sociology: what does it mean to be modern?
Now one objection to my objection would be that it is not a problem for sociology to abandon the search for GTMs. To counter this I will say that sociology was originally conceived of as the science of modernity, and even today producing comprehensive theories of modern societies is an activity that clearly sets sociology apart from the other social sciences such as political science, economy, anthropology, psychology and human geography. For that reason, sociologists would not fulfill their task in the social division of labor in the social sciences if they totally abandoned GTMs for SMs, as analytical sociologists argue they should. Also, the more comprehensive our understanding of an object such as modern society is, the better we understand it. This epistemic principle, what Kant (1996: 518) once called the “regulative principle” of totality, and defined as the “principle of the greatest possible continuation and expansion of experience”, is well expressed in the following quote from Tolstoy’s War and Peace: “The highest wisdom has but one science, the science of the whole.” In sociology, the science of the whole is GTMs.

An illustration: education and social mobility
I would like to make this line of critique more clear and concrete by illustrating what a transformation from the analytical to the classical approach would imply. I have selected the sociology of education and social mobility because it is one of the most important and highly developed subfields of sociology. Let us first establish the explanandum. The empirical observation to be explained is this: in spite of the great expansion of the educational system in all (post)industrial Western countries since World War two, class differences in educational attainments display a high degree of resistance to change. With some minor exceptions, this observation is also valid across nations (Goldthorpe 2007: 45). After having established this fact, many different social mechanisms may be invoked to explain it. Differences in educational achievements may be explained by rational choices (Boudon 1974; Goldthorpe 2007), biological differences, differences in socially transmitted cognitive skills (Bernstein 2003), differences in socially transmitted cultural practices (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Willis 1981), differences in socially transmitted aspirations (Sewell and Hauser 1975) etc. For my purposes, though, it is not necessary to take a stand in this debate.

Now the existence of social differences in educational attainments is a very interesting empirical observation, and both for cognitive and practical purposes it is important to detect the social mechanism(s) that brings it about. However, as seen from the classical approach the sociological analysis cannot stop here. To give a contribution to the development of a comprehensive theory of modern societies, the sociology of education and social mobility
would in addition have to analyze what consequences for our view of modernity as a whole are entailed in these partial theories. One way to do this would be to see which of the existing GTMs that could best accommodate these results. Another, which I will look more into here, would be to develop a GTM based on the findings from this branch of sociology. In this case social stratification would be the central structural principle, and I will therefore label it the theory of vertically differentiated modernity.

In brief outline, it could be built on the following elements: First, modern society is conceived of as a relational system of relatively clearly demarcated, stable and objective social positions that individuals occupy depending on for instance their class, gender, ethnic origin and generation. Second, each social position is based on the same principle, namely volume and composition of economic, social and cultural resources. Third, social position shapes a person’s objective life-chances; that is, his or her access to goods such as income, status and influence. Fourth, social position shapes an individual’s subjective identity by structuring his or her space of possible experiences and through his or her identification with the social position. Fifth, social positions are also to a large degree transmitted from parents to offspring due to the kinds of social mechanisms pointed to above. Sixth, and this is where the structural principle of vertical differentiation enters, social positions are hierarchically ordered because the incumbents of some positions – for instance upper-class men belonging to the ethnic majority – have access to more resources than others. Seventh, this means that there will be differences in objective life-chances and subjective identities between individuals occupying different positions, differences that often express themselves in forms of material and symbolic domination. Eight, these forms of domination are also the origin of latent and manifest conflicts of interest and value between individuals and groups who belong to different positions – workers versus capitalists, men versus women, ethnic minorities versus ethnic majorities, the young versus the old etc. Ninth, from the perspective of vertical differentiation, the representative parliamentary political system is where such conflicts are expressed and resolved in a relatively peaceful manner. And finally, the role of sociology according to this GTM is to disclose the consequences of this system of vertical differentiation and the SMs that (re)produces it. Marxism was one such GTM based on a combination of the structural principle of vertical differentiation and socioeconomic class. After the demise of Marxism, however, conflict sociologists have been slow to develop new GTMs.

In a next step, this GTM could be discussed against other GTMs that highlight other structural principles, such as the theory of functional differentiation that emphasizes
horizontal instead of vertical differentiation (Durkheim 1984; Luhmann 1997; Parsons 1971),
the theory of individualization that emphasizes how social positions have become less clearly
demarcated, less stable and less capable of determining the actions and identity of individuals
(Bauman 2000; Beck 1992; Giddens 1991), and the theory of risk society that emphasizes risk
positions instead of social positions based on class, gender, ethnicity and generation (Beck

Being true to the analytical approach, however, will prevent sociologists from
constructing GTMs and taking part in debates like these. From the classical perspective, this
is the main problem of grounding social theory on a toolbox of SMs.

The problem with Grand Theories of Modernity
As was the case with the analytical approach, even sociologists who generally accept the
classical approach face a lot of internal challenges. Yes, there are probably more unresolved
issues emasculating the classical than the analytical approach to social theorizing. For
instance: What kind of methodology goes with the classical approach? What is a structural
principle? How to combine structural principles? How to pick out and rank the most
important structural principles? How to accommodate local variation in general structural
principles? And so on. Here, however, I will launch an external critique from the position of
an analytic outsider. Much analytical critique of the “grand” way of theorizing does not afflict
GTMs. For instance, GTMs are not what Merton (1967) calls “total theories” presupposing
that we have captured the essence of man, the true nature of society and the inherent telos of
history. Thus in contrast to the proto-sociological and “metaphysical” theories of Hegel,
Comte, Spencer and even Marx, GTMs are fallible hypotheses about the structural principles
of contemporary modern society based on what information the social sciences can provide at
present. Moreover, GTMs are not simply empty classificatory systems developed to put social
phenomena into conceptual boxes, such as Parsons’ (1951) theory of the general action
Although general conceptual schemes are an integral part of GTMs, as they are of SMs,
GTMs are substantial theories about concrete societies. In what follows I will instead look at
two other problems with the classical approach that stand out very clearly when viewed
through the theoretical lenses of analytical sociology.

The first problem is that most GTMs are characterized by an unfortunate dualism
between “grand” structural principles at the macro-level and claims about the existential
predicament of the individual at the micro-level. What are missing are descriptions of the
more fine-grained causal social machinery – the nuts and bolts, cogs and wheels – connecting the structural principles “up there” with individual lives “down here”. That is, GTMs lack a more detailed specification of how structural principles are produced and reproduced by human actors. Using the typology of social mechanisms inspired by Coleman, we can say that GTMs are weak on specifying type 1 mechanisms describing how structural principles influence actors and their situation, they are weak on specifying type 2 mechanisms describing how attributes of the actor and his or her situation produce individual actions, and finally they are weak on specifying type 3 mechanisms describing how the (inter)actions of several individuals add up to (re)produce structural principles. As a consequence, GTMs often appear vague, imprecise and explorative rather than well-defined and distinct, and the important micro/macro-link is regularly left undetermined.

The second problem with GTMs is their weak empirical foundation. Even if GTMs differ somewhat in this regard, there is a widespread disproportionate relation between their grand claims and feeble empirical evidence. Typically, a GTM exhibits some combination of i) generally few empirical observations to back up its claims, ii) personal experiences and anecdotes, and iii) a biased sample of preexisting empirical studies.

**An illustration: the theory of individualization**

To illustrate these problems with GTMs, I will take a closer look at one of the most widely discussed GTMs the last two decades, namely the theory of individualization (hereafter TI). The theory consists of two elements. First, on the institutional level, it is a theory about the macro-properties of contemporary modern societies based on a particular structural principle, namely social deregulation. In short, the theory says that the institutional matrix of industrial modernity has been dismantled the last 30-40 years as the aggregated result of several social processes: globalization has stretched social life across the territorial borders of the nation-state, a more flexible postindustrial economy has replaced the “fordist” regime of organized industrial capitalism, and the epidemic spread of the dual breadwinner family has undermined the sexual division of labor dominating the nucleus family in industrial modernity. The net result of these and similar processes is a new “post-traditional” (Giddens 1996), “liquid” (Bauman 2000), “flexible” (Sennett 1998) and “individualized” (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001) social order characterized by de-regulation, de-standardization and de-stabilization. Next, at the individual level, and this is the second element of the theory, the TI claims that due to the lack of clearly demarcated social positions and role-expectations, a new existential predicament for the individual follows. Identity now becomes a “problem”
(Bauman 1995), the self a “reflexive project” (Giddens 1991), and the biography and life-course of the new “homo optionis” turned into a succession of choices (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001).

From the analytical perspective, the first problem with the TI is its dualism. It is founded on a structural principle at the macro-level and claims about the existential predicament of individuals’ at the micro-level, but lacks precise social mechanisms connecting the two levels. To see this, let us follow Coleman’s typology of SMs. First, precise macro-to-micro mechanisms are lacking. Using Hedström’s (2005: 38-42) DBO-model,² where a human action is conceived as the joint product of the actor’s desires, beliefs and opportunities, structural principles can have an impact on individual actions by way of influencing an actor’s desires, beliefs and opportunities. All we find in the TI in this regard, however, are vague suggestions of mechanisms. Regarding desires Beck (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001: chapter 2) claims that “living a life of one’s own” is a predominant cultural value in individualized modernity, and the same does Giddens (1991: 78-79) with respect to “authenticity”. But the mechanisms through which these values are transmitted to individuals (learning, experience, adaptive preferences, contra-adaptive preferences, conformism, anti-conformism), and thereby can generate desires, are in both cases black boxes. The same goes for beliefs. Giddens (1990; 1991), for example, strongly emphasizes how the late-modern individual is exposed to large amounts of new information due to what he calls the institutional reflexivity of contemporary modernity. But he does not specify any mechanism (cognitive learning, de-habituation) through which this new information influences beliefs about, for example, the expanded scope for individual choice. So we end up with yet another black box. Finally, the situation is not much better with regard to opportunities. The TI says that due to the expanded opportunity set, people are “condemned” (Beck) to be choosers in ever more aspects of their lives. Here some mechanisms are hinted at, such as the weakening of social norms (“post-traditionalism”) and the “disembedding” of social relations from local social contexts. But then again, the hints are all we get.

The theory is also weak on micro-to-micro mechanisms. The TI is not founded upon any particular theory or typology of action. Due to the emphasis upon de-habituation, reflexivity and choices, it seems to imply some sort of transition from traditional and norm-regulated to some variant of rational action, be that instrumental, axiological or

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² This is also sometimes called the BPF model (Gintis 2007): Beliefs, Preferences and Constraints.
communicative. But again, this is really hard to know all the time the theory does not specify any precise mechanisms on the micro-to-micro level.

Finally, the theory is also weak on micro-to-macro mechanisms, as are so many sociological theories according to Coleman. Both the emergence and reproduction of individualized modernity are supposed to be the unintentional and unanticipated outcome of individual actions. But apart from vague pointers to “reflexive modernization” – modernity modernizing itself – no mechanism or concatenation of mechanisms are specified in order to show how the concerted consequences of many individual actions are coordinated and channeled into the macro patterns described by the TI. An apparent exception is Bauman’s (1998: chapter 2) theory of the consumer society. In Bauman’s theory, the function of “systemic reproduction”, as he calls it, is fulfilled by the market, and no longer by the state as in industrial modernity. However Bauman nowhere in his extensive oeuvre explains precisely how he thinks the market achieves this. He does not, for instance, make use of neoclassical theories of market-equilibrium from economics. And so even he ends up with a black box.

The second problem with the TI is its weak empirical foundation. Even though the sociologists associated with it differ somewhat at this point, the general impression is a combination of the three weaknesses I pointed to above. Firstly, the emphasis is on conceptual issues rather than on empirical testing. Secondly, much of the empirical backing we get is anecdotes and personal experiences, as in the cases of the most essayistic of the theorists, Bauman and Sennett. And finally, already existing empirical studies are selectively sampled. For instance, Giddens (1991; 1992) bases his theory of the reflexive self and “pure” intimate relationship primarily on self-help literature, which must be said to be expected to support such a thesis in the first place.

To sum up, the TI is vaguely articulated and full of black boxes regarding how structural principles affect individuals’ identities and behavior and vice versa. In addition its empirical backing is generally weak, based on anecdotes, personal experiences and a biased sample of pre-existing empirical studies. In this way it exemplifies general weaknesses of the GTM-approach as seen from the perspective of analytical sociology.

Whitman’s challenge
So far I have presented the main principles and discussed some problems of GTMs and SMs. At present the relation between analytical and classical sociologists is characterized by mutual hostility and an almost complete lack of dialogue. It seems as if analytical and classical sociologists view their relation as a Prisoners’ Dilemma in which defection is the dominant
strategy: if the other part cooperates (wants to learn from me), I get to dominate him (impose my views on him), if he does not, at least I don’t get dominated myself.\(^3\)

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Table 1: Prisoners’ Dilemma

The result is that analytical and classical sociologists abstain from cooperation. This, however, is a suboptimal outcome in so far as we have seen that SMs and GTMs have complementary strengths and weaknesses and hence have strong incentives to cooperate. I shall argue, therefore, that analytical and classical sociologists instead should conceive of their situation as an Assurance Game in which there is no dominant strategy but in which mutual cooperation is the equilibrium point both parties prefer, and therefore ought to be chosen by rational players:

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Table 2: Assurance Game

However, to claim that they ought to play an Assurance Game, and not a Prisoners’ Dilemma, assumes that we have overcome what I will call Whitman’s challenge. In his poem “Song of Myself”, published in the collection *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman claims that he contains several selves, many of which contradict one another. But this represents no problem to him: “Very well then, I contradict myself”. This, then, is Whitman’s challenge: can we as sociologists have both an analytical and a classical self, or do we end up in contradiction trying to combine incompatible approaches? From both our personal lives and science we know that contradictory selves are endemic to the human condition (Ainslie 2001; Elster 1986). For instance, our rational and spontaneous selves are often in contradiction (Elster

\(^3\) The values in the tables are arbitrary numbers meant only to make possible the ordinal ranking of outcomes.
1984; Elster 2000). However, as social scientists we should not accept too high levels of cognitive dissonance. I will argue that we do not necessarily end up in contradiction in the case of GTMs and SMs. To justify this claim, I will now present a Weberian solution to Whitman’s challenge.

A Weberian solution
Weber is rightly praised for resolving the tension between several dichotomies in sociology, such as the one between “subjectivist” interpretational and “objectivist” explanatory sociology and the one between idiographic and nomothetic approaches. In the rest of the article I will argue that Weber also implicitly proposed a solution to Whitman’s challenge. To see this, we need to notice three things about Weber’s sociology.

First, Weber (ref) is obviously a “grand” theorist of modernity in so far as he seeks to describe the overall cultural, institutional and psychological matrix of modern societies. In Weber’s GTM “formal rationality” (ref) is the key structural principle: the tendency to reflexively calculate, plan and control everything. At the cultural level of world views, this principle is expressed in how the world is demystified and reduced to a causal mechanism that can be explained and predicted according to universal laws, without recourse to magical or transcendent powers (ref). At the institutional level, formal rationality is expressed in the emergence of bureaucratic organizations designed to make it possible to calculate, coordinate and control human activity (Weber 1978). And finally, at the psychological level, formal rationality is expressed in “inner-worldly ascetism”: that is, the emergence of a novel personality type practicing the art of disciplining his or her impulses to an unprecedented degree (Weber 1992).

Second, Weber is also central in establishing the SM-approach in sociology. Not only was Weber a proclaimed methodological individualist. He also pioneered the SM-approach by introducing the idea of ideal types: fine-grained causal models applicable to understand and explain social outcomes. Thus his magnum opus, the posthumously published Economy and Society, consists mainly of 1200 pages of definitions of descriptive and causal models.

And finally, in Weber’s sociology there is no conflict between his “grand” theory of modern societies and ideal types. On the contrary they mutually support each other. GTMs need to be properly specified, and hence Weber develops his ideal types (SMs) to articulate his GTM. For example, in his cultural sociology, and in particular in his sociology of religion, Weber specifies the general causal mechanisms that go into the formal rationalization of worldviews; such as psychological pattern-seeking – the search for “cognitive closure”
(Rydgren 2009) and meaningful explanations of our experiences – and specialization – that separate validity-claims such as truth, beauty, efficiency and moral rightness are addressed separately. In his sociology of institutions, Weber specifies the causal conditions for the rational coordination of human activity, namely a bureaucratic organization build upon such features as division of labor, hierarchy, formal rules, recruitment based on formal competence, predictable career opportunities and paid salary. And in his famous study of the “economic ethos” of the protestant ethics, Weber (1992) specifies the causal conditions producing the modern rational personality type, namely the internalization of religious principles that makes it a moral virtue to discipline one’s spontaneous impulses. In this way, Weber’s GTM is nothing but a constellation of SMs. From this also follows that Weber never constructs his ideal types (SMs) *ex nihilo* but guided by his ambition of producing a comprehensive GTM. This means that which types of social processes need to be modeled and which social observations are important to explain by SMs are piloted by the GTM.

**Why a Weberian solution?**

Weber’s intellectual ambition was to construct a conceptually articulated, empirically tested and comprehensive conception of contemporary modern societies founded upon a particular constellation of SMs. This combination of a GTM and SMs makes it understandable why he has inspired both analytical and classical social theorists, although for different reasons. In this way Weber also provides a way to combine the analytical and classical approach to social theory. Now even if we do not approve of Weber’s particular choice of structural principle and the constellation of SMs he applies to open the black boxes entailed by it, his general solution to Whitman’s challenge seems promising. This is because it reconciles GTMs and SMs in a way that make them compensate for each others’ weaknesses. Let me explain.

Analytical sociologists could benefit from the Weberian solution by being reconnected to the “grand” questions and ambitions of the classical approach, and this in two ways. First, GTMs could be a sensitizing device in the design phase for analytical sociologists conducting empirical studies. It could help them pick out from the infinite population of possible objects of empirical study the sociologically important phenomena that ought to be modeled and explained by SMs. To give an example; much of today’s empirical research within the field of social mobility springs out from a particular GTM, the theory of vertical differentiation, and in particular Marx’ theory of modern capitalism. Let me call this the principle of design relevance. And second, GTMs could provide comprehensive interpretational frameworks that the results of analytical sociology could be fed into. In this way it could raise the stakes of
analytical sociology and increase the area of application of its research results. To keep up with the sociology of social mobility, the results from this branch of sociology may have important and perhaps dire consequences for the theory of individualization. This I will call the principle of interpretational relevance.

If analytical sociologists have much to benefit from a dialogue with the classical approach, so do classical sociologists from cooperating with analytical sociologists. First, as we have seen in connection with Weber’s theory of formal rationalization, SMs make it possible to open the black boxes entailed by GTMs and specify in much greater detail the kind of social processes going into a structural principle. In this way SMs may be applied to decompose the elements that constitute a GTM and thus avoid the charge of vagueness. I will call this the principle of articulation. Second, specifying SMs makes it easier to deduce observational consequences from GTMs and hence to test them empirically. For instance, specifying the bureaucratic social processes going into the institutional dimension of formal rationalization makes it much easier to see how well actual institutions and organizations cohere with this structural principle. I will call this the principle of empirical testing. And finally SMs could make it easier to solve a peculiar problem facing classical sociologists in search of structural principles. How, namely, can it be legitimate to subsume a variety of social processes occurring in different social arenas under one and the same structural principle? For instance, what justifies subsuming social processes taking place in different institutions such as the family, work life, media, religion and politics under the structural principle of individualization? The answer is that these processes are all generated by the same SMs or concatenation of SMs. In the case of individualization, the shared SM may look something like this: increased menu of opportunities → challenge to established routines → de-habituation → increased pressure towards reflexive choices. Let me call this the principle of identification.

These mutual benefits notwithstanding, to make the Weberian solution to Whitman’s challenge work, three additional premises have to be accepted. First, we need to accept what I will call the principle of second-order theoretical pluralism. Whereas first-order pluralism says that different theories give different answers to the same kind of questions, second-order pluralism says that different theories differ because they are answers to different kinds of questions. For instance: how did this observed social phenomenon come about?; versus: what are the structural principles constituting the kind of society we live in today? This principle also leads to a second principle, namely what I will call the principle of non-assimilation. It says that if different theories are answers to different kinds of questions, we should not try to
reduce different kinds of theories to each other. They fulfill different epistemic functions. Thus this principle implies that SMs should not be tried transformed into GTMs or the other way around. They should be respected as independent and important forms of social theory. And finally we need to accept that even if the relation between the theories going into the first-order theoretical pluralism is usually characterized by competition, the relation between the theories constituting the second order theoretical pluralism is more often characterized by cooperation. This is especially so in cases where different kinds of theories exhibit complementary strengths and weaknesses, as I have argued that SMs and GTMs do. This I will call the principle of cooperation. As they do not go against any generally accepted scientific principles that I can think of, none of these premises should be too difficult to accept.

**An illustration: the sociology of freedom**

So far I have argued that analytical and classical sociological theory exhibit complementary strengths and weaknesses and thus have much to learn from each other. I have also proposed a Weberian solution to the question of how such a cooperative endeavor may look. What remains is to illustrate the fertility of my solution. There are of course many ways to implement the Weberian solution, far too many for me to describe them here. What I will do instead is to illustrate the fruitfulness of my Weberian solution by way of demonstrating one possible strategy of implementation, connected to one of my own research interests, the sociology of freedom. I will devote the rest of the article to this task.

Freedom is of outmost importance both psychologically and socially. Psychologically, in normal cases of action, we all have the explicit or implicit feeling of freedom; that is, that what we do is up to us and that we could have chosen to do otherwise (Dennett 1984: 104; Habermas 2007: 23-27; Searle 2007: 43). Also, at the societal level, freedom is a culturally highly validated and institutionally rather thoroughly implemented idea in the Western world (Patterson 1991). This importance notwithstanding, sociologists have been slow to develop a sociology of freedom. The concept of freedom is relatively little discussed in social theory, and not many empirical studies that explicitly address the social conditions of freedom have been conducted. I will not go into the causes for this situation here, only assert the need for a sociology of freedom. Now a sociology of freedom can take a local or global approach. The local approach implies studying the social conditions of freedom in relation to a delimited social arena such as the family, economy, politics, law and education or a delimited social phenomenon such as power, social stratification, gender and organizations. Here, however,
and in line with the grand ambitions of the classical traditions, I will address freedom globally from the perspective of a GTM and ask: what are the overall social conditions of freedom in contemporary modern societies?

Applying the Weberian solution to this question means combining the classical and analytical approach. To outline how this can be done, let me present a very simple algorithm for a global sociology of freedom. Step 1: Define a concept of freedom applicable for empirical research. Step 2: Construct a GTM based on the dominant structural principles organizing contemporary modern societies. Step 3: Describe the constellation of SMs that go into these structural principles. Step 4: Analyze how the SMs that go into the structural principles both enable and constrain the freedom of individuals as defined by step 1. In what follows I will give a very brief presentation of some of the elements that should go into each step. Although I think the elements I present below are highly pertinent to a sociology of freedom, I do not intend my analysis to be comprehensive, my aims are first of all illustrative.

**Step 1: A sociological concept of freedom**

A good place to start for a sociological definition of freedom is the concept of action, the basic concept of sociology and the social sciences (Boudon 1991; Coleman 1990; Elster 2007; Hedström 2005). To act is to deliberately change the world according to an intention. In line with this, freedom can most generally be defined as a lack of constraints on our behavior when we deliberately try to change the world according to an intention. According to this definition a typology of freedom can be constructed with one subcategory of freedom corresponding to each aspect of our actions that can be constrained. To keep things simple, I will limit myself here to perhaps the most important aspect of freedom, namely the absence of outer barriers to our actions. To this corresponds a particular category of freedom, namely freedom as absence of external constraints: we are free when nothing is stopping us when we try to reach our goals. On this definition freedom is a function of two elements: firstly the number of alternatives available to us, and secondly their importance as seen from the perspective of our goals and plans.

**Step 2: The structural principles of contemporary modern societies**

To sketch out the basis of a GTM intended to grasp the most central aspects of contemporary modern societies, I think no less than eight structural principles are needed. The first and most important is functional differentiation. Contemporary modern societies are split up in many relatively autonomous institutions, differentiated according to their separate values, roles,
norms, vocabularies and the different tasks they fulfill for society; examples are the family, economy, politics, law, religion and science. The second is individualization. Due to the fact that the values and norms attached to the roles in these institutions have become more flexible, open and blurry, more room is opened up for individual choice. The third is formalization. All the institutions, with the partly exception of the family, are dominated by formal organizations and formal rules. This is also why they have the capacity to maintain their autonomy. The fourth is institutional reflexivity. Journalists, artists, scientists, bureaucrats and so on produce a lot of information about the institutions. This information is picked up by the participants “inside” the institutions and used by them to continuously reorganize the way the institutions work. The fifth is disemboding. Social life within the institutions is lifted out of local contexts and stretched across much wider spans of time and space, both nationally and globally. The sixth is social stratification. Due to the combination of biological and social transmission of resources within the family, selection processes in the educational system, and differential access to income and status depending on position in the economy, individuals differ in their access to economic, cultural and social resources. The seventh is risk. Contemporary institutions produce a lot of unintended, unforeseen and unwanted consequences that it has become a main task to cope with both on the individual and collective level. And the eighth is the democratic rule of law. Through such institutions as parliament, government and the state bureaucracy, members of contemporary society can decide which rules they want to live according to. Also, to make them capable of participating in the democratic process, they are granted democratic citizenship; that is, a comprehensive set of civil, political and social rights.

**Step 3: Mechanisms of (un)freedom**

Since my interest is in the social conditions of individual freedom, I will focus mainly on type 1 SMs; that is, typical ways in which structural principles impinge on individual actions. In this connection, I will first have to make a preliminary and seemingly banal point: social structures both constrain and enable human action. It is important to note this, though, because there is a long tradition within sociology for conceptualizing social structures as predominantly constraints to action. This, as we know, is how Durkheim (1982) famously described social facts in his book *The Rules of Sociological Method*. The reason for this is probably that so much sociological thinking takes off from the problem of order: how can social structure in the gestalt of reasonably predictable and cooperative social relations come into existence and be reproduced when the elements that produce this orderliness are human
beings endowed with the freedom to choose (Alexander 1982; Parsons 1968)? The common sociological answer is through constraints on actions. These may be of the external type, such as (expectations of) social sanctions, or the internal, such as internalized social rules with a “causal grip” (Elster 1989a) on the mind. To illustrate, in Parsons’ (1951) sociology the “double contingency” of social interaction – both “ego” and “alter” can choose what to do and thus face a situation of double indeterminacy – is solved because the decisions made by the acting “psychological system” is constrained and thus made predictable both by the external sanctions residing in the “social system” and the internalization of inter-subjectively shared values from the “cultural system”. This way of thinking implies that the less social structure the more freedom and vice versa. To quote Babbie (1994: 46, emphasis in original): “Surrendered freedom is the substance of society.” However, as sociologists such as Bourdieu, Foucault, Giddens and Habermas recently have emphasized, and this is of outmost importance for a sociology of freedom, social structures also enable human action. To see this, note first that by mastering a large body of social rules the individual becomes a socially competent actor capable of participating in ongoing social practices (Bourdieu 1990; Giddens 1984). And secondly, social structures produce alternatives that otherwise would not exist, such as marrying, taking an education, buying goods with money etc. (Searle 1995; Searle 2010). A sociology of freedom, therefore, needs to shake of the presumption of an antithetic relation between human freedom and social structure.

Now to the SMs of (un)freedom embedded in the GTM I have just presented. It is neither possible nor required for my argument here to produce an overall account of all the SMs going into the eight structural principles. Rather, I will limit myself to one very simple and not too fine-grained SM, namely socially conditioned variations in the opportunity set of the individual. That is, I will look at how the structural principles affect what Merton (1995; see also Petersen 2009) calls the “opportunity structure” of the individual. Moreover, I will found this SM on the DBO model, in which human action is the joint product of an actor’s desires, beliefs and opportunities. Hence one way to connect structural principles to the social conditions of individual actions is to look at the consequences they have for the courses of actions available for the individual. I will here focus on three aspects of this type 1 SM: the number of objective opportunities available, the costs attached to alternatives, and the importance of the alternatives.

Step 4: The social conditions of freedom
Let me start with some ways in which the opportunity set of the “median inhabitant” is increased in the kind of society my GTM describes. First, functional differentiation increases the number of life projects an individual has to choose from. This is so because in a functionally differentiated society, due to its large number of institutions, roles, values, social norms and vocabularies, there are very many potential life-projects to be embarked upon. One could dedicate one’s life to become a family-man, an intellectual, a business man, an artist, a journalist, a religious zealot, or even choose the postmodern life-strategy of “pointillism”, that is, continuously swapping roles and identities (Bauman 1995; Bauman 2007). Thus with a large “status set”, to keep with Mertonian terminology (Merton 1996), comes an abundance of possible ways to gestalt one’s life.

Second, individualization implies that social norms are relaxed and more ways of doing things are accepted. For instance, the social norms regulating what it means to be a man, woman, have a particular ethnic identity, belong to a particular class etc. have opened up. This social conditioned increase in what Goffman (1961: 110) calls role-distance – the “disdainful detachment of the performer from the role he is performing” – not only make more options available. It also reduces the social costs of being a “stranger” in Schütz’ (1964) classical description. The result is a “democratization of Zarathustra” (Beck).

Third, formalization strengthens the overall efficiency of society. For instance, formalization increases the net output of goods and services in the economy, it increases the number of patients treated by the health service, it increases the number of children that can be enrolled in schools etc. In this way formalization amplifies the net amount of options available to individuals in society.

Fourth, the disembedding of social institutions increases our exposure to “otherness”. As a result it makes a lot of new life-forms and life-projects culturally acceptable and institutionally accessible. For instance, due to migration processes into the Western world since the 1970’s, previously “exotic” religious practices, food styles and clothing habits have become real life-style options.

Fifth, institutional reflexivity means that individuals are provided a lot of information about how the institutions of their society work. This enhances their external freedom by making it possible for them to change their social surroundings more efficiently, according to the principle “knowledge is power”: scientia propter potentiam. In addition, by exposing institutions to critique, institutional reflexivity denaturalizes established patterns of behavior that have become “second nature”, thus opening up space for novel ways of acting and living. All that is solid melts into the reflexive air.
And finally, democratic rule of law not only makes it possible for people to participate in the production and enactment of laws, thus freeing people from the authoritarian experience of living according to laws they have not given themselves. Moreover, it also ascribes them democratic citizenship, thus providing them with a comprehensive set of civil, political and material rights backed up by the state. In a modern democracy everyone has the right to live where they want, marry who they want, believe what they want, vote, say what they want, congregate etc.

That was some of the bright sides of the society molded by the eight structural principles. Now to some ways in which it constrains freedom. First, formalization produces the “iron cage” made famous by Weber (1992): a social structure dominated by a dense network of formal rules backed up by large formal organizations. Coleman (1982) aptly uses the phrase the “asymmetric society” to pinpoint this aspect of a contemporary society: the individual is “small” and society is “big”.

Second, social stratification implies that even if the net amount of alternatives in society increases, they are differentially distributed according to such biological and social criterion as sex, class, ethnic origin, race and generation. In other words, even if we are all free, some are freer than others.

Finally, living in a risk society means that we both individually and collectively produce a lot of side-effects that constrain our actions. For instance, global climate change will perhaps necessitate a dramatic reduction in private consumption among Western individuals, whereas the financial crisis in 2009 produced economic recession in many parts of the world. In such cases, the menu of alternatives shrinks significantly.

To sum up this very brief, schematic and explorative global sociological analysis of the social conditions of freedom in contemporary modernity, five tentative conclusions can be made. First, individuals living in this kind of societies face many alternatives in their lives. Second, these alternatives range across important aspects of their lives, such as what life-project to embark on and what laws to be subjected to. Third, the social costs imposed on “deviant” life-styles are considerably reduced. However, and this is the fourth point, this kind of society also displays illiberal tendencies, such as the iron cage of formalization and the constraints associated with risks. But, and this is the last point, these illiberal features cannot set aside the overall impression that compared to all other societies in historical time and geographical space, the kind of society described above greatly enhances the absence of external constraints to actions. Thus I do not find it apologetic to stick the label “liberal modernity” onto this type of society.
Conclusion: worlds apart?
It is time to conclude. In this article I have discussed the relation between analytical and classical sociology. Analytical sociology is founded upon the project of explaining partial social outcomes with causal SMs, whereas the ambition of classical sociology is to produce a GTM. Are the two approaches worlds apart? The answer given in this article is both yes and no. Yes because there has been little dialogue and much mutual hostility between the two approaches in the last decades. It is also yes because analytical and classical sociologists produce clearly demarcated types of social theory and also have different visions of what social theory should accomplish. Nonetheless, and this has been the main argument of this article, the answer is also no. Analytical and classical sociology exhibit complementary strengths and weaknesses, hence they both have much to benefit from increased cooperation. Such a cooperative endeavor, however, faces Whitman’s challenge: are the two approaches really compatible? I have proposed a Weberian solution to this challenge. It says that a GTM should be conceived of as a constellation of SMs. Following this recipe, GTMs and SMs could mutually support each other in several ways, some of which have been described. To illustrate the fruitfulness of my Weberian solution, I have showed how the social conditions of freedom in contemporary modern societies could be illuminated from this Weberian perspective.

Thus the intuition I have tried to articulate in this article is that increased cooperation between analytical and classical sociologists will strengthen sociologists’ capacity for making the modern social world we are thrown into transparent and comprehensible. Whether my intuition and its articulation into the Weberian program serves me right, however, only putting this sociological program into practice will tell.

References


