

*Lecture 22 Sociology 621*  
**MICROFOUNDATIONS FOR THE THEORY OF IDEOLOGY**  
*November 14, 2013*

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## 1. STATING THE PROBLEM: What Are “Micro-foundations” and Why Bother?

### 1.1. model of action:

Individual subjects are subjectively characterized by:

a. *preferences*: what a person wants (includes values which may internally select/rule out certain preferences). Some notes about preferences:

- These need not be viewed as fixed -- preferences change and are often fuzzy.
- individual action often involves forming or discovering preferences, not just acting pre-given preferences

b. *information*: perceptions about what exists, what options are available

c. *theories*: conceptions about what will be the consequences of given choices for their preferences, given the information

d. *mental capacities*: including both conventional things like cognitive abilities and skills, but also creative capacities, problem-solving ability, intuitive abilities, empathetic capacities, flexibility, etc.

e. *nonconscious psychic processes*: underlying drives, “the unconscious”, personality, dispositions, habits, emotions

They are objectively characterized by:

f. *resources* of various sorts at their disposal (capacities to act = real power relations)

g. *causal environment of choosing*. This includes, some obvious things like the feasible set of possible choices. But also much more interesting things like: the social-interactions which affect how individual capabilities are actually deployed. For example, “problem-solving capacity” and “creativity” may be mental capacities – some people have these more developed than others. But their actual use in social action is heavily conditioned by interaction and communication. The aphorism “two heads are better than one” is actually a deep claim about problem-solving.

h. a *causal environment of the effects of their actions* (while people chose their actions in terms of anticipated effects – which is part of c – their actions have real effects which depend upon what other people do).

On the basis of these subjective factors (preferences, information, theories, capacities and nonconscious psychic structures) and given the available resources actors/subjects make choices about what to do, and the resulting actions have actual consequences for the subject and others.

a+b+c+d+e = subjectivity

a+b+c = ideological processes of subjectivity (consciousnesses)

## **1.2. Four aspects of Micro-foundations:**

- (1). **Micro-mechanisms of consciousness formation:** mechanisms through which preferences, information and theories are produced = the micro-formation of ideologies.
- (2). **The micro-mechanisms of nonconsciousness formation:** mechanisms through which nonconscious psychic processes are formed and transformed = the micro-formation of personality, habit, etc.
- (3). **Micro-process of choice-making:** given preferences, information, theories, and other psychic structures, how are choices actually made, how are strategies formed, etc. One class of models of this sort of process, with relatively simple assumptions about cognition, etc. = rational actor models.
- (4). **Micro-processes of creative action, problem-solving:** This is different from a simple “choice” per se: choice among options → pretty clear preferences/goals, etc. Here the issue is the creative act of coming up with new solutions, new ideas, etc. which often involves the discovery transformation of ends. This is what the work of Hans Joas is about. In creative action means and ends co-evolve through problem solving.

In Therborn’s analysis, this process was elaborated in terms of *affirmations* and *sanctions* = basically a behaviorist model of reinforcement, etc. = **A simple learning model of belief-formation.**

Elster offers a more complex model for the formation of beliefs and values, a model rooted in cognitive psychology.

## **1.3. Why Bother?**

- a. general point: a complete theory contains micro-foundations
- b. Methodological point: in the case of theories of ideology the analysis of mechanisms is especially important given the object of explanation -- beliefs: to have confidence in our beliefs about beliefs we need some knowledge of the causal mechanisms involved.
- c. To transform beliefs we need knowledge of their mechanisms of production

## 2. TYPES OF EXPLANATIONS OF IDEOLOGIES (465ff in Elster)

Note: Object of explanation in Elster's analysis is somewhat narrower than our previous discussion of ideology as the process of subject-formation:

“beliefs and values that have society as their object as well as their explanation”.

### 2.1. Autonomy of Thought

A precondition for micro-processes to have much substantive interest is for thought to have a certain kind of autonomy. If all categories of thought were pure, instantaneous reflections of material conditions, there would be little reason to care about micro-foundations. Belief-formation is of interest because it is not a simple reflection and has enduring effects on action.

Important issue = whether the *social* cause or the *cognitive* cause sets the basic limits: constraint vs. maximand in Elster's views. Elster feels the more plausible = class interests constitute a constraint rather than maximand (i.e. minimal correspondence is needed)

### 2.2. Types of Explanations

a. *interest* explanations vs. *position* explanations

b. *causal* explanations vs. *functional* explanations

- all position-explanations are causal
- interest explanations can be causal or functional:
- a belief may be explained because it is shaped by interests or because it serves interests. NOTE: *a belief that is shaped by interests does not necessarily serve interests*: there is no inherent reason for functionality to always be produced (eg. wishful thinking).

c. Examples:

- **interest-functional explanation**: Capitalists believe that socialism is undesirable because it actually serves their interests to believe this.
- **interest-causal explanation**: radical workers in the 1930s often believed that the USSR embodied communist ideals. “The wish is parent to the thought”. This is a psychological mechanism. It might not, however, have really served their interests to hold this belief (i.e. it could lead them to be uncompromising in situations where compromises would be beneficial). Arguably the collapse of the Weimar Republic was in part due to the unwillingness of communists to form alliances with social democrats.
- **position-casual explanations**: commodity fetishism. The position you hold in the world directly generates certain kinds of mental states. Our view of the Sun setting is a positional-causal explanation of the belief that the sun goes around the world.

### 2.3. Cognitive and Motivational explanations

Cognitive psychology: motivational explanations (hot) vs. cognitive explanations (cold)

Four-fold table:

		EXPLANANDUM	
		<i>MOTIVATIONAL</i>	<i>COGNITIVE</i>
EXPLANATION	<i>MOTIVATIONAL</i>	adaptive preferences	wishful thinking
	<i>COGNITIVE</i>	mental bookkeeping	availability heuristic: extend to the whole knowledge of parts

a. **adaptive preferences** = sour grapes: frustration changes preferences. Key type of positional explanation. Critical consequence = **resignation**.

b. **wishful thinking** = acting on beliefs shaped by interests: note these often will not serve interests (but may: self-fulfilling prophecy, etc.)

c. **mental bookkeeping** = cognitive classification system shapes preference orderings. Two examples:

1. “Children” lack judgment and therefore need and deserve paternalistic regulation instead of autonomy. If certain categories of adults are therefore like children, they should be treated in the same way. Classifying women or blacks or the disabled or the retarded as “children” has, at various times, been used to support the values that justify paternalistic treatment of these categories.

2. Another example: amniocentesis and abortions for fetal deformity -- is this an example of reproductive freedom or phobias against lack of physical perfection? (Note opposition of various handicapped groups to abortion). Also: classification of “personhood” re fetus/child.

c. **availability heuristic** = illegitimate extension of knowledge from particular to general: Joe is poor because he didn’t work hard therefore the explanation for the level of poverty is laziness.

HOT explanations = motivational = causal *interest* explanations

COLD explanations = cognitive = causal *position*-explanations

### 3. MECHANISMS FOR RULING IDEAS TO BECOME RULING:

Question: How do ideas of the ruling class -- ideas that are in the interests of the ruling class -- become the ruling ideas of the époque? That is: how do these ideas become dominant **among intellectuals**? If we reject a purely functionalist explanation, how do we account for this?

Parallel to the state is not entirely compelling. In the state, financial dependency of the state on capital is the pivotal mechanism that insures minimal correspondence: the state must ensure the reproduction of favorable conditions of accumulation. But financial inducement is not credibly the appropriate mechanism for ideologies: “Why should the ruling ideas be the ideas of the ruling class?”:

“No Micro-foundations are provided [by Marx] to explain why the ideas that correspond to the outlook of the ruling class should gain disproportionate acceptance among intellectuals” (473)

Possible Answers:

- repression
- financial support gives differential survival value
- negative selection against systematically anti-ruling class ideas.

Not entirely convincing because idea-production is not so resource intensive. Note: *this is probably why there are usually more counterhegemonic ideas than counterhegemonic politics.*

### 4. MECHANISMS OF IDEOLOGICAL BELIEF FORMATION

#### 4.1. Inversion

Two forms:

a) **Abstraction:** equivalent to reification -- taking a concept of something to be real, with the empirical instances simply instantiations of the abstract concept. Cause of reification = fixity of the categories of thought: because of one's preoccupation with ideas they become seen as having causal power.

b) **Projection:** religion as prime example: individuals project their powers onto an alien being: “religious distress is the expression of real distress”

#### 4.2. Particular & general interest

Representation of particular interests as general social interests = a general tendency for all classes. Mechanisms:

Wishful thinking: “The transformation of narrowly conceived self-interest into a vision of general interest, by the intermediary of wishful thinking”

Note: no necessary functional explanation here, or conscious deception. The process is a psychological one of wishful thinking in Elster's views.

Comments:

(1) To claim that wishful thinking impels people to see their own interests as general interests and to really believe this (rather than just to admit that they are selfish, etc.) implies something about the role of morality in human motivations -- perhaps á la Kolberg: the development of moral principles, superego, etc., means that the guilt in being egotistical/selfish produces the cognitive shift (wishful thinking). There has to be some sort of psychological foundation to moral-thinking in order for wishful thinking to generate legitimations.

(2) Wishful thinking can help to underwrite hegemony:

- psychological mechanisms of wishful thinking → stability of the distortion to ruling classes.
- plausibility to *other* classes of the wishful thinking claim may be a condition for hegemony.

### **4.3 local & global vision**

version 1: what is causally true *ceteris paribus* is true without constraint.

version 2: statements that are true for any given agent are true for all agents taken as a totality.

EXAMPLES:

1. Each individual worker bargains a wage = to what that individual worker could produce as an individual. The capitalist hires 100 workers and makes a profit. The profit appears to come from capital. But in fact it comes from the cooperation -- the enhanced productivity derived from cooperative labor.

2. Marginal wages: each worker is paid the marginal product, each being treated as the last hired/next to be fired. But if the collective worker were paid the collective marginal product, there would be no profit.

3. Workers facing unemployment: since I would be worse off without being employed by capitalists, society would be worse off without capitalists. Feudal peasants would be worse off without protection of lords, therefore giving the surplus to lords is justified & society would be worse off without lords (like gangster protection racket).

4. Capitalist's money fetishism: each capitalist thinks profits can be gained from speculation.

### **4.4 Conceptual Imperialism**

Improper cognitive extensions of understandings in time and space: ethnocentrism, anachronism.