

Gestalt Switches in the idea of context: a macro dimension of the world for every theory of action

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Abstract. This paper consists of three parts. First, some epistemological limits to the contextualization of social dynamics are discussed. Then a trajectory of the idea of context is briefly sketched by reconstructing three crucial oscillations of the concept around a sort of barycentre with respect to two typologies: the one distinguishing between situation and frame, the other between global, analytical and structural properties. Lastly, procedural approaches aimed at explaining a contextual effect that combine the micro and the macro level are examined, and some rules of thumb are suggested in order to correctly associate logics of action, contextual properties and research designs.

Keywords: Situation/Frame, Large Scale Data-set Analysis, Rational Action Theory.

1. Apories and fallacies in the process of explaining-by-context

An indexical behavior indicates a specific state of affairs: “I” refers to whoever is speaking, “now” to the time, “here” to the place of utterance. Explaining a social/demographic behavior means indexicalize it, i.e. inserting it in a context-dependent framework. But social researchers try to explore the world without any privileged point of view, and searching general rules leads to bracket the context. This aporia and many else make “context” a concept epistemologically frail.

1. Inserting an action into a nested structure of hierarchical ‘layers’ (as in multilevel analysis) apparently bypasses the obstacle of indexical loss, by a sequence of causal descriptions. But a large range of “action trees”, variably extended like an accordion, may correspond to the same outcome. Thus, an indexicalization procedure can produce an indefinite range of causal descriptions, hindering the choice of one explanatory model.

2. Explaining an action by means of an action tree implies that causes and effects are commensurable one another. On the contrary, an action tree meets one or more points of discontinuity: a sequence of macro-events enters, from a certain point on, the region of micro-events, then it can shift into the area of psychological ‘events’, up to the area of neuronal dynamics. What to do, therefore, in those discontinuities?

3. A basic impasse frails the quantitative social research: the aim of explaining an action or behaviour is pursued, as a rule, by reifying in form of variables both the states of being and the actions of individuals. This strategy emerges in the 1930s, when the quantitative social research begins to cope with large data-sets. “Variable analysis” (Abbott, 1997) rapidly becomes the norm in social processes analysis, thanks to the rise of the opinion polling and market research, which in turn are favoured by the advancing sampling methods, whose theory is based on the decontextualization of the social actor. By this approach, “to be theoretical is to make assertions about the relation of abstractions like gender, capitalism, education, bureaucracy”. Variables are no more proxies of the

reality as well the reality itself, individuals are no more actors in social relations as well units of analysis. The variables' independence is enshrined in the phrase 'net of other variables'. Social actions have the same causal meaning whatever its context.

2. Gestalt switches in defining social context

Comprehending the logic of the social actors means elaborate "middle-range theories of contextualization": a challenging oxymore. The keystone for this theoretical challenge is the category of context. But what do the scientific community mean when using this term? Did the meaning remain stable over the time, or fluctuate? Two typologies consent us to situate the historical evolution of this term in the history of social thought.

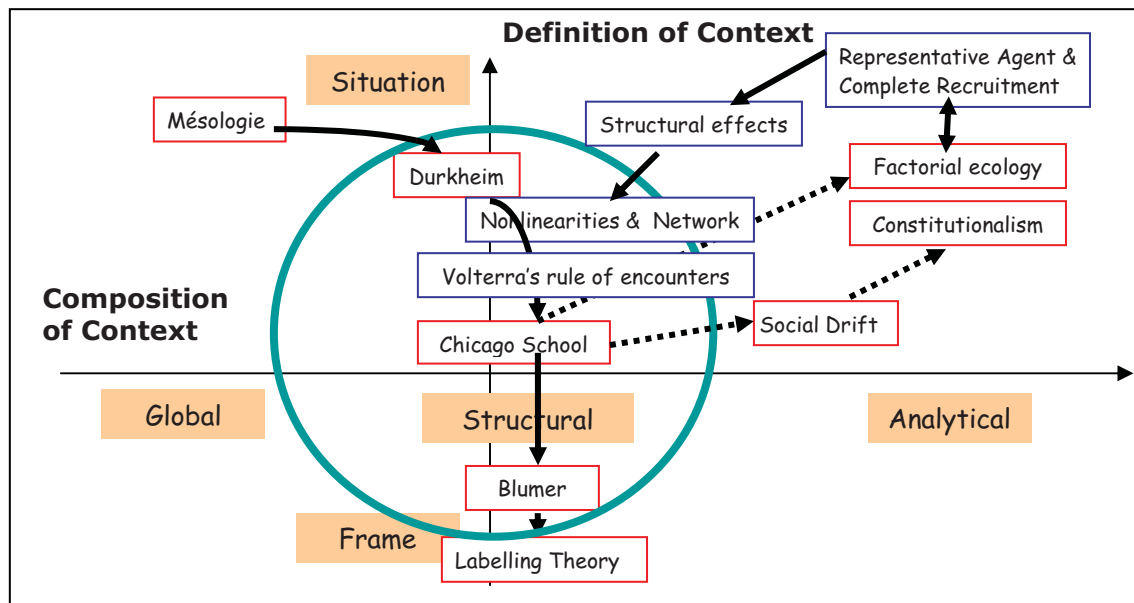
The first one classifies three types of properties which describe collectives: a) analytical properties, obtained by performing some mathematical operations upon some property of each single member; b) global properties, not based on information about the individuals; c) structural ones, obtained by performing some operation on data about the relations of each member to some or all of the other. The second one distinguishes the context as a situation (i.e. the set of objective parameters the observer - not the actor - values as remarkable to situate a subject and explain his/her actions) or as a frame (i.e. the process by which the actor himself, selecting the data and events basing on his own philosophy of the world, interprets and re-constructs, i.e. 'defines', the situation, attributing to it his own meaning). The meaning of a situation does not pre-exist before its definition, which is at variance with the logical premises of variable analysis.

An idea of context as a property both structural and equidistant between situation and frame should consent us to optimize the pregnancy of the rule of Ego's strategic autonomy. Nevertheless, whenever the objective, situational component of the human realm is neglected, the (idiographic) uniqueness of the frame makes a universal (nomothetic) law impossible; in the same way, whenever we neglect the subjective side of the human experience, the pure situation does not permit to comprehend any intrinsic (intensional) relationship between events and actions. The story of the theories on social and demographic behavior shows continuous switches and oscillations around a sort of 'centroid', i.e. a barycentre with respect of both the cited typologies. Along 150 years of social sciences we can observe at least three main Gestalt-switches:

- a) a centripetal oscillation, approaching the 'centroid', starting from the positive criminology to Durkheim's 'minority effect', up to the Chicago School;
- b) a centrifugal, bifurcated, countermovement (dotted lines) in the 1940s and 1950s, marked on the one hand by loss of consciousness of the structural property of a context, reduction of social disorganization to the "proliferation of individual disorganization", and total adhesion to the 'variable paradigm' through the Factorial Ecology; on the other hand by a reduction of the context to the individual frame, sliding from the interactionist equilibrium point to the radical approach of the labelling theory.
- c) a new centripetal oscillation (blue arrows) within the socio-economic studies, from the equivocal adoption of the 'representative agent' as a centroid of a firms population, to the econometric formulation by Nataf & Klein of the rules of cross-level transformation, from Blalock's analytical relation between ecological and individual correlation

$$\rho_{yxT} = \eta_{xz} \times \eta_{yz} \times \rho_{yxBG} + \sqrt{(1 - \eta_{xz}^2)} \times \sqrt{(1 - \eta_{yz}^2)} \times \rho_{yxWG} \quad (1)$$

(where Z is the ecological index) to the Goodman's 'complete recruitment model', from the discovery of the hermeneutic power of nonlinearities as clues of structural effects, up to the translation of 'structural' into 'network' effects by Blau, Laumann *et al.*



3. Explaining by mechanisms and beyond

Are the frame approach and the situational one really incompatible each other? It depends on the theory of action we choose. Researchers “theoretically focus on the *constraints* of individual actions rather than in individual’s intentions”. And situations are contexts “where the actions of a great number of individuals are *channelled by external constraints, leaving little room for the importance of individual choice*” (Blossfeld, 1996, our italics). Although this is not true for all the frames, just assuming this logic of full subordination to the contextual constraints makes the rational choice theory surprisingly fine tuned with the variable approach.

An instrumentally rational man is used to be conceived as an atomized actor, perfectly able to take always and in any case the best choice, with limitless cognitive capabilities. He is thus, however, totally determined by the set of rules of decision-making, rigidly derived from beliefs, preferences and exogenous opportunities. Rational choice theory makes the action fully determined, de-contextualized, measurable in form of variable. This is why Goldthorpe (1996) claims for an alliance between the quantitative analysis of large-scale data-sets and the deployment of the rational action theory. His suggestion opens the door to a large range of procedural approaches aiming at explaining the contextual influence on the individual action, holding together micro- and macro-level.

A procedural approach is proposed by Hedstrom & Swedberg (1996). Instead of analysing relationships between phenomena all on the macro level, their generation of ‘social mechanisms’ first moves from macro level down to micro one, and then backs up again. The procedure consists of three steps, aiming to establish respectively: a) how macro-level events or conditions affect the individuals, b) how the individual assimilates the impact of these macro-level events, c) how a number of individuals, by their actions and interactions, generate macro-level outcomes. Both the first and the second step, seen as

descriptions of decision-making processes basically laying on the classical rational action theory (RAT), are estimated by causal models employing large-scale data-sets. For the third step a less theory-oriented method is suggested, resorting to empirically calibrated agents (ECA) models, which do not privilege any particular logic of action.

The divergent treatment between the first two steps and the last one draws its roots in a misunderstanding Coleman's (1986) assessment: "It is the micro-to-macro relation that proved the intellectual hurdle both for empirical research and for theory". It should be a more reasonable strategy, on the contrary, to follow three simple rules of thumb:

1. It is true that micro-to-macro step presents both theory and method problems, as it does not exist a unique rule of action explaining all the aggregation dynamics; however, the macro-to-micro arrow too presents similar problems.

2. The "quantitative analysis of large-scale data-sets" (QAD) approach makes sense to explain macro-to-micro relations if we accept that action is totally driven by the economic covering law. However, this alliance QAD-RAT is not always in force.

3. Every scenario of collective action claims its own peculiar logic of action (whether it is matter of instrumental or value rationality, of moods and drives or conformity to group norms); and both the logic of action and the proper contextual scenario claim their own peculiar research design.

A syncretistic elaboration of theories and methods is the razor's edge we have to walk on. Abell (2004) suggests to coin a distinctive way of combining quantitative approach with small-scale techniques and methods centred on 'narratives', like sequence analysis, event structure analysis, stream analysis. The structure of the narrative (a map of a set of actors & actions, showing which actor performs which action) can be well represented by a di-graph, where nodes are the states of the world and two types of arcs represent respectively causal events and actions. In the narrative approach, of course, comparing individual di-graphs is a must to understand a social action or a demographic behaviour, as well as in the quantitative large-scale analysis, since Stuart Mill on. And comparing narratives is still an unsolved problem. If we shall be able to give for granted this basic rule of the scientific work, a correct alliance between variable and narrative approach will be the only way-out from the golden cage of a world reduced to a set of variables.

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