

INDIVIDUALISM IN MODERN THOUGHT: FROM ADAM SMITH TO HAYEK. BY LORENZO INFANTINO. LONDON AND NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE, 1998

Professor Infantino has applied his considerable skills to the task of freeing the social sciences from the deforming constraints of methodological collectivism. Relying on the methodological individualism pioneered and developed by Bernard de Mandeville, Adam Smith, Herbert Spencer, Carl Menger, Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek and Karl Popper, Infantino renders a parsimonious statement of the theory of unintentional order. As a sociologist, he directs his colleagues to the similar themes that inform the writings of Georg Simmel and Max Weber in the larger context of his searching examinations of the constructivistic modes of thought so thoroughly ingrained in the major works of Émile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons.

Those who followed in the wake of Mandeville and Smith have made it possible to locate each of the major elements of unintentional order in these seminal writings. Therein, the human species is treated as social in its origins and constrained by what Infantino calls a “double-entry of account.” Ego acting in view of his or her own interests depends upon means supplied by Others. To secure these means, Ego must supply material and services that are means to Others, used in furthering their own interests, which need not be approved by nor even known to Ego. Ego’s own plan becomes a constituent part of a composition of individual actions that no one could have planned nor even imagined, *ex ante*.

Over his first three chapters, Infantino provides ample demonstration that the *social glue* that has been of such great concern to sociologists is clearly recognizable in the concessions individuals are bound to offer one another in the course of accumulating the means of their own satisfactions. These are the norms most relevant to the sociological enterprise. Arising directly out of interaction, they measure “the relationships which actually exist in society” (p. 17). The alternatives so prominently displayed in the mainstream of sociological theory and research are norms imposed by authority. At best, they measure relationships as imagined by an elite, which also seeks to bring them about.

In the case of economic exchange, norms appear in the form of prices. But if prices are merely the costs that individuals must accept to further their own action plans, they can be generalized to encompass all the accommodations and concessions individuals extend to others in social exchange—which itself is inclusive of all varieties of purely voluntary social interaction. Following a logical and painstaking argument, Infantino embellishes his thesis with the simple observation that “It is not by chance that Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ was represented by a network of prices, and the ‘impartial spectator’ was constituted by a network of norms” (p. 163).

In his endeavor to communicate effectively with sociological colleagues, Infantino has had to overcome a number of potential obstacles, some of which are merely historical and others more directly theoretical. On the historical side, he corrects the impression that Adam Smith found any substantive grounds for disagreement with Mandeville. Despite Smith's assertion that Mandeville's notions were "in almost every respect erroneous," Infantino has juxtaposed a sufficiency of passages from the works of both authors to establish their theoretical consistency. Turning more directly toward the theoretical, he dissolves the putative inconsistency between Smith's writings in *Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations* by demonstrating that "impartial spectator" and "invisible hand" coexist easily in the earlier work. Once the pretense of logical moral foundations has been rejected, as it was not only by Mandeville and Smith, but also by Hume, any fundamental distinction between the two ideas must vanish.

Sociologists should take a lively interest in this discussion, wherein they will appreciate the contours of C.H. Cooley's "looking glass self," G.H. Mead's "generalized other" and a neat sorting out of the social-scientific meaning that can properly be associated with the idea of "sympathy." Relying on Adam Smith (1976, pp. 158–59), Infantino suggests that sympathy merely allows us to see "ourselves as others see us or as they would see us if they knew everything about us" (p. 25). Nothing in the concept links sympathy to a sharing of values or goals. As he says, "sympathy is not a sentiment," and "putting oneself in the Other's place does not mean sharing his 'sentiments'; it is simply equivalent to adopting his observation post" (pp. 29–30). Those whose introduction to the history of social thought may have been slighted or forgotten should be impressed by the social psychological sophistication of these eighteenth-century writers. They insisted on the primacy of learning over "nature" and the utter importance of what we now call "primary socialization." However strongly contemporary sociologists and social psychologists may agree on these points, they appear hesitant to allow historical applications, which would eliminate the idea that human beings have depended at some critical point on the bequest of a societal template from some mysterious source or other.

On the theoretical side most directly, Infantino has been obliged to grapple with the sociological concept of unequal exchange. His treatment of this matter is excellent, but he may have underestimated the importance of the concept to many sociologists and the tenacity with which they embrace it. The mainstream of the sociological literature on inequality is grounded in one way or another on the possibility of unequal exchange. Infantino traces the basic idea to the mercantilists who held exchange to be a zero-sum proposition (p. 39). The theory of unintentional order, beginning with the ideas of specialization and the division of labor, depends fundamentally on an exchange process that is positive sum. It is equally clear that methodological collectivism depends just as heavily on mercantilist teachings, reworked as may be, into a neoclassical form that can be described as empirical at final equilibrium (e.g., Coleman 1990) or into a Durkheimian form wherein the values of an elite can stand proxy for the dictates of a *collective conscience* (e.g., Blau 1964). This is not the place to discuss the sociological affinity for the zero-sum game. Suffice it to say that Infantino has rested his case on absolutely solid ground. Exchange is an analytic concept that, by definition, excludes every element of force and fraud. Whether or not an absolutely pure

exchange has ever been transacted between two human beings is clearly not an empirical question insofar as we are dealing with axioms; but the conceptual distinction is perfectly clear. In defense of the sociologists, it can be said that once *the actor* and *action* have been banished, Weber's distinction between class (market) and party (power) becomes meaningless and with it the distinction between exchange and coercion.

The ambivalence of sociologists to the presence of actors emerges as an important theme in the critical chapters that follow. The incorporation of choice leaves ample space for ignorance, error, force, and fraud; but the contrary does not hold. If choice is eliminated, nothing remains but stimulus and response. Notwithstanding the diminishing residuals of ignorance and error, it will no longer matter whether one says that responses have been triggered, elicited, induced, or coerced.

Durkheim is treated over two chapters that illustrate almost paradoxically how a thoroughgoing constructivistic cast of mind can be transformed—with only nominal changes—into a consistent statement of the cybernetics of unintentional order. Durkheim's most glaring deficit was his ignorance of the economics of his day. His polemics directed at economists, members of the "Orthodox School," etc., are remarkable in their neglect of formal citation. Infantino quotes Bergson, who wrote that with Durkheim "one never encountered a fact" (quoted in Lukes 1972, p. 52). Infantino reveals Durkheim's strawman as none other than John Stuart Mill. This choice is remarkable in view of the avalanche of new ideas which animated the social sciences in the wake of a still recent marginalist revolution.

Durkheim's caricature of economists as positing "originally isolated and independent individuals, who consequently enter into relationship only to co-operate" (Durkheim 1964, p. 279) was irresponsibly false in 1893, but was carried forward nonetheless by Parsons and continues to this day to inform the sociological view of its own *raison d'être*. The Durkheimian solution to a problem of order, which could not have been approached by the economists he imagined, was to cast the State as the supreme "organ of moral discipline" (Durkheim 1958, p. 72), making it an independent variable in the Hegelian manner (p. 63).

Durkheim never ventured into the arena of social origins. He was content merely to stress the impossibility that any such creature as *homo economicus* could have emerged to take on the task of societal architect. From this vantage point, he felt justified in arguing that society could only be a phenomenon *sui generis*. Infantino's explication of this troublesome concept focuses on Durkheim's decision to disallow by consideration the results of interaction by its principal parties in favor of a *real third person* upon whom these results became *crystallized*. This third person becomes the common sensorium that subordinates individuals to the common goals, which, in Durkheim's view, were necessary to society's existence (p. 75). In defense of the Open Society, here and in subsequent chapters, Infantino is only obliged to defend the proposition that human beings benefit (or suffer) from their own experiences. If this is true then the "privileged point of view on the world" must be that of a recognizable elite and not a reality *sui generis*. He places Durkheim's method in the larger context of collectivist thought, "with its conceit of defining the social Absolute" which will always be limited to "placing some individuals in an unjustified position of privilege" (p. 76).

Infantino uses chapter 5 to draw out the detailed struggle between Durkheim's profound disdain for the market and his most genuine sociological insights. By carefully noting Durkheim's frequent lapses into methodological individualism, he is able to reconcile Durkheim both with Herbert Spencer and Georg Simmel. "The price to be paid" for this reconciliation "is the elimination of 'social realism,'" whereas "The advantages lie in the possibility of reaching a clear sociological method, and of throwing full light on the complex phenomenon that is unintentional order" (p. 98).

Chapter 6 documents the methodological individualism that had developed in sociology a generation before Talcott Parsons embarked upon a career that established his preeminence over a generation of sociological theoreticians. Infantino compares key writings of Carl Menger with those of Simmel and then examines the work of Max Weber aided by the critical eye of Ludwig von Mises. Following Menger, Simmel rejected the central thesis of historical realism—that "historical science is simply a mirror image of the event 'as it really happened'"—in favor of an a priori argument to which historians resort, if only implicitly, to arrange the "facts" into patterns of relief and background (Simmel 1977, pp. vii–viii and 76–77). With Menger he asserted the evolutionary origins of money as a tool capable of being put to a variety of unforeseeable uses. Simmel's contention that purely monetary obligations are those most congruent with personal freedom derives from the separation that money affords between services rendered and the goals that are privately pursued by actors. This opens our view to "a society that renounces a 'unitary' system of ends" (p. 114).

Max Weber treated sociology as *universal history* rather than as a social science "that aims at universally valid propositions" (Mises 1976, p. 106). Professor Infantino is thus obliged to reduce Weber's four-fold typology to the fundamental dichotomy of "value-rational" and "instrumentally rational" actions, on the way to presenting the ideas and insights that most evidently place him in the tradition of methodological individualism (p. 129).

Weber rejected "psychologism," arguing that sociology bears no closer relation to psychology than to any other science. He was among the first to derive declining marginal utility from the multiplicity of means and ends in the face of scarcity, independently of any physiological or psychological tendencies to satiation. Along with Boris Brutzkus and Mises, he grasped the importance of market prices for calculations that could approach any reasonable standard of economic efficiency. Most importantly, Weber insisted on the ultimacy of the individual in social action. For some cognitive purposes, entities such as associations, corporations, and states could "be treated as the subjects of rights and duties or as the performers of legally significant actions." But Weber immediately specified that "the subjective interpretation of action in sociological work" necessitated treatment of these collectivities "as solely the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons" (Weber 1978, p. 107). To acknowledge the particular acts of individual persons is to avoid the constructivist reification, which discovers them as mere emanations of the supraindividual.

Infantino's final substantive chapter is devoted to the early Parsons, introduced as an individual whose most basic impulses directed him to illuminate what he considered the necessarily moral foundations of human society by means of a

sociology in which the *explanation* of social action could be found in its *justification* (pp. 158–59). Impressed perhaps by the startling successes of Mendeleev and others in the physical sciences, Parsons conceived a continuum for the sciences that began on the left, let us say, with the sciences of ultimate means such as physics and chemistry which deal with matter itself. Lying to the right of these sciences were those like engineering and economics which treat the relation between means and ends. On this basis Parsons felt competent to predict the science of “ultimate ends,” i.e., sociology—awaiting discovery at the right extremity of the continuum. He failed to note that metaphysics is located to the left of physics, nor did he consider that his own creation might turn out to be of similar stuff.

Infantino documents Parsons’s misreading of Spencer, his neglect of Simmel, and his embrace of Weber’s failure, set out in the previous chapter, to grasp that individuals who pursue duty, honor, and beauty to the neglect of material gain those value the former more highly. Parsons was thus disposed to treat the voluntarism in his action theory as a species of submission to a transcendent normative order already outlined by Durkheim. Infantino notes Parsons’s criticism that Durkheim’s “individual” is a mere theoretical abstraction. As Parsons (1949, p. 355) said, this individual “is the fictional human being who has never entered into any social relationship.” If the fictional human being is eliminated, however, we must protest with Professor Infantino that “society cannot be a *sui generis* reality, greater than the sum of its parts” (p. 152). Parsons was required at this juncture to choose between the concrete and the fictional actor—but he did not. Infantino finds the roots of this obstinate inconsistency in Parsons’s moralism reinforced by a refusal to consider the unintended consequences of action.

The question of importance, both to citizens and theoreticians, is whether social order emerges from a network of conditions. If it does, there is no need for an imposed order of ultimate ends. On the other hand, of course, if the network of conditions is powerless, individuals are powerless to act freely on their own behalf and must be duly constrained. What Durkheim, Parsons, or any of us may perceive as a consistent collection of ends is, in reality, a collection of means embedded in the conditions we impose upon each other for their reciprocal appropriation. Action can thus be *explained*, as Infantino says, “by means of the personal objective of the actor, and it can be *justified* through socially accepted ‘reasons’, in which the ‘conditions’ imposed on Ego by the Other are reflected” in a “double-entry of account” (p. 159).

In concluding, Infantino summarizes the elements of any theory of intentional order as psychologism, the rational construction of preferences, and the idea that the results of social action can be conceived as a process of maximization (p. 169). Against these prescriptions he offers a view that, despite its venerable age, remains revolutionary. We learn to be selves after settling within ourselves the models, norms, and beliefs we have absorbed from the sociohistorical context into which we are born.

Those familiar with Professor Infantino’s sources will be delighted by the efficient ease of his arguments. Others, who read with a critical eye, will appreciate his well-documented invitations to the seminal works which inform his views. Before adopting the term “praxeology” to designate the most fundamental of the sciences of human action, Ludwig von Mises had referred to this discipline as

“sociology.” In a few pages Dr. Infantino has demonstrated the sense and substance of Mises’s earlier usage—both as to method and subject—for a sociology that can pursue the unlimited prospects of the unintentional order that inevitably emerges from purposive social action.

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