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## **The Interdisciplinary Research Programme of Methodological Individualism: Back to Its Foundations**

### **Abstract**

According to methodological individualism any scientific explanation in social sciences should have recourse to individual beliefs, wishes, intentions and actions. This article sets forth two practical reasons to endorse a clear-cut, classical version of methodological individualism as an interdisciplinary research programme in the social sciences. The first one is that methodological individualism should lead to hypotheses that can be empirically refuted. For instance, public choice theory is open to refutation and not trivially true. The second reason is that methodological individualism allows to transfer strategies and results between the social sciences.

The present article questions highly sophisticated accounts of methodological individualism. It suggests five tenets to be a valid interdisciplinary research programme in the social sciences underscoring an intuitive language to analyze social phenomena. By doing so, it reviews some distinctive features of methodological individualism: Max Weber's ideal types, Joseph Schumpeter's notion of given behaviour, Friedrich Hayek's concept of individual action and Jon Elster's account of social mechanisms.

**Keywords:** Methodological individualism, interdisciplinarity, research programme, social sciences, social phenomena.

### **Introduction**

In the second volume of the *Encyclopedia of Political Theory* methodological individualism is defined as the perspective according to which “social structures and entities are nothing but ensembles of individuals and their behaviors” (Little, 2010, p. 880). That characterization misses the point of a strictly methodological thesis for it suggests an ontological definition. Other characterizations of methodological individualism also emphasize ontological propositions that are not informative about its methodological strengths (Cfr. MacDonald 1985, p. 199). But what is methodological individualism about? Do we mean a methodology to raise meaningful scientific explanations, an eclectic heuristic tool to find certain laws in social sciences or a broad research programme encompassing several epistemological assumptions? (Udehn 2002, p. 480).

The present article suggests that methodological individualism is a research programme with methodological outcomes and not a methodology *stricto sensu*. To say it as concisely as possible, methodological individualism is a label for a set of perspectives which can bring about models and explanations of regularities, correlations and causality in social sciences. Further, those models and explanations can be successfully implemented in social sciences to illustrate and to answer practical problems avoiding speculative research.

Methodological individualism is neither a research theory nor a methodology in a strict sense. It is a privileged research programme with scientific validity. Its chief aim is to prevent unscientific theses which undermine its utility (Katzner 1999, p. 8). Methodological individualism stems from individual interactions, be they within groups

or institutions. The version outlined in this paper is testable. It should produce statements open to refutation. From that perspective, interconnections of individual beliefs, wishes, intentions and actions illuminate both correlations and causal chains between social phenomena.

To adopt the perspective of methodological individualism means to assume, to a great extent, the following five theses: (1) In order to understand and to answer research problems in the social sciences individual beliefs, wishes, intentions and actions have an explanatory potential; (2) any statement, to be scientifically valid, requires a corresponding vocabulary that regards social phenomena as the result of individual interactions; (3) these scientific statements are subject to empirical refutation; (4) rational action in social sciences means that individuals are motivated to act to satisfy certain goals and to avoid certain consequences; (5) methodological individualism provides a non-exclusive research perspective to look into the genealogy, development and results of social action.

The previous account differs from Joseph Agassi's tenets about methodological holism, even if it remains true that valid implications might be derived from them (Agassi 1960, p. 244). Although to say it properly, instead of a methodological standard, methodological holism is an alternative research programme to methodological individualism. However, holism should not be understood as its opposite research programme. Social holism focuses on the analysis of social phenomena through collective concepts to understand their genesis and processes beyond individual interactions. If holism amounts to something else than a heuristic function is a matter of debate.

Taking into account the analyses of contributors in the edited books by Julie Zahle and Finn Collin, *Rethinking the Individualism-Holism Debate*, and by Peter J. Martin and Alex Denis, *Human Agents and Social Structures*, three theses at the core of social holism can be summarized: (1) society is not identical to the sum of individuals and, consequently, scientific statements cannot be completely reduced to individual beliefs or wishes or intentions (non-reductionism); (2) social facts should be scientifically explained according to 'collective singulars' that refer to groups of individuals acting irrespective of particular beliefs, wishes and intentions (meta-intentionality); (3) individual agency is constrained by supra-individual entities (individual subjection).

Holist explanations are found in Marxism, psychoanalysis, economic neo-institutionalism or radical feminism, among other research fields. According to holism, methodological individualists should concede that collective concepts provide specific information about causal chains between social phenomena that individual interactions do not. A concomitant question arises, if individuals are the primary unit of analysis, what is the role of institutions, historical dynamics and ideologies that, for instance, Marxists vindicate? (Heijdra, Lowenberg and Mallick 1988, p. 296).

To say it with the vocabulary of methodological holism, there are properties related to causal connections between social phenomena that 'emerge' from individual actions but that are scarcely useful if reduced to individual wishes and beliefs (Ianulardo and Stella 2022, p. 202). The concept of emergence is far from clear. However, if that thesis is admitted, methodological individualism's social explanations are poor because they

exclusively understand social phenomena through the meanings that agents give to their beliefs, wishes, intentions and actions.

There are several questions in that regard: Can the scientific quest for meaningful explanations in social sciences leave individual actions aside without jeopardizing the very idea of causal explanation in social sciences? Instead of illuminating causality in the social sciences, it opens the door to interpretations of social phenomena without any explicit reference to individual action. Do collective concepts of methodological holism provide us with meaningful sociological explanations from a certain perspective of causal relevance? Holist explanations rather seem to darken individual causal connections reducing them to impersonal collective actions and concepts.

To methodological individualists holists fail to make sense of the multiple individual interactions subsumed under abstract concepts, as for the so-called ‘economic superstructure’, to use the Marxist jargon; or the ‘heteropatriarchy’, to use the language of radical feminism. Concepts of that kind neither delimit the explanatory potential of these abstractions nor are subject to empirical fallibility. When using highly abstract, vague or ambiguous concepts methodological holism can generate its own corresponding explanations of social phenomena. To think that agents’ complex intentionality can be reduced to collective concepts beyond ideal types excluding alternative explanations of intentionality equally sound can be completely misleading. To choose certain collective concepts instead of others demands an act of faith about their abstract validity. How to properly justify that analytical choice to the detriment of others?

If collective entities are helpful in social sciences, then it is indispensable to grasp the specific relations between the individuals who belong to those groups. Further, causal explanations on how individual interactions can be superseded by the language of collective concepts are needed. Holists should explain how collective entities relate to something different from abstract hypostasis. Likewise, they should give an account of, among others, social, ideological, psychological and political factors influencing individual interactions within and between those groups. To select several factors of individual interaction dismissing the rest would lead not to one-sided perspectives, as it would be desirable, but to wrong interpretative frameworks (Weber 2012, p. 111).

In a nutshell, methodological holism usually transforms the selection of collective groups in a discretionary selection. It often fails to infer how to integrate the perspective of individual action within scientific analyses of social phenomena. The fact that holist theses are difficult to falsify in scientific terms should lead us to think that explanations of that sort are very often highly speculative and hardly meaningful from the standpoint of what should count as a valid explanation in the social sciences. However, unlike what highly sophisticated scholarly debates on the validity of methodological individualism indicate, to distinguish modest versions or to blend it with some of the tenets of holist theories does not contribute to clarify any scientific thesis (Bulle 2018, p. 3; Cfr. Langevon Kulesa 2006, p. 283–84). At worst, methodological individualism can shed light on minimum scientific requirements in the social sciences.

### **Weber, Schumpeter and Hayek on Methodological Individualism**

Regarding social sciences, Max Weber acknowledged that sociological analyses could lead to understand collective entities as existing entities only if the starting point of methodological research were individuals acting together (Jensen 2012, p. 51). His account of methodological individualism did not dismiss the heuristic utility of collective ideas. Nonetheless, he brought up the necessity of individual actions and intentions to provide scientifically meaningful explanations in social sciences (Jensen 2012, p. 52). Individual actions are the unit of analysis because they clarify the complexity of empirical reality:

[I]ndividual action may actually in terms of its subjective meaning be oriented towards several [instituted] orders that, according to conventional ways of thinking in that particular context, “contradict” each other in terms of their meaning, but are nevertheless empirically “valid” alongside each other (Weber 2012, p. 284).

Weber interpreted scientific explanations in the social sciences as the result of rational reconstruction and selectivity, always incomplete and open to further improvements. His methodological account of rational individual action in social sciences remains substantially valid. Interpretative models akin to Weberian ideal types should rationally reconstruct the portions of the social reality that the social scientist delimits (Rosenberg 2016, p. 7). In that sense, in a letter that Max Weber addressed to Robert Liefmann on 9 March 1920, he endorsed individuals and their actions as the methodological constituent of social phenomena against the use of collective concepts:

[I] wish to note that if I have now become a sociologist (according to my official title!), then to a great extent in order to finish off the last resilient remnants of an enterprise working in terms of collective concepts. In other words: sociology too can only be based on the action of one, several, or many individuals; it can only be pursued with a strictly “individualistic” method... In sociological terms, the state is no more than the chance that particular kinds of specific action occur. And that is all. I have taught and written about this for years. What is “subjective” about this is that such action is oriented to particular ideas. And what is “objective”: that we, the observers, conclude that there is a chance that action oriented to these ideas will follow (Weber [1921] 2019: 57).

Any concept used by social scientists should clarify one or several aspects of social phenomena from the point of view of acting individuals. No concept in the social sciences is of scientific interest unless it is connected to individual concrete actions and/or perspectives. Without that goal in mind, concepts in the social sciences would be ineffective tools that only apparently explain aspects of social reality in a scientific sense:

The relationship between concept and historical research is reversed for those who appreciate this, the goal of the Historical School then appears as logically impossible, the concepts are not ends but are means to the end of understanding phenomena which are significant from concrete individual viewpoints (Weber 1949: 106).

To say that agents of group A refused to do X because they tended to think it unfair to her fellows under circumstances C1, C2 and C3 is to provide a meaningful explanation from the standpoint of methodological individualism. Even if that explanation does not amount to a general model, an individual disposition is taken as the explanatory key to

make sense of agents' actions within a group. For anyone who assumes the utility of this explanatory framework at a basic level, this statement should be necessarily open to refutation. Historical events cannot be explained without statements establishing connections between events, facts and intentions.

The advantage of explaining that the end Y is the effect of agents of group A, or of agents of multiple groups with features F1, F2 and F3, doing X is typically a rational explanation in Weberian terms. Research hypotheses and ideal types grounded in methodological individualism fit this apparently simple scheme (Udehn 2001, p. 96). To look into causal chains implies to use conceptual devices to stress certain features of any given social phenomenon to the detriment of others. That is precisely the one-sided perspective of causal explanation suggested by Max Weber which ideal types supply with.<sup>1</sup> Without recourse to abstract types of individual action, social sciences would lack mechanisms of causal explanation about the intentionality of single individuals acting.

Additionally, Weber's individualism is purely methodological. It does not preclude that any phenomenon is bound to a never-ending chain of causal factors. The task of the social scientist is to single out the factors, be they political, economic, psychological or of another sort, that are causally relevant from a certain research perspective to the occurrence of a given social phenomenon:

We ask first [...] how in general is the attribution of a concrete effect to an individual "cause" possible and realizable in principle in the view of the fact that in truth an *infinity* of causal factors were indispensable for the occurrence of the effect in its concrete form (Weber 1949: 169).

Indeed, causal factors are intelligible through individual actions because of their interconnections as to produce a social phenomenon or effect on social reality. A causal explanation in the social sciences can be valid if explicit research aims have been previously organized with logical coherence. In that regard, ideal types are research instruments to translate that logical coherence into a conceptual apparatus. Individual concrete actions are subsumed under abstract classifications, namely, ideal types. Each ideal type allows to establish differences and causal connections between individual actions.

Despite the prominence of Weber's contributions to understand the baseline of methodological individualism, it was Joseph Schumpeter who circulated the term 'methodological individualism' in 1908. The Austrian thinker combined the study of political, social and economic institutions in his famous *History of Economic Analysis* with the endorsement of methodological individualism (Bögenhold 2018, p. 254). Accordingly, methodological individualism would lead to relevant and expedient results that other approaches cannot supply (Schumpeter [1908] 1980: 6). The question is, if he regarded himself as a methodological individualist, how to characterize what he named as methodological individualism?

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<sup>1</sup> Friedel Weinert has concisely presented the main methodological strength of ideal types as envisaged by Max Weber: "hypothetical *as-if* models" which account for scientifically relevant connections and relations between selected social phenomena empirically grounded (Weinert 2014, p. 11). Yet more interestingly, Weiner makes it patent that Weber did not distinguish between initial conditions leading to social mechanisms and social mechanisms themselves (Weinert 2014, p. 19).

Some authors have affirmed that Schumpeter assumed the perspective of an institutional individualist (Papageorgiou and Michaelides 2016, p. 14). Others, that he presented a *sui generis* middle ground between methodological individualism and social holism, namely, sociological individualism (Hodgson 2007, p. 213). Indeed, Schumpeter's analysis in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* seems to befit sociological individualism. Institutions and groups matter when explaining individual actions as much as individual explanations contribute to understand institutional dynamics and collective decision-making. Whatever the case is, Schumpeter's individualism is not an all-encompassing research programme excluding others. It is rather an intricate one to produce specific research results having the entrepreneur as its main character (Papageorgiou and Michaelides 2016, p. 15).

Perhaps the best answer is that, as Schumpeter himself acknowledged, his approach to methodological individualism in economics during his youth was a methodological choice to understand economic phenomena with new overtones (Schumpeter [1908] 1980, p. 6–7). In any case, his appraisal of methodological individualism is more schematic than detailed, and not free of contradictions. He was in favour of heuristic explanatory devices that individual rational action makes possible. Pure economic theory was to him inadequate to analyze the complexity of individual interactions since it heavily relied on abstract theoretical frameworks.

The structure of both *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* and *History of Economic Analysis* points at a very personal insight, almost unique, of addressing research questions from the rhetorical perspective of constantly defending counterintuitive viewpoints. In doing so he mixed up methodological strategies diverging from his earlier account of methodological individualism towards more eclectic methodological strategies. Type concepts such as 'bourgeoise', 'pre-capitalism', 'capitalism' or 'socialism' were used to make sense of the complexity of individual social action without hypostatizing them.

As a mature social scientist his methodological approach to social reality ranged from individual psychologism to economic sociology, combining them in original manners to raise ambitious scientific results (Bögenhold 2018, p. 261). It was precisely his methodological, historical and philosophical erudition what gifted him with a far-sighted approach on almost any topic addressed. He never renounced explicitly to methodological individualism. Immediately after outlining the weaknesses of sociological individualism in *History of Economic Analysis*, namely, its incapacity to account for a theory of social processes, he stated:

From this, however, it does not follow that, for the special purposes of a particular set of investigations, it is never admissible to start from the given behavior of individuals without going into the factors that formed this behavior. A housewife's behavior on the market may be analyzed without going into the factors that formed it. An attempt to do so may be suggested by considerations of division of labor between different social disciplines and need not imply any theory about the theme of Society and Individual. In this case we speak of Methodological Individualism (Schumpeter 1954: 855).

Schumpeter's pragmatism is interesting for, at least, two reasons. The first one is that his scientific positivism was connected to methodological efficiency and not to settle

once and for all what kind of methodology is the most suitable for the social sciences. Debates as such seemed to him pointless (Shionoya 1990: 187). He deemed methodology a substantial issue which admitted dissimilar answers. The second one is that his notion of given behaviour implies that social phenomena can be simply explained without resorting to their causal factors. This is relevant inasmuch as it means that when we investigate social reality a crucial thing is to distinguish something specific on it as behaviour. As trivial as this may seem, it has methodological implications. To delimit portions of social reality being the result of individual behaviour is not the same than to consider it the result of intentional actions.

Prominently, Friedrich Hayek pointed out that the scientific interest of social sciences would be unattainable if individual actions were reduced to psychologism. He accepted society as a system of ‘emerging properties’ derived from individual interactions compatible with methodological individualism (Di Iorio 2015, p. 71). A non-atomist version of theory, as the one endorsed by Hayek, would show the scientific potential of methodological individualism, compatible with the language of institutions and to describe social phenomena. The label of hermeneutical individualism can be applied to his methodology (De Iorio 2015, p. 76).

In fact, Hayek voiced his methodological affinities with Schumpeter’s account of methodological individualism: “I must confess that I still sympathize more with the views of the young Schumpeter than with those of the elder, the latter being responsible to so great an extent for the rise of macrotheory” (Hayek 2002, pp. 12–13). Hayek rejected the ontology of collective concepts, as Weber did:

It is the ideas which the popular mind has formed about such collectives as ‘society’ or the ‘economic system’, ‘capitalism’ or ‘imperialism’, and other such collective entities, which the social scientist must regard as no more than provisional theories, popular abstractions, and which he must not mistake for facts. That he consistently refrains from treating these pseudo-entities as ‘facts’, and that he systematically starts from the concepts which guide individuals in their actions and not from the results of their theorising about their actions, is the characteristic feature of that methodological individualism which is closely connected with the subjectivism of the social sciences (Hayek 1942: 286).

Individual rational action is of interest to the social scientist and cannot be replaced (Boettke and Coyne 2005, p. 150). Institutions are better explained as providing social rules for individual agents (Boettke and Coyne 2005, p. 153). This would be possibly the most concise answer that a methodological individualist can give about the role of institutions in social sciences. In that regard, Hayek’s perspective was not reductionist, but compatibilist regarding the language of institutions (Zwirn 2007, p. 59).

In Hayek’s view, individuals give subjective meaning to their action. Without scientific explanations which consider the individual level of explanation, there would be an informative vacuum. Accordingly, any theoretical framework adopted should underpin arguments and explanations that refer to individual interactions. The different ‘guises’ of methodological individualism should not overshadow its scientific potential (Zwirn 2007, p. 76). The more we look for valuable explanations in the social sciences the more we need complementary perspectives.



Individual actions are the unit of scientific analysis in the social sciences. Beyond individual actions there is no meaningful explanation. To distinguish different levels of explanation in the social sciences excluding individual beliefs, wishes, intentions and actions necessarily results in flawed explanations that do not draw on any tangible practical framework. A numberless myriad of actions “seeks ends distinct from the social patterns that emerge” (Hayek [1960] 2001: 16). To sum it up, Hayek’s version of methodological individualism relies on a particular view of individual actions as irreducible units of analysis in the social sciences. Together with the miscellaneous Schumpeterian notion of given behaviour and Max Weber’s defence of one-sided intentionally oriented perspectives organized around ideal types, some strengths of methodological individualism are visible.

### **Elster’s Contemporary Version of Methodological Individualism as a Research Programme**

The previous characterization of methodological individualism does not imply to exclude the language of institutions when explaining social phenomena. To reject the validity of scientific statements which refer to existing institutions and groups is simply misleading. The language of social institutions is connected to individual actions by means of abstract concepts that translate into intelligible statements a portion of the countless concrete individual actions that shape social reality. To say it with Elster’s words:

Institutions exist as networks of mutual expectations among officials and between officials and clients. To individuals subject to their decisions, they can appear as supra-individual, monolithic entities, but to those who operate them, they appear as what they are (Elster 2023, p. 127).

A satisfactory theory of scientific explanations in social sciences is surprisingly missing (Steel 2006, p. 444). Jon Elster might be the most remarkable exception. Aiming to explain social mechanisms he affirmed that “understanding the details of the causal story [in social sciences] reduces the risk of spurious explanations, that is, of mistaking correlation for causation” (Elster 1999, p. 6). Causality implies that certain factors and means necessarily have certain consequences. These consequences could occur or not otherwise, but they are indeed the result of factors operating on individual beliefs, wishes, intentions and actions.

With other words, the social scientist should be very careful when describing connections between social phenomena. For these connections are infinite, it is indispensable to differentiate spurious from relevant causal inferences. Even when establishing correlations can be a first step in social analysis, to find causal explanations is much more difficult. The former requires observation, whereas the latter also demands clever insight and capacity to discern necessary factors beyond appearances. In social sciences arguments open to refutation should be raised to endorse causal connections.

As pointed out by Elster, methodological individualism does not conflict with the fact that individuals have expectations about supra-individual entities that cannot be reduced to individualistic explanations (Elster 1982, p. 453). Indeed, the sort of explanations that the social scientist should yield does not correspond with general laws. As outlined by

Elster, “even if we can establish a general law from which we can deduce the explanandum [...] this does not always amount to an explanation [in the social sciences]” (Elster 2007, p. 32).

There are causal, intentional and functional explanations, though in a wide sense intentional and functional explanations can be regarded as concrete type of causes or ‘causal chains’ in social sciences (Elster 2007, p. 14). The methodological individualist should take heed when selecting explanations of social phenomena. The main scientific concern in the social sciences is to bring out informative statements about one or several actions and events. These actions and events are connected through causal chains, some of which the researcher should identify to answer a certain research question.

To interpret individual motivations does not mean to disregard the causal connections between facts and events that the social scientist looks for. These causal connections can amount to psychological explanations, but they are not themselves psychological ones. They are rather intentional explanations, typically facts in Elster’s terminology. By contrast, public acts and declarations should count as events.

To endorse methodological individualism implies that individual interactions are the most relevant unit of analysis regarding social phenomena. This is also the case when explaining the very existence of institutions and their changes. The five theses of methodological individualism mentioned in the introduction entail that meaningful explanations in social sciences require, at least, one description or explanatory statement subject to falsifiability. Together with it, that descriptive statement should state explicitly individual beliefs, wishes, intentions or actions. Institutions are not exceptional in this sense. To find one or several social mechanisms unleashing a certain social phenomenon means to ‘dig into’ their causal chains. Institutions are ruled individual interactions. In that sense, they have an explanatory potential to reveal social mechanisms that should not be confused with its ontological status.

A relevant question is to know to what extent methodological individualism succeeds in shedding light on the interconnections between social phenomena and social mechanisms by using collective entities as *post res* heuristic fictions. With other words, methodological individualists should identify effective intentional drifts, namely, social mechanisms. Only they explain connections between actions and events through scientific statements. Abstract concepts have an exclusive conceptual function that should not be confused with their actual existence.

### **Methodological Individualism Revisited**

Without the necessity of coordination between individuals, institutions would not make sense. They are better understood as instances of individual coordination than as supra-individual entities. With Kirdina’s words, “metaphorically, institutions in society can be presented as the ‘power lines’ of an electro-magnetic field” (Kirdina 2015, p. 62). Institutions seem to operate on their own logic and rationale, but they are nothing else but the result of ruled individual interactions within groups.

Methodological individualism implies to regard social phenomena as the result of individuals acting with a certain amount information and wishes upon a given fact (Goldstein 1958, p. 2). Any version of methodological individualism draws attention to

individual behaviour as being rational with respect to certain beliefs and wishes, even if those connections are always rationally imperfect from the perspective of rational-oriented conduct (Sproule-Jones 1984, p. 169). Both the existence and the lack of intentionality in human actions can be explained in terms of absent beliefs and wishes.

In that same regard, one of the theses about methodological individualism suggested by Nathalie Bulle and Denis Phan, with extensive scientific implications, is the following: “[...] social/relational structures have an explanatory or causal role in the representation of generative mechanisms only insofar as they affect the subjective meaning of the reasons for individual actions by the contextual properties they define” (Bulle and Phan 2017, p. 404).

With a clearer language, individual interactions and relations have a causal role to explain social mechanisms and regularities. This is so because the meanings that individuals give to their own actions are the result of a certain context with its own features, be they more or less implicit. Social scientists should resort to how individuals interpret and explain relations between social phenomena. The ways in which individuals represent themselves and their reasons to act in certain ways have a causal role in contextualizing and explaining social actions.

Bulle presents two theses to characterize methodological individualism: (1) the meanings that each individual gives to its actions have methodological pre-eminence over explanations based on ‘social forces’ and (2) social institutions and groups have an explanatory potential when they are influential in the meaning that individuals give to their own reasons to act and actions (Bulle 2018, p. 2).

Unlike prevailing versions of methodological individualism (Jones 1996, p. 119), the one adopted here makes sense of one type of relations between social phenomena: those bringing into play both individual rationality and biases. Apparently, since individual beliefs, wishes, intentions and actions are unavoidably plural, methodological individualism fails to reduce all the complexity of social groups and norms to individual ones without using the language of collective entities (Jones 1996, p. 124). This criticism would make sense if and only if methodological individualists use collective concepts as existing entities and not as epistemological toolkits to abstract shared individual features.

Further, methodological individualism is compatible with references to ‘primary’ existing social groups (Heijdra, Lowenberg and Mallick 1988, p. 303). To be scientifically useful, methodological individualism should not dismiss the explanatory use of collective enterprises or concepts about such entities. Methodological individualism suggests that to explain social phenomena and to produce scientific statements we should elaborate general models, research hypotheses and/or empirical claims that account for individual interactions at a certain level. If the vocabulary of supra-individual entities is admitted, then researchers should not forget that those entities are general abstractions made of individuals acting within them.

To the methodological individualist there is no valid statement of social phenomena when selecting a single explanation in social sciences as scientifically valid (Steel 2006, p. 441). To say that most agents of group A will behave in the way X when circumstances C1 and C2 take place because reasons R1 and R2 motivate that conduct

resorts to the level of individual rational explanation, subject to empirical falsifiability. That statement advances how individuals of a group will act if a series of circumstances do meet. If the expected behaviour X for that group does not take place, the previous statement would therefore be false.

In Ernest Nagel's terms, any explanation within methodological individualism implies that it is possible to describe social regularities for social phenomena. Additionally, he assumes that those descriptions can be translated into propositions or principles which refer to individuals through so-called 'bridge laws' (Duijf, Tamminga and Van de Putte 2021, p. 4166). As for the concept of emergence, 'bridge laws' is a rather elusive expression that can make sense in natural sciences. For they admit different explanatory levels and connections between them. To assume that parallelism in social sciences calls for a thorough justification.

Nagelian individualism would allow to mathematicise some propositions or principles to obtain meaningful statements open to refutation (Duijf, Tamminga and Van de Putte 2021, p. 4168; Zahle and Collin 2014, p. 8). But against Nagel's view, to establish social laws is far from the aim of methodological individualism. To find the sort of explanations for social phenomena which account for certain types of causal chains should be the main task of the methodological individualist. If those laws – or to say it better, regularities – exist and can be determined that is a very positive result. However, in no case this would mean to exhaust the meddling of interconnections between actions and events that methodological individualism can find and explain successfully.

To say that gravity law explains why agent A fell from his house's roof does not provide any meaningful explanation of either *how* it happened that agent A went up to his house's roof or *how* it occurred that he fell from it. To provide a psychological explanation of *how* that happened, we must resort to agent A's beliefs, wishes, intentions and actions. Instead, to ask *why* agent A fell from his house's roof is a more ambiguous question: it would admit different explanations depending on the physical or psychological explanation that we choose to privilege. The methodological individualist chooses an explanation depending on the portion of social reality and the research question drawn up. Logical coherence and selectivity are prerequisites.

In narrow interpretations, methodological individualism's ambiguity has mistakenly led some researchers to consider it a theory instead of a research programme. Methodological individualism's approaches provide research explanations that would be otherwise impossible. Explanations of that kind can be fairly interpreted in terms of broad individual actions and preferences (Udehn 2001, p. 4). Human interactions result in multiple interconnected individual beliefs, wishes, intentions and actions. In any case, individual behaviour can be translated into the language and reasoning framework of social sciences.

In some cases, methodological holists raise the accusation of psychologism against this sort of social explanation. Despite the relevance of this criticism, methodological individualism is not equivalent to psychologism. Individuals are multi-layered units which coexist with other equally acting individuals whose interactions amount to something else than psychological ones. Individual interactions can be explained from a purely psychological perspective or not. These interactions can result in regularities that do not exclusively respond to psychological factors. The use of ideal types as

abstractions about individual entities to explain certain social phenomena is not just a choice for the researcher, but a necessity to prevent exclusively psychological explanations.

A concomitant issue should be clarified. Psychological explications are compatible with historical approaches in the social sciences. Events-to-events explanations in which event A is explained as the consequence of event B does not disqualify the relevance of individual decisions and misbehaviour leading to event B. A same event admits different types of causal connections that highlight one or several aspects instead of others. The more connections are satisfactorily explained, the better quality in social sciences usually is.

Psychological insight is of great relevance, but it does not stand by itself as the privileged sort of explanation that the methodological individualist seeks to provide. Individual interactions and mentalities are shaped by the complex meddling and conflict of beliefs, wishes, intentions and actions. Without resorting to the explanatory level of individual intentionality, actions cannot be connected to events and facts (Hodgson 2007, p. 5). Any purely psychological perspective misses relevant information to construct interdisciplinary models in social sciences. It fails to incorporate complementary information that is not strictly psychological in nature.

As a token of that argument, strictly psychological perspectives omit that individuals use concepts and explain the world in such ways that can be only scientifically explained through the combination of one-sided perspectives. Individual and masses psychology are relevant fields, though not the exclusive ones of social sciences. If we say that a bank went to bankrupt since masses of people were afraid of losing their deposits, we provide a meaningful but also a partial explanation of an event (that a bank went to bankrupt) and two facts (that its users were afraid of losing their deposits and moved their money back from their bank).

Other possible perspectives and theses can add more relevant information. For example, the lack of ability on the part of the bank firm to ensure its financial capacity. Not doing so unleashed uncertainty among users of the bank. The fact that those doubts were publicly raised in social media resulted in massive deposit withdraws. These causal chains throw light on how it was possible that these masses panicked, in which sense social trust affect banks' solvency and how the information or misinformation about the bank's funding capacity circulated among users. The more relevant information the researcher explains, the more complete our picture of the social phenomenon we label as 'bankruptcy' is.

All these previous concerns are relevant to provide meaningful complementary answers from a scientific perspective of that bank's downfall. But they also explain how the set of social phenomena that we label as bankruptcy can occur. We should be aware of the sort of causal inferences we select to derive explanations about the abstract phenomena of bankruptcy beyond specific cases of that kind. That is precisely the task of the social scientist when assuming the perspective of methodological individualism. Any social phenomenon admits complementary explanations from different perspectives at the level of individual action concerning how agents acted.

To give a satisfactory account of those social mechanisms that explain social phenomena is the crucial aspect of explanations in the social sciences. To say that one or several mechanisms of rational – or irrational – social action have been *discovered* means to identify those mechanisms or causal chains (Udehn 2001, p. 310). Additionally, it means to indicate that they are relevant to understand intentionality and their consequences from a certain point of view. Methodological individualism does not exhaust all relevant explanations about social phenomena. As a research programme, it leaves open complementary accounts of rational social action. It admits that any social phenomenon can be understood from differing perspectives, each one of them explaining a portion of relevant information about a given social phenomenon.

### **Methodological Individualism's Interdisciplinarity**

Any methodology or research programme faces its own problems. Methodological individualism is not an exception. For instance, it fails to give a reasonable account of the transfer of technologies between social groups. If we look closely at how this occurs, we should deduce that it is much more like epidemic processes than like rational transference of knowledge between individuals (Arrow 1994, p. 7). However, it is plainly valid from a methodological point of view to say that intentionality is not a property of supra-individual entities (Hodgson 1986, p. 215). Methodological individualism's strength hinges on its potential to interconnect individual motivation, individual action, oriented actions and strategic behaviour.

Methodological individualism is comparatively more helpful than other research programmes to raise explanations of how individuals receive new information and act in the light of it. That is so even when social institutions provide that information (Arrow 1994, p. 8). It was Ludwig von Mises who accepted that social entities such as municipalities and nations are valid to explain human action in connection with the individual beliefs, intentions and actions that sustain them (Hodgson 1986, p. 213).

Methodological individualism resorts to a specific kind of social explanation. It requires the language of social entities, but its validity rests upon the meanings that social actors give to their actions. A methodological individualist assumes that social entities sometimes seem to operate beyond individuals' purposive action (Mitrović 2017, p. 34). However, when understanding social actions and social phenomena the methodological individualist explores what are the means and ends of those individuals and entities. Methodological individualism aims to explain the causal connections or chains corresponding to the social meanings given to certain ends or results.

Fruitful examples of scientific models in the social sciences are ideal types and nomological-deductive models. Successful methodological contributions are public choice, game theory, markets' asymmetric information and behavioral finance. It is not by chance that economics places a privileged field in which the research programme of methodological individualism has obtained prominent results.

Indeed, the theoretical frameworks and findings in economics have a high degree of applicability outside that field. For instance, game theory and public choice are irreplaceable to understand how human organizations operate in the context of growing political, economic and sociological complexity. In the case of game theory, interactions among individuals and groups are analyzed according to individual actors' strategies, be

they isolated or acting within groups. Without those perspectives, we would be obliged to use less sophisticated interpretative frameworks and explanations about individual interactions in social sciences.

In the case of public choice theory, its basic theoretical framework has been essential to understand collective action in government through the lens of individual beliefs, wishes, intentions and actions (Neck 2022, p. 357). Transfers between disciplines are possible insofar as models for understanding individual actions, beliefs and intentions are needed in all social sciences. Despite attempts to clarify the meanings of scientific explanations and mechanisms in the social sciences, we can affirm that there is no definite answer. To put into practice the research programme of methodological individualism in the social sciences is a matter of defending a number of coherent research premises and feasible research questions responding to them. But does methodological individualism apply to research at the social sciences crossroads?

That question should be divided into two different lines of reasoning. One is about how the lack of a theory of scientific explanation in social sciences is followed by and coherent research programme in the social sciences. Another is about how methodological individualism would work at these crossroads. Both questions are eminently practical. Their answers should bring forward a distinct version of methodological individualism.

The answer to the first part of the question is that a theory or a set of theories of what a scientific explanation in the social sciences is can be dispensed with. From a methodological point of view, it matters to use specific explanatory frameworks that have been fruitful in other social sciences. Methodological individualism should not produce new theories, but to identify and to distinguish, as much as possible, correlations, regularities and interconnections between social phenomena, intentionality and actions.

The answer to the second question is that, to say it in a concise manner, the methodological individualist should test the rational strength of her statements as regards to what we know about existing social phenomena. Methodological individualism should lead to an interdisciplinary integration – as pretentious as this may sound – that improves our understanding of a very plural and never exhausted social reality. The interdisciplinary researcher that assumes methodological individualism should answer outspoken research aims providing one or several explanations, open to refutation, about a certain aspect of social reality.

Some of the general questions to be answered by the methodological individualist are the following: (1) How agents play strategically according to others' expectations as to give rise to new social phenomena?<sup>2</sup> (2) How blurred is the distinction between political, economic, historical, legal, psychological and sociological phenomena when analyzing the complexity of social reality? (3) How advances in social sciences are related to hypothesized intuitions, cumulative knowledge and logical reasoning? If strategic behaviour in markets, parliaments, electoral campaigns or courts of justice is analyzed from the perspective of methodological individualism, then regularities about changing wishes, beliefs, intentions and actions responding to strategic aims must be

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<sup>2</sup> The potential of game theory should be especially fertile in this regard.

identified. Additionally, it would be relevant to contrast how different social disciplines can contribute to understand a same social phenomenon over a certain time span. If the rational coherence of explanations is pondered, their correspondence with rational preferences, biases and noise of individuals acting in the context of growing institutional complexity should be tested.

Social sciences' explanatory models, if focused on individuals, can bring argumentative and strategic frameworks into light. They suggest a path to check how institutions and social groups work at the level of individual interactions among and within conflicting groups. Social sciences can gradually refine models of social explanation when applied to differing disciplines and sub-disciplines in social sciences. The degree of compliance of current social research under the premises of methodological individualism varies significantly. To practice interdisciplinary research is often frustrating and uncertain, though it is the most promising path to innovative research. Economic and psychological results can be improved by means of conceptual clarification. The consistent use of concepts should produce scientific hypotheses subject to refutation. That is a remarkable strength of methodological individualism lacking in alternative research programmes.

## **Conclusions**

The introduction has characterized methodological individualism as a far-reaching interdisciplinary research programme to provide research results in the social sciences. The first section has compared Weber's, Schumpeter's and Hayek's views on methodological individualism. These three authors understood the scientific potential of that research programme and succeeded when employing a clear-cut language with methodological tools such as ideal types, given behaviour and individual action respectively. Section two has highlighted the main features of Elster's revision of methodological individualism. It has been argued that his notions of social explanation and social mechanism are powerful reasons to endorse methodological individualism.

The third section has underlined the contrast between a renewed though intuitive version of methodological individualism and methodological holism. To clarify the meaning of the former does not entail to assume the latter as its asymmetric opposite. Additionally, that section has sets forth the general advantages and pitfalls of methodological individualism. The fifth and last section has outlined the interdisciplinary accommodation of methodological individualism in social sciences. As a token of them, it has been argued that prevailing research questions in these disciplines should be oriented towards empirical relevance and falsifiability.

When applied to social sciences methodological individualism should prompt a practical-oriented empirical turn in the social sciences. This means to boost the search for reasons, explanations and causal relationships between events, facts and social phenomena. Conceptual clarity should help to raise new models and social mechanisms to understand social phenomena.

Instead, methodological individualism should be interpreted as a research programme that seeks the validity of modest explanations of social phenomena over more ambitious systematic attempts of theoretical foundation. Speculative research should be straightforwardly discarded. Research results under the premises of methodological



individualism should benefit from interdisciplinarity. That should be so even when their cost in terms of uncertainty and unsuccessful hypotheses is higher than expected in one single social science. By doing so causal connections and mechanisms between concepts, intentionality, actions and effects on social reality can be disclosed.

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