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CHAPTER XIII

Methodological Individualism: Key Insights from Boudon and a Critical Discussion

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Introduction: methodological individualism as a paradigm for macrosociological research

In his autobiographical reflections, Boudon (Boudon and Leroux 2003) traces his recognition of the importance of referring to the individual actions of social actors in explaining macrosociological phenomena back to a published work in the field of judicial sociology. The study aims to understand the upward trend in decisions to discontinue prosecution, alongside the increase in the number of offenses since the beginning of the nineteenth century (Boudon and Davidovitch 1964). This analysis, centered on statistics relating to individual decisions, called for interpreting them not as the mechanical consequences of macrological changes, but as the results of social mechanisms involving "the subjectivity of the magistrate, who undertakes the translation of facts into terms of law." In a (secondary) dissertation[1] under the direction of Raymond Aron, *A quoi sert la notion de structure* (*The Uses of Structuralism*), Boudon (1968) discusses the prevailing tendency among representatives of structuralism, then in vogue, to ascribe a form of metaphysical reality on the structures studied. He argues that they should be used only for what they truly are: means of identifying a set of interdependent characteristics. The significance of his methodological defense of the individualist approach is well known, although he does not explicitly refer to it as such in the context of sociology until 1979. Multiple examples of this defense appear in his subsequent publications, including: *L'inégalité des chances* (*Education, Opportunity and Social Inequality*) in 1973; *Effets pervers et ordre social* (*The Unintended Consequences of Social Action*) in 1977; and *La logique du social* (*The Logic of Social Action*) in 1979, among others.

In a chapter entitled "The Individualistic Tradition in Sociology", part of a collective work *The Micro-Macro Link,* which compares the continental and Anglo-Saxon sociological traditions in terms of the relationship between the macrological and micrological levels of social analysis, Boudon (1987) contrasts the scientific aims of methodological individualism (MI) with those of three other traditional paradigms of macrosociological research: "observe" (the nomological paradigm which seeks macrosocial laws: If A, then B); "interpret" (the interpretive paradigm which aims to identify general social forms); or "criticize" (the critical paradigm which seeks to change society). The aim of MI, on the other hand, is to "explain" any social phenomenon – whether a regularity, singularity, or societal difference – by uncovering the individual actions that give rise to it. With this explanatory ambition, MI represents the central paradigm of macrosociological research in the social sciences. Its methodological dimension is based on three conditions: First, actions, in the Weberian sense, are bearers of meaning and, consequently, of motives; second they are ideal-typical, since their relationship to real actions takes the form of a stylized, abstract model; and, finally, individuals are social actors, and are therefore inherently embedded in social relationships:

[1] Boudon defended his doctoral dissertation in 1967 on *L'analyse mathématique des faits sociaux* (*The mathematical analysis of social facts*), prepared under the supervision of Jean Stoetzel.

> Suppose M is the phenomenon to be explained. In the individualistic paradigm, to explain M means making it the outcome of a set of actions m. In mathematical symbols, M=M(m); in words, M is a function of the actions m. Then, the actions are made understandable, in the Weberian sense, by relating them to the social environment, the situation S, of the actors: m=m(S). Finally, the situation itself has to be explained as the outcome of some macrosociological variables, or at least of variables located at a level higher than S. Let us call these higher-level variables P, so that S=S(P). On the whole, M = M{m[S(P)]}. In words, M is the outcome of actions, which are the outcome of the social environment of the actors, the latter being the outcome of macrosociological variables (Boudon 1987, p. 46).[2]

The equation m=m(S), mentioned above, expresses the ideal-typical relationship between actions and individual situations. This relationship, to which Boudon refers in all his works, from *L'inégalité des chances* (*Education, Opportunity and Social Inequality*) to the posthumous *Le rouet de Montaigne* (*Montaigne's spinning wheel*), via *L'idéologie* (*The Analysis of Ideology*), *L'art de se persuader* (*The art of self-persuasion*), *Le sens des valeurs* (*The Origin of Values*), invites us to adopt the perspective of the abstractly modeled actor and, aside from a-rational cases, to give full scope to the social actors' reasons for action. Within the framework of MI, the actors' relationship to their situation thus rests on two postulates which, as Boudon points out, are largely coextensive: the postulate of understanding and the postulate of rationality. In this regard, Boudon frequently emphasizes the organic links between Weber's or Simmel's interpretive sociology and MI.

This understanding approach (Verstehen), associated with the uncovering of the reasons behind the actions of social actors, stems from the social scientist's specific knowledge of their modes of action. It assumes that we can adopt the point of view of individuals and thus understand the cause of their action (understood in the Weberian sense as meaningful and oriented toward others), provided we adequately identify both the subjectively perceived external factors and the internal means of interpretation available to them. In this regard, Boudon emphasizes in various texts the role of the neo-Kantian epistemology shared by Max Weber and Georg Simmel, which involves considering the socially acquired meaning structures of individuals in order to understand their interpretive relationship to their situation (see Bulle and Morin 2024). These meaning structures help explain the motives or reasons for action, both personal and impersonal, of social actors that determine their behavior. This situation, therefore, involves both internalized structures (knowledge, beliefs, normative and conceptual systems, etc.) and external relational structures (patterns of interconnections or interdependence). The understanding perspective thus assumes that the influence of structures on action is essentially indirect, mediated by the interpretive activity of individuals. It relies on an abstract psychology that involves selecting the relevant elements from ideal-typical individual situations. Furthermore, this abstract psychology incorporates what Boudon refers to in his 1987 article as "context-bound rationality" (echoing Herbert Simon's "bounded rationality"), in contrast to universalizing conceptions of rationality. The associated principle of rationality does not pertain to the normative and often instrumental forms of rationality employed in economic models. Instead, as Boudon (1987, p. 63) writes, it assigns "a much broader meaning to this notion," a meaning that he identifies as "cognitive" in subsequent texts. Cognitive rationality assumes that the social actor chooses not only between means and ends, but also (implicitly) between different interpretations of problems, relying on beliefs or values to address issues that cannot be resolved through purely logical or consequentialist reasoning. However, in all cases, the relationship to reality is that of a highly simplified and abstract theoretical model, which does not necessarily imply full awareness of the reasons for action on the part of social actors.

[2] The equation, as stated by Morin (2023, p. 236) with reference to Boudon, is an effective alternative: $S=f[a(r, C)]$: "Each social phenomenon S is considered the collective effect f of actions a, which are driven by reasons r, within context C."

The individualist paradigm thus outlined is central to macrosociology, and applies to all levels of analysis – groups, organizations, societies – given the simplifications that can be made in theoretical models and explanations. On this basis, MI does not propose a general theory but focuses on uncovering the social mechanisms underlying observable phenomena. These generally present themselves as enigmas, whether historical and specific, behavioral and general, or empirical and social: "Why the French farming system was still underdeveloped when the British became modern? Why do members of a latent (i.e., unorganized) group tend to defect?"; or "Why does the expansion and democratization of education systems in advanced industrial societies not ipso facto have a noticeable effect on social mobility?"[3] Social phenomena particularly require sociological analysis when they represent the unintended effects of individual actions. Neglecting individual motives and focusing more on notions of collective structures and forces, on the other hand, tends to imply a form of congruence between macrological cause and effect, which assumes that individual actions are directly influenced by supra-individual structures. The individualistic method thus allows us to deepen explanations by identifying more explicit or authentic causal mechanisms. In response to the questions mentioned above, Boudon explains that in France, due to administrative centralization and the attractiveness of public offices, landlords tended to purchase these offices and abandon the direct management of their land, rather than increase agricultural productivity (Tocqueville 1952 [1856]). Moreover, Mancur Olson's (1965) theory of collective action helps us understand the subjective situation of members of a latent group who desire the results of collective action but are unwilling to bear the costs individually. Regarding inequality of educational opportunity and social mobility, in contrast to theories that directly link social inequality and educational inequality through cultural inequality, Boudon (1973) proposed a model that illustrates how individuals' educational choices are shaped by subjectively perceived opportunity structures. Their perceptions depend on their educational achievement and social origin, with inequality exacerbated by the cumulative effects of the choices they make throughout the schooling process. Boudon's model also demonstrates that structural school reforms, such as expanding access to educational levels, can mechanically reduce inequality of educational opportunity but have no significant effect on inequality of social opportunity unless accompanied by concomitant changes in the social structures.[4]

Demarcation of MI: a problematic shift in Boudon's conception

According to the above, Boudon provides clear criteria for characterizing MI, which recur systematically in his texts until the early 2000s – that is, for nearly twenty-five years, during which this theme was omnipresent in his writings. These criteria include: the individualism of the explanatory model; the understanding that links the observer to the actor; and the rationality of the actor in the broadest sense, which he prefers to identify as "cognitive" rather than limited.[5] As part of a critique of the standard version of rational choice theory – which employs instrumentalist, egoistic consequentialism and utility-optimizing principles, Boudon (2002) differentiates and hierarchizes these three postulates to define MI: the P1 postulate of individualism ("all social phenomena result from the combination of individual actions, beliefs or attitudes" – which I will refer to here as the postulate of causal individualism),[6] the P2 postulate of understanding, and the P3 postulate of (cognitive) rationality. The hierarchy of postulates follows a progression from the most open to the most closed conditions, with the most closed logically implying verification of

[3] For an overview of typical examples of MI explanations developed by Boudon in his various works, see Boudon (2023).

[4] See Bulle (2009) for an analysis which highlights the evolution of the intrinsic structure of educational opportunities in Boudon's model and Bulle (2016, 2019) for the design and implementation (applied to the French context) of a measure of intrinsic educational opportunities ("inequality within the selection process").

[5] See, for example, Boudon 1984, p. 66; Boudon 1987, p. 55; Boudon 1991, p. 118; Boudon 1995, p. 253-255; Boudon 2002, p. 9; Boudon and Filleuile 2002, p. 25; and Morin (2024) for an overview.

[6] Causal individualism can be defined as a methodological approach that involves analyzing a whole – here conceived as social – into units endowed with causal properties.

the most open conditions. Indeed, on the one hand, rationality in the broadest sense implies understanding, with understanding including certain additional, "a-rational" cases.[7] On the other hand, both rationality and understanding imply reference to individual actions or behaviors. However, 2003 marks a shift in Boudon's presentation of MI. From that year onwards, MI is no longer characterized by the postulates P1-P3, but is instead limited to the single postulate P1 of individualism. P1 is then presented less as a "postulate" and more as a self-evident principle (Boudon and Leroux 2003; Boudon 2003b, 2006). The approaches defined by postulates P1-P3, previously characteristic of MI, are now distinguished from MI in the strict sense. In his 2003 texts, they are described variously as a very general variant of MI (Boudon and Leroux 2003), as effective sociological theories (Boudon 2003b), or as the paradigm that Boudon (2003a) calls "the cognitivist theory of action." In 2006, postulates P1-P3 define valid explanatory approaches (Boudon 2006); in 2007, they represent a version of interpretive sociology (Boudon 2007); and in 2010, they refer to the paradigm envisioned by Boudon (Boudon 2010).

It should also be noted that by identifying MI with P1 in the 2006 and 2007 texts, Boudon links it to conceptions supposedly shared by Weber and Schumpeter – something that had not been the case previously. He had always believed that Schumpeter had carried out vacations for Weber and had likely introduced the term MI at Weber's suggestion. However, I have found no evidence of a connection between Weber and Schumpeter prior to 1910 (Swedberg 1991, p. 92). This anecdote, which Boudon believed, allowed him to attribute the very authorship of the concept to Weber. In fact, Schumpeter did not coin the expression, which appeared as early as 1904.[8] The key point is that, reduced to P1, MI becomes closer to Schumpeter in Boudon's view, making it easier for him to associate the economist with Weber to represent MI in this new, strict sense, now defined solely by postulate P1. Together, postulates P1 and P2 are said to define interpretive sociology in Weber's sense. What truly matters, however, are the postulates P1-P3, which now represent a version of Weberian interpretive sociology, specifically, the version championed by Boudon himself.

However, the distinction between three versions of Weber's methodological conceptions is artificial. Boudon derives the MI version (P1) from Weber's famous letter to the marginalist economist Robert Liefmann: "sociology, too, can only be pursued by taking as its point of departure the actions of one, or more (few or many) individuals, that is to say, with a strictly 'individualistic' method" (Weber 2012 [1920]). However, this reference to individual actions in Weber's view inherently implies the postulates of understanding and, correlatively, rationality, since human behavior is called "action" "if and insofar as the acting individual or individuals attach a subjective meaning to it" (Weber, 1922, § 1). Schumpeter himself probably did not equate MI with P1. When he wrote "when we describe certain economic processes, we must base them on the actions of individuals", he was referring to actions endowed with intentionality, as represented in particular by the models of neoclassical economists (i.e., P1-P3 along with postulates used for modeling, which would later define the standard version of rational choice theory). Finally, Weber (2024 [1922], p. 79) defines sociology as he sees it as "a science that aims to understand social action interpretively and thus to explain its course and effects causally," without distinguishing between an essentially interpretive version and one incorporating the principle of rationality. This is because, except in a few borderline cases, reference to the subjective meaning of action inherently involves the P3 principle of rationality in the broadest sense, applied through an ideal-typical

[7] The possibility of a-rational but not "irrational" motives – understandable essentially through empathy – justifies the distinction between the postulates of understanding and rationality: "I regularly close my eyes without realizing it. This action responds to the needs of my organism; it is not the product of reasons formed in my mind. I am unable to pronounce a particular English word correctly: this is because my vocal cords have not been accustomed in good time to producing the phonemes it includes. I'm disgusted by a dish that the Japanese consider a delicacy: This is because I haven't acquired in time the habitus corparis evoked by medieval Aristotelianism" (Boudon, 2003b, p. 20).

[8] The expression "individualist method" was used as early as the nineteenth century in the context of the *Methodenstreit* between Carl Menger and the German Historical School. The term MI can be found in a 1904 text by the French philosopher and historian Élie Halévy (see Halévy 1904 and Borlandi 2020).

approach. As a result, the P1-P2 definition of Weberian interpretive sociology does not fully make sense either.

Reducing MI to postulate P1 alone raises several other significant problems. First, Boudon presents P1 as a truism, which tends to deprive it of substantive content, especially since he is quick to add that effective or explanatory theories are also based on postulates P2 and P3. Consequently, MI, when reduced to P1, loses its particular methodological significance. Second, the rejection of Pl, equated with the rejection of MI in the strict sense, is supposed to characterize holism (Boudon 2003b), which also trivializes the methodological problems of holism.[9] Third, reducing MI to P1 expands the scope of MI explanations to include individual behaviors resulting from processes that are not only unconscious – processes that P2-P3 do not reject as long as they can be linked to internalized subjective meanings – but also processes that cannot be meaningfully interpreted in this regard. This is methodologically problematic. As Popper (1994) noted, it is generally more fruitful to revise our conception of individual situations than to question the principle of rationality, and this is even more true in the case of the principle of understanding. Moreover, in explanations that retain P1 but reject P2 and P3, once individuals are deprived of subjectivity in the sense of P2 and P3, even if they are still seen as the causes of action, they become more susceptible to the direct influence of environmental factors, including those encapsulated by collective concepts. In such cases, the previously established oppositions between MI and methodological holism would no longer apply. Indeed, some of the historicist theories against which MI was historically constituted[10] can now fall under MI when the latter is reduced to P1. MI approaches can now also include functionalist theories that rely on individual action but relate it to equilibria determined at a supra-individual level, or the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (see e.g. Bourdieu 1985), who sought to "break out of structuralist objectivism" by reintroducing individual agency with the notion of habitus (a system of enduring, structured, structuring dispositions). This scope extends even further, as MI reduced to P1 should logically encompass approaches from depth psychology, thereby extending MI to any framework, albeit without any specific methodological focus.[11] However, Boudon consistently distances MI from any psychological hypothesis that portrays individuals as mere playthings of unconscious cognitive processes associated with their group membership. He cites, as examples, the psychological interpretations of Gustave Le Bon and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (Boudon 1995). John Stuart Mill can also be included as Mill argues that, based on associationist psychology and the supposed effects of interaction with the environment, individuals adopt collective behaviors that form the basis of major sociological laws.[12]

Finally, the principle of rationality (in the broadest sense) is constitutive of MI in the methodological work of its founders (Carl Menger, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber) and early proponents (Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, and Karl Popper). Therefore, its reduction to P1

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[9] This is nevertheless consistent with Jon Elster's approach, for whom MI "is trivially true" but who tends to emphasize the subtleties of methodological holism.

[10] See for instance Bulle 2024 on this subject.

[11] This is depth psychology, not just the unconscious, which only becomes problematic when it is presumed to conflict with conscious meaning. Weber considered certain exceptions to the principle of rationality, and concluded that they should simply be regarded as non-meaningful facts:

> It is possible that future research will also discover uninterpretable regularities in certain meaningful behaviors, as little as has been the case so far [...] Acknowledging their causal significance would not change in the least the task of sociology (and the action sciences in general), which is to understand meaning-oriented action through interpretation. It would merely introduce, at certain points within the comprehensibly interpretable motivational contexts, non-meaningful facts of the same order as others already mentioned above (Weber 2024 [1922], p. 90).

[12] Popper (1966 [1945], p. 303) acknowledges that Mill seems to share a key idea with MI – namely, that the actions of collectives must be explained by the actions of the individuals who comprise them. However, this does not make Mill a representative of MI, as his psychologism, since Popper points out, forces him to adopt a historicist method in which the social environment exerts a dominant influence. This leads Mill to invoke the notion of the "spirit of the people," a concept used by certain historicist approaches to explain individual behavior: "Yet to whomsoever well considers the matter, it must appear that the laws of national (or collective) character are by far the most important class of sociological laws" (Mill 1843, ch. 9, § 4).

is also problematic from the perspective of the historical emergence of MI.[13] Nevertheless it should be noted that MI is sometimes interpreted in a broad, minimalist, sense, as opposing the misuse of collective concepts, but without imposing any particular constraint in terms of rationality (see Bouvier 2011; Elster 2023). This perspective is also adopted in recent approaches in analytic sociology (see on this subject Bulle and Phan 2017; Bulle 2023a; Di Iorio and Chen 2019; Di Iorio 2023a; Di Iorio 2024; Manzo 2023; Opp 2024). In my view, and for the reasons outlined above, these interpretations overlook MI's logical commitment to the three postulates P1-P3.

Understanding Boudon's shift

How can we explain this major shift in Boudon's conception of the scope of MI, which raises multiple problems, including the continuity of his views on the subject? To answer this question, we must consider the criticisms of MI within the scientific community since its popularization in the 1950s. These critiques have tended to interpret it first through the neopositivist lens of the dominant epistemology of the time, and later through the physicalist perspective of the analytic philosophy that succeeded it. Both lenses tend to reject subjectivism and, correlatively, to embrace the reductionist problematics widely debated under their influence. In this intellectual context, MI has tended to be interpreted as a reductionist approach that advocates a focus on individuals to the exclusion of structures (see Bouvier 2023; Bulle 2023b, 2025; Di Iorio 2023b). In this respect, Boudon (1995, p. 253) observes that MI is often misunderstood, and Boudon (1999, p. 375) describes MI without naming it. Against this unfavorable backdrop for MI in some academic circles, the Swedish sociologist Lars Udehn (2001, 2002) published a comprehensive work on the intellectual history of MI in 2001 and an article "The Changing Face of Methodological Individualism" in *Annual Review of Sociology* in 2002. Udehn had devoted his 1987 dissertation to MI, and his 2001 book represents a substantially revised and less critical version, reflecting the developments he observed (Udehn 2001, p. 24). In these texts, the sociologist adopts an integrative perspective, grouping under the banner of MI all approaches that can be linked to the postulate P1, decoupled from questions of understanding and rationality. Udehn argues that the approaches associated with P1 represent multiple, more or less coherent versions of MI. These approaches, which essentially refer to individual behavior, questionably include classical economics, Mill's psychologism, and social contract theories. Moreover, Udehn tends to identify reductionist ideas in Menger, the acknowledged founder of MI in economics, and in Weber, the acknowledged founder of MI in sociology. For instance, Udehn (2001, p. 166) highlights Menger's reference to Robinson Crusoe as a method of analyzing the variable value of goods based on their utility for survival. However, in a text by Hayek on this subject cited by Udehn, Hayek explicitly emphasizes the intrinsic link between Menger's MI, the method of understanding, and the principle of rationality, that is, the postulates P2 and P3 as defined by Boudon which, by referring to the interpretive activity of individuals, protect against reductionism:

> The consistent use of the intelligible conduct of the individuals as the building stones from which to construct models of complex market structures is of course the essence of the method that Menger himself described as 'atomistic'[14] (or occasionally, in manuscript notes, as 'compositive') and that later came to be known as 'methodological individualism' [...] Unlike the physical sciences which analyse the directly observed phenomena into hypothetical elements, in the social sciences, we start with our acquaintance with the elements and use them to build models of possible configurations of the complex structures into which they can combine and which are not in the same manner accessible to direct observation as are the elements. This raises a number of important issues, on the most difficult of which I can touch only briefly. Menger believes that in observing

[13] See Bulle (2025).

[14] It should be noted that Menger's atomism does not refer to the atomism of the British empiricists, which focuses on the analysis of sensible impressions, but rather to the decomposition of a whole into basic units – specifically, the P1 postulate of MI.

> the actions of other persons we are assisted by a capacity of understanding the meaning of such actions in a manner in which we cannot understand physical events (Hayek 1978, pp. 276-277).

Similarly, Udehn (2001, p. 191) argues that for Weber, sociology is "a science of individuals and their actions, not of society," so that society exists for him, "neither as an entity, nor as a 'level of reality'". However, for Weber, this is a methodological claim, rather than an ontological one: Any science, in his view, is defined by the perspective from which it seeks to apprehend reality, not by an ontology (see Feuerhahn 2023). This also explains why Weber argues that psychology is not a foundational science for the social sciences, because society and social actors are not considered from an ontological standpoint, but as relative theoretical concepts. Moreover, while Weber, for reasons that need not be elaborated, tended to avoid collective concepts and to favor their nominalist interpretation, he developed numerous references to various types of society as such, including "traditional", "feudal", "commercial", "communistic", "mixed", etc.

In the broad perspective he has developed, Udehn characterizes social science approaches associated with P1 based on their positioning along a scale of reductionism, indexed to the exogenous role played by social structures. He thus observes a progression from a strong, original form of MI that increasingly incorporates structures. Finally, he describes the approaches of "leading sociologists such as James Coleman and Raymond Boudon" as "best characterized as structural individualism" (Udehn 2002, p. 496) because of the importance they attach to social structures.

A few points about reduction need to be clarified here. The reference to higher levels of complexity, such as structures, does not, in itself, distinguish a non-reductionist approach from a reductionist one. Causal individualism, as associated with P1, is reductionist if, and only if, the causal properties of the basic units involved are independent of the wholes, allowing theories about wholes to be, in principle, reducible to theories about those units (their parts).[15] The exogenous variables essentially refer to the boundary conditions of models, meaning that reduction does not imply their absence. However, reduction logically invites regression ad infinitum, to a point of origin. As noted by Udehn (2002, p. 501):

> It is often argued, for instance, that it is impossible to endogenize all social institutions, since the attempt to do so leads to an infinite regress [...] If this argument is correct, strong methodological individualism is not a viable position, even if ontological individualism is self-evidently true, as most methodological individualists seem to believe.

This logical regression ad infinitum suggested by the reductionist approach is referred to by Popper (1966 [1945], pp. 304-305) in his critique of Mill's psychologism:

> It is a desperate position because this theory of a pre-social human nature which explains the foundation of society – a psychologistic version of the "social contract" – is not only an historical myth, but also, as it was, a methodological myth.

In any case, the presence of structural variables as exogenous variables in the models does not always imply ipso facto the interdependence of the causal properties of individuals. The degree of reduction based on this presence provides, at best, an imprecise perspective on the reductionist

[15] Intertheoretical reduction was originally defined by advocates of, or influenced by, logical empiricism (see, in particular, Oppenheim and Putnam 1958; Nagel 1961). It is reworked here in a post-positivist version consistent with earlier definitions, which specifically imply the possibility of translating the laws of the reduced theory in terms of the laws of the reducing theory.

implications of social science approaches. In MI, it is principles P2 and P3 that bring the inherently social nature of individual actions by referring to their interpretive properties.

Udehn's approach motivated Boudon's shift. Boudon even notes: "Udehn (2001) provides a useful survey of IM variants, but he seems not to recognize the logical importance of the psychological question that the social sciences must adopt" (Boudon 2003b, p. 66). However, one might ask, why, despite the challenges posed by abandoning the role of postulates P2 and P3 in defining MI, Boudon changed his presentation of the paradigm, apparently after reading the Swedish sociologist.

To answer this question, it is necessary to try to examine Boudon's interpretation of the situation. When he worked with Davidovitch in 1962-1963 and began to explore the idea of an individualist approach, he was unfamiliar with the term "MI" (Boudon and Leroux 2003, p. 50). He did not use it in *L'inégalité des chances* (*Education, Opportunity and Social Inequality*) in 1973. In *Effets pervers et ordre Social* (*The Unintended Consequences of Social Action*), Boudon (1977, p. 248) refers to MI primarily within the framework of economics, noting that we can identify a variety of interactionist paradigms in sociology (Marxian types, Tocquevillian, Weberian, Mertonian). He writes that "economic theory as a whole rests on a paradigm to which tradition gives the name of *methodological individualism*", a statement that leads him to question the epistemological coherence of sociology. At this stage, MI was not yet considered by Boudon as a general paradigm for the social sciences, although Philippe Perrenoud (1978) wrote a review of the work in *La Revue française de sociologie* entitled "*Les limites de l'individualisme méthodologique. A propos des* Effets pervers et ordre social de R. Boudon" ("The limits of methodological individualism. On R. Boudon's *Effets pervers et ordre social*"). It was apparently when the French historian, François Furet, commissioned him to write a book introducing sociology for a collection devoted to the major disciplines of the social sciences, that Boudon decided to make MI "the common thread" of *La Logique du social* (The logic of social action), published in 1979. MI seemed to him "henceforth to be the common denominator of convincing analyses produced by the social sciences" (Boudon and Leroux 2003, p. 59).

Boudon thus developed MI as an epistemologically unifying project for sociology at the very end of the 1970s, at a time when MI was still little known and poorly understood. This was compounded by the fact that it had been rather clumsily defended by Karl Popper's collaborator John Watkins (see Bouvier 2023; Bulle 2018, p. 2025), who is often cited by critics of MI. Udehn produced an important work, supported by analyses of classical texts, which was destined to become a reference on the subject. Boudon adopted MI's minimalist approach (reduced to P1) in line with Udehn's, especially as this change enabled him to continue defending a version semantically free of any critical charge. Udehn had positioned his work prominently among the variants of "weak" MI, and Boudon conformed to this rather than oppose Udehn on the definition of MI, manifestly believing that the semantic battle was not worth the effort. In this context, his decision may seem subjectively rational. However, as I have argued, a slightly deeper analysis reveals that reducing MI to postulate P1 alone is confusing and, ultimately, untenable.

Conclusion

MI, as presented by Boudon between 1979 and 2002, represents its constitutive and coherent version. It is grounded in a methodological principle shared with the natural sciences: The analysis of a whole into basic units endowed with causal properties that enable the study of the whole in question. MI thus establishes a first postulate (P1) identifying individuals as the primary sources of action (causal individualism). For Boudon, as for the founders of MI to whom he usually refers - primarily Weber and Simmel, but also Menger - the social sciences have an advantage over the natural sciences in that they have direct knowledge of the mode of action of their causal units. This mode of action, which brings principles of understanding and rationality into play, is intrinsically tied to social structures, particularly those internalized as structures of meaning by social actors,

from which they derive the subjective meaning of their actions.[16] This interpretive approach justifies the inclusion of postulates P2 and P3, which involve understanding and rationality, as integral components of the constitutive version of MI. Consequently, contrary to popular belief, MI is fundamentally opposed to reductionism.

I believe that Boudon, prompted by the negative reception of MI in the literature, shifted his conception of the methodological foundation of MI from postulates P1-P3 to postulate P1 alone, thus aligning with Udehn's approach to MI. This shift allowed him to further develop a version of MI that incorporated postulates P1-P3 while remaining free from the prevalent criticisms. Boudon himself never deviated from his overarching aim: enriching the central paradigm of macrosociology through his work on methods, interpretive sociology, and the rationality of social actors.

In an article published in the late 2000s (Boudon 2008), Boudon observes the failure of the great theories of the social sciences, which he argues have all relied on a conception of causality modeled on the natural sciences. These approaches, he notes, operate "in congruence with the postulate of materialism," a framework that has underpinned the success of the natural sciences and assumes "the primacy of the body over the mind," presenting the human mind as "an emanation of the organism's exchanges with its environment." Whether individuals are seen as driven by *social, cultural, or biological forces*, these forces share the characteristic of escaping the individuals' "control." However, as Boudon points out, while the general explanatory principles driving the natural and social sciences are comparable, they have different access to the way their proper objects interact, so that:

> Materialism is a valid postulate in the natural sciences, but not in the human sciences, for the reason that it is realistic in the first case, but not in the second. It is realistic to see the natural world as the effect of material causes, and superstitious to see it as the effect of final causes. In the human sciences, the terms of this relationship are reversed (Boudon 2008, p. 45).

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[16] As Boudon also argues, the formation of this meaning implies a neo-Kantian form of approach to reason - based on the use of tools of thought, conceptual systems, and so on - that is irreducible to mechanistic associative processes. (Bulle and Morin 2024).

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