
The Singular and the Universal in Urban Ethnography: How Mechanism-based Explanations Enable Generalisability¹

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In the last twenty years ethnographers have provided thorough and inspiring accounts regarding, first, the ‘context of discovery’ of fieldwork practice, as philosophers call the process of theory development and of causal explanations and, second, the relation of the singular to the universal. In this article I endeavour to contribute to this discussion by placing the question of how one could claim generalisability of their findings through causal explanations at the forefront of the urban ethnographers’ methodology agenda. To do this, I present the Critical-Realist approach to emergence and to mechanism-based explanations in detail, and I provide an argument as to how one could talk about the universal by researching the singular. Finally, I apply these ideas to most of the case studies collected in Manos Spyridakis’ book *Market vs Society* in order to highlight the importance of causal thinking for explaining the realities of the social world.

Keywords: Ethnography, significance, causal explanation, case studies, generalisability.

‘I would like to say in passing that, among all the dispositions I would wish to be capable of inculcating, there is the ability to apprehend research as a rational endeavor rather than as a kind of mystical quest, talked about with bombast for the sake of self-reassurance...The summum of the art in the social sciences is, in my eyes, to be capable of engaging very high “theoretical” stakes by means of very precise and often apparently very mundane, if not derisory, empirical objects.’ (Pierre Bourdieu, *The Practice of Reflexive Sociology*, 1992: 220)

The impetus for writing this article was the International Conference ‘Urban Inequalities: Ethnographic Insights’ that took place in June 2019 in Corinth, Greece, where I was invited to present Spyridakis’ edited volume titled *Market versus Society* (Spyridakis 2018, hereafter MvS). Usually the title of a book denotes its position in the academic field and it says something about how it is related to a specific theme of the knowledge area within which it is inscribed. MvS criticises what Spyridakis calls ‘the financialisation of rationality’; that is, economists’ claim to identify rational action with instrumental reason or to impose the model of homo economicus as the normative prototype model to which all human behaviour and action should be ascribed. On the contrary, he invites us to see rationality and economy not in instrumental terms but as embedded in cultural, social and political relationships. MvS’s source of inspiration is Karl Polanyi’s epistemology according to which ‘any so-called economic behaviour cannot be studied separately of what is happening within society’ (Spyridakis 2018: 9). As I see it, there are two ways of reading this statement. One is to see it as a political critique of the (non)democratic EU’s decision making. The idea is simple: the more remote economy is from society, the less democratic the decision-making is. The second is to read it as a methodological injunction concerning how researchers should explain economic practices and how a causal explanation in ethnography could be obtained. In this

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article I will focus on the methodological version of this reading because it touches upon the core epistemological issue that urban ethnographers face when trying to theorise their findings.

This issue revolves around how the findings connected with a specific site and settings are theoretically informative about the social phenomenon of which that site is a case. This is a controversial issue to grapple with and its resolution has troubled scholars engaging with urban ethnography for the last twenty years. What seems to be the most intriguing part of this issue concerns the ways through which theoretical explanations related to the singular (urban ethnographies located in time and place) could be generalised so that they cover features of something universal. Although for decades urban ethnographers remained indifferent to systematizing their ‘context of discovery’ for fear of abstraction, it is encouraging to see that there is a growing number of ethnography-based articles delineating the specifics of theory development. MvS, in collecting cases of urban ethnographies from various localities, aspires to connect the singular features that emerged from these localities to theoretical insights which could explain more universal phenomena like, for example, why social groups develop either deviant economic activities or entrepreneurial practices in similar conditions (like that of neoliberal ascendancy). The common denominator of MvS’s fieldworks is Prato’s (2018) conception of the city according to which ‘urban’ is not limited to geography or physical space but mostly and most importantly takes into account ‘citizenship’, in the sense of ‘individual’ civil, economic, and political rights. As Prato has powerfully argued ‘the city should be understood at once as *urbs*, *civitas*, and *polis*; that is, as a built-up area, as a social association of citizens, and as a political community. Focusing only on one of these aspects would be inexcusably reductive’ (Prato 2018: 5).

Therefore, I have structured my argument as follows: in the first section I summarise the main philosophical approaches regarding what it means to explain something by means of a mechanism-based account. One of the main ideas of the article is that theory development in urban ethnography can benefit from mechanism-based explanations because they enable one to identify the details of how the singular is tied up with the universal. Next, I present the main epistemological ideas proposed by ethnographers for theory development and specific ways in which ethnographic cases can be theoretically informative of how larger social phenomena are set out. Finally, I apply the idea of an ethnography-informed and mechanism-based explanation in some of the fieldworks gathered in MvS in order to give a flavour of how this way of explaining the singular tells us something about the workings of the universal.

Mechanism-based Causal Explanations: A Critical Realist Approach

Although philosophical literature on causal explanation is vast and sometimes seems chaotic, social scientists have adopted many of the ideas developed in it in order to frame causality in social research, both quantitative and qualitative. A common theme permeating these ideas is that Hempel’s Deductive-Nomological Model presents too many inadequacies and shortcomings to be considered a gold standard for social science research, especially qualitative research. There are two main reasons for this. First, since the explanandum (that which is to be explained, for example a specific finding from urban ethnography fieldwork) is subsumed under the initial conditions of the explananda (that which explains, for example a

theoretical proposition covering all the particulars to which it refers), it follows that the particular fieldwork finding is explained by reference to the premises of the initial conditions. For economists, these premises are identified with the Rational Action Theory, which is considered to unify all the explanatory propositions of economic and social phenomena. However, in that sense — and this is the second reason behind the failure of the D-N model — social explanations are not informative of the social world, they do not tell us something new in relation to the data at our disposal once the research is completed. For the D-N model, whatever is not subsumed under the initial conditions of explananda is inexplicable and so it lacks the necessary armour for theory development (Porpora 2008).

Given that most social scientists who grapple with these issues are well aware of these failings, they have adopted mechanism-based approaches to causality, because they think that they fit more with the social ontology upon which social research methodology is built. For Critical Realism (henceforth, CR) social reality is not only what actors perceptually experience. This is only one of the first layers that the social world is composed of and it is called the ‘Empirical’ level of reality. Social reality is also composed of social events whose existence is dependent upon actors’ perceptions, not its explanation. This is called the ‘Actual’ level of social reality and its workings are not premised on whether actors are aware of it. Finally, a layer exists upon which the other two are based in the sense that its generative mechanisms give shape to how, why and in what conditions the events of the ‘Actual’ level take place and inform how actors are going to experience these events at the ‘Empirical’ level. The philosophical innovation of this stratified social ontology is twofold. Firstly, although it acknowledges the concept-dependent dimension of social reality, it gives precedence to the independent existence of generative mechanisms that emerge in the ‘Actual’ and in the ‘Real’ ontological levels. Secondly, although controversial in philosophical circles, the concept of ‘emergence’ would be of central importance should one want to make sense of CR. In contrast to various strands of reductionism, the ontological doctrine of emergence provides a thorough and detailed picture of the Durkheimian thesis that ‘the sum is something more and above its parts’ (Sayer 2000: 10-29; Collier 1994: 3-31).

As a starting point, we could say that cases exist where lower-level parts interact in ways that higher-level configurations are formed and whose properties emerge through this interaction. For Kim (1999), emergence describes two things. First, that the properties which emerge in the upper and configurational level cannot be predicted through the knowledge of the lower-level parts; in this sense, these emergent properties are novel. This is why emergence stands in stark contrast to reductionist explanations which tend to reduce upper level phenomena to the knowledge of the parts of which they are composed. Second, these emergent properties bear causal powers which are independent of the constituents of the interacting parts and which can shape their behaviour. What is crucial in these ideas is that a large part of social phenomena related to the unintended consequences of action owe their existence not to the actors’ rationality or reasons for action but to the causal power of these emergent properties of the whole. According to Groff (2004: 99-135), the emergent properties of social phenomena are qualitatively different from the sum of their parts. The non-predictability of emergent properties provides us with a holistic clue as to why a large part of

consequences were not anticipated when action was planned. In addition, the causal power of these properties is formal in the sense that it gives shape to the configurations of the interacting parts. If one wants to detect causal mechanisms one should explore how these formal causes make things happen and why things take one form and not another.

This conception of causality agrees with Gerrings' attempt to provide a unifying definition of causation when he states that 'causes refer to events or conditions that raise the probability of some outcome occurring' (Gerring 2005: 169). Thus, causation is framed in probabilistic and not deterministic terms since formal causes display necessary and efficient conditions for something to happen or change. Thus conceived, causal explanation should refer to generative mechanisms deployed in the emergent level of the Real. Instead of treating actors' reasons for action as efficient causes, CR views them as the first step for detecting causal mechanisms and for crafting causal propositions. In the layered model of the social world, CR offers reasons for actions that are the observable starting point in order to tap the unobservable generative mechanisms. The ontological criterion for the (non-observable) existence of the Real is through the causal effects exercised in the (observable) levels of the Actual and the Empirical. In this stratified ontology, causation may take three directions, upward, downward and on the same level. The first means that higher-level entities are explained by lower-level entities, the second means that a lower-level property is instantiated because of the emergent higher-level property and the third concerns explanations related to entities belonging to the same ontological level (Gorski 2009). Hence, it is obvious that CR's emergentism prioritises downward causation but without this meaning that it is crude Marxism or superficial structuralism. All these explorations are socio-ontological commitments, not theoretical propositions to be treated as testable deductive explanations of the particulars of the social world. They are not social theories for explaining the world but socio-ontological arguments about the furniture populating the social world and which provide a lens for explaining the causal forces forming people's practices. Social research is that which will provide us with the domain-specific details of these forming forces. Emergence is a socio-ontological term while mechanism is an epistemological one.

Having clarified the basics of what it means to say that social phenomena are emergent from a Critical Realist perspective, let me now briefly present the details of how social phenomena are explained through the concept of mechanism. It has been argued that the definition of mechanism propounded by the philosophers Machamer, Darden and Craver (2000) is that which most suits the research issues of social science. They say that 'mechanisms are entities and activities organised such that they are productive of regular changes from start or set-up to finish or termination conditions' (2000: 3). More refined versions of this definition are that 'A mechanism for a phenomenon consists of entities and activities organised in such a way that they are responsible for the phenomenon' (Illari and Williamson 2012) and that 'A mechanism for a phenomenon consists of entities (or parts) whose activities and interactions are organised in such a way that they produce the phenomenon' (Glennan 2010). One crucial component of these definitions is that they dispute the Humean and regularity conception of causality in so far as mechanisms could work only once or irregularly.

Critical Realists are in line with the above characterisations since they conceive of the causal power of mechanisms through its capacities to bring about changes in the world and effects which are observable. A crucial qualification CR makes is that causal mechanisms are generated within relationships. What social research has to do is to detect the necessary elements of these relationships in which mechanisms are generated. Earlier I mentioned that it is the peculiarity of the configuration of the lower-level entities that makes possible both the emergence of higher-level entities and the fact that that these entities have a causal effect in their own right. The task of social research is to identify the particular causal influence by exploring the peculiarities of the configuration of the relation in which mechanisms are generated and make things happen or raise the probability of some outcome occurring. Reframing this line of reasoning through CR terminology, we could say that social researchers need to explore the diachronic and synchronic dimensions of the events. Events are composed of what humans empirically perceive by means of their narrative or conceptual schemes and of the entities whose interrelation takes a specific form due to its emergent properties. Entities can be not only individuals but also social organisations and groups, and in that sense entities exist in all the three ontological levels (in the Empirical the entities are the individuals, in the Actual they are the organisations or social roles and in the Real they are the causal mechanisms) and are emergent in relation to them. Due to their properties, entities possess powers which may or may not be actualised. The causal power of entities is found not in the entity per se but in the configuration of the interaction between them. This is why mechanisms are emergent and why Bhaskar conceives of societies as open systems (Collier 1994).

Theory Development and Ethnographic Research

Sometimes ethnographers have been reluctant to engage in methodology-oriented philosophical reflections like those given above either for reasons of academic division of labour or for fear of abstraction. Abstraction and armchair theorists have been the target of critique in various sociological and anthropological circles which had adopted the lessons of C W Mills on the dangers stemming either from blind empiricism or from abstract theory. In my view this is a justified fear because whenever social scientists wanted to apply causal language and explanatory propositions to research data, they made superficial use of the D-N model of causality. Actually, what they did was to use a Marxist or structuralist theory that covers conditions in which every explanandum is explained by these theories. The results of these crude conceptions of causality were, among others, theory stagnation or theory imposition on empirical domains and data, and in some cases the stereotyping of how social actors think and feel. Pardo's research (1996) is a telling example that highlights the defects of applying deductive reasoning to ethnographic data.

Italo Pardo in his fieldwork in Naples, contra to this deductivist application of causal explanation, tries to forge a new and non-reductive insight into how one should approach the agency/structure debate by developing a conception of social action that takes into account non rational elements in how actors manage their existence. Pardo treats his informants as rational actors who assess their resources and take decisions, not as cultural dupes who are

unable to manage their existence. He suggests that Neapolitans' managing of existence is informed by '*strong continuous interaction* between tangible aspects of existence and symbolic, moral and spiritual ones' (Pardo 1996: 11). It is, he adds, a matter 'of attaining self-worth through which motivations and boundaries are formed' (Pardo 1996: 14). Pardo puts at the forefront what I described in the previous discussion as the unintended consequences of action. Although actors' beliefs that their relations to the system are negotiable may not be well founded, they nonetheless play an important role in how they manage to form interpersonal connections and webs which are unaffected by trade unions. By means of the creation of entrepreneurial practices which are usually atypical but tolerated by the authorities, actors produce their social, economic and moral status without being involved in the traditional industrial work which they see as alienating.

Pardo, by setting in motion Weber's value-laden rationality, disputes the stereotyping of the *popolino's* (ordinary people) atypical work activities as criminal and describes in detail the creativity entailed in such activities, which is embedded in religious and moral meanings (Pardo 1996: 25-45). He uses the case of Naples to argue that the development of European urban settings is characterised by internal instability of power and defends the idea that the struggle between the dominant and the dominated cannot be merely explained in class terms (Pardo 1996: Ch. 7). In other words, through urban fieldwork, he uses a case study to disconfirm class theory for explaining the unequal distribution of power by highlighting the contexts to which this theory does not apply. Thus, the concept of 'strong continuous interaction' can be used not only for descriptive but for explanatory reasons.

Pardo's ethnography is an example of the use of theory not in deductive terms but as an orienting device for investigating inductively social process and contexts. His methodology follows the principles followed by most ethnographers either explicitly or implicitly: analytic induction and abductive reasoning through which new (mostly substantive) theoretical propositions can be forged. Although analytic induction is considered the 'royal road' for qualitative researchers and is well known, let me briefly outline its main logic. Given that analytic induction goes hand in hand with theoretical sampling, one should note that in analysing their data ethnographers proceed sequentially, meaning that the first unit or case yields a set of findings and questions that inform the next case. The reasoning behind theoretical sampling is that one starts by analysing a unit (an interview, a household, a neighbourhood) and then proceeds by exploring whether prior findings are replicated or not. This exploration is done using units similar to the initial one and units different from it. The crucial thing in this procedure is that the characteristics of units are chosen deliberately, based on the refinement and re-evaluation of each unit that is sequentially analysed in order that the underlying phenomenon be understood. The goal is not that descriptive statements be made (x% present the Z attribute) but to establish that a mechanism is at work.

The methodological principles of analytic induction and abduction should be seen not as a peculiarity of qualitative research but as a strategy for crafting explanatory accounts which could be transferred to contexts other than those in which the fieldwork took place. The systematizing of this strategy constitutes the main challenge ethnographers have to overcome. Despite the fact that ethnographers should care about the extrapolation of their theoretical

explanations, they should not imitate quantitative epistemology because in that case they would be unable to distinguish empirical findings from theoretical accounts. In order to clarify this, Small (2009) thinks that the key is to reframe qualitative sampling. In classic quantitative parlance, generalisability is attained through the selection of typical cases which are identified by means of survey techniques. Ethnographers are encouraged to select cases not from the dependent variable but by assessing how representative is the case of the population from which it has been sampled. However, I have to note that there are two reasons why the statistical conception of generalisability is doomed to fail: the first has to do with the fact that the selection of cases will always be biased because researchers use their hunches to a greater or lesser degree in order to assess how typical the case they have selected is. The second reason is that ethnographers will never be certain whether their analyses concerning their sampling units would apply to those that would be obtained if the entire population had been analysed. There is no way of determining whether the same results can be obtained by studying populations from which the (typical) cases have been sampled. The solution ethnographers propose is to carry out in-depth research in order to overcome this limitation. However, for Small this does not change things, and he proposes specific alternatives.

The first promising solution, Small believes, comes from Burawoy's 'extended case method'. The goal is not the discovery of new theory but the extension of pre-existing theoretical or conceptual formulations to other groups or aggregations, to other bounded contexts or places, or to other sociocultural domains (Small 2009: 20-4). In this view, theoretical extension focuses on broadening the relevance of a particular concept to a range of empirical contexts other than those in which they were first developed or intended to be used. In this sense, theoretical extension preeminently involves the 'transferability' of theory between at least two contexts. For Snow, Morrill and Anderson (2003), Simmel's formal sociology offers a classic means for practicing theoretical extension. They believe that there are three main forms that Simmel thought could explain the various contents of social life; they are social processes, social types and developmental patterns. By researching a specific singular, ethnographers can describe how it instantiates one of these three forms.

However, there is an inconsistency in Burawoy's argument since it is not clear what is meant by 'extended'. While the key idea is to learn how society's larger forces shape the case, the purpose is to understand the case, not to generalise from it. I believe that this confusion lies in the fact that Burawoy draws upon a deductive line of reasoning, not an inductive one like that of Grounded Theory. Beyond this unclear point, Small makes a crucial distinction between 'statistical significance' and 'social significance', which means that ethnographers should be clear as to what the single case has to tell us about society rather than about the population of similar cases. He proposes the replacement of 'statistical inference' with the use of 'causal or logical inference' which means that the 'extrapolability from any one case study to like situations in general is based only on logical inference' (Small 2009: 18). He suggests that the tapping of a causal hypothesis should be based on logical thinking, not on deduction. Instead of hypothesizing that "All entities of type A will exhibit characteristic Z", researchers

should hypothesise that “When X occurs, whether Y will follow depends on W” (Small 2009: 23).

Be that as it may, how could one be sure that what one has found from the research on a single case tells us something about society as a whole? The solution comes from how researchers should select cases, and Small believes that ethnographers should search for ‘deviant or unique cases that are especially interesting, because they provide for ways of developing or extending theories’ (Small 2009: 21). In other words, Small argues that instead of prioritizing typical cases identified through random sampling, researchers should look for cases which are deviant in some respect. Although it sounds good, this solution is appropriate for theory development (when one wants to develop a theory in order to cover instances not explained in its initial form), not for informing us on how a case is generalisable to society. We believe that at this point Small’s argument lacks specificity because he does not provide us with sufficient details as to how a ‘deviant case’ is defined and identified in fieldwork research. On the contrary, he takes the deviant case solution as a taken-for-granted guide which will ease ethnographers’ confusion.

From Sampling to Causal Propositions

Let me reiterate here my earlier crucial point that it is the kind of sampling that can produce causal propositions. In the quantitative tradition, randomisation assures one that the cases selected are representative of the population. However, two important notes need to be made. First, that it is the researcher who defines what the population will be and, second, that representativeness is not exactly the same as generalisability; the former refers to the fact that every single unit has the same likelihood of being selected and not to the possibility of generalizing sample findings to the population. According to a quantitative logic, generalisability is inferred from representativeness; it is inferred from the reasoning that since every single unit has the same likelihood of being chosen, it follows that what applies to the sample will also apply to the population.

In contrast, in ‘maximum variation sampling’ cases are selected only if they represent the full range of values of the relevant variables X, Y or of the dimension of interest. The aim is for the researcher to collect data from all viewpoints (including the extreme and the mean values) that constitute the studied phenomenon. Identification of diversity is not usually obtained in a one-shot procedure before the research is carried out; instead, the cases are selected in an iterative way while the research is in progress. Antecedent analysed cases inform the researcher about the diversity of the next cases that have to be selected (remember what we said previously on analytic induction). Maximum variation sampling goes hand in hand with the construction of typological theories, that is theoretical explanations delineating types of conditions within which a different causal hypothesis of X and Y is analysed. In other words, typologies are informative of the various types of necessary and sufficient conditions within which the causal path from X to Y takes various forms. Typicality and diversity in this sampling procedure interact since in each type a typical case has to be analysed for within-type generality to be obtained. The most known advantage of maximum

variation sampling is that by covering the full range of variation in the dimension of interest, one is justified in claiming the representativeness of the chosen sample of cases.

If a researcher wants to maximise variance then he or she could select a single case exemplifying an extreme value on a dimension of interest for a within-case analysis. 'Extreme' could mean either the distance from a mean or what is considered unusual in a common sense way. The extreme-case method can be implemented on condition that the full range of variation in the population of cases has been understood, allowing the researcher to obtain a fuller picture of the studied population. Alternatively, it can be implemented for exploratory reasons; that is, as a way of explaining how a Y (outcome) has been produced, or of pointing out the effects of an event or a situation (of X).

Similarly, when a case presents unexpected or surprising properties in relation either to a theory or to common sense, then this is called deviant. According to Gerring (2007: 95-105), the difference from the extreme case is that while the latter is defined in relation to the distance from the mean of a single distribution, deviant-ness emerges only when a case is not explained by a statistically-grounded causal relationship. To the extent that the causal model is transformed so that it encompasses the unexplained, then the deviant becomes typical. Gerring believes that the best way to choose a deviant case is to pose the question: *relative to what general model* (or set of background factors) is Case deviant? For example, Paul Willis' theory on how working-class kids get working-class jobs applies only to cases in which the opportunity structure of the local job market, the school habitus, the community culture and the predominance of locality are similar across the population of cases. Thus, one could carry out ethnography or an interview-based study by selecting a case (for example, a group of working-class adolescents or a vocational school) in which one or more of these contextual factors is absent. In such an instance, one could either disconfirm Willis' theory on adolescents' identity formation or reframe its main constituents. What is important is to understand that both the extreme and the deviant case have an exploratory function to perform. To the extent that a causal process has been identified for a deviant case, then one can expect that it is applicable to other deviant cases, too.

I believe that social researchers should capitalise on deviant cases because generative mechanisms come to the fore more visibly in periods of crisis or of transition (Christodoulou and Spyridakis 2019). As Collier has argued (1994: 165), by seeing how something goes wrong we find out more about the conditions of its working properly than we ever would by observing it working properly. In researching deviant contexts we learn about the workings of an unactualised mechanism under typical conditions.

Finally, in contrast to the exploratory logic of extreme and deviant case method, a case that is used to confirm the assumptions of a theoretical model is defined by Gerring (2007: 118) as influential. Here, the goal is not to produce new causal explanations but to specify the conditions that make this influential case not deviant but rather explicable from the original theory to the extent that one takes into account the circumstances of this case. While the exploration of new causal paths and theory modification is fitting for extreme and deviant sampling, theory confirmation is what sustains the influential case method.

I believe that the main idea springing from what I have set out thus far is that the kind of generalisability of the discovered causal relations depends on the sampling reasoning that sustains the research design. For instance, in a typical case sampling, the generalising reasoning is that ‘since this causal relation applies to this case, it probably applies to similar cases’. In the maximum variation sampling, the generalising reasoning is that typologies tap necessary and sufficient conditions through which causal relations take a different form analogous to the type. In the extreme or deviant case sampling, the generalising reasoning concerns causal relations explaining new phenomena through theory development. Finally, in the influential case, the case that is analysed exemplifies a theory-confirming causal relation.

We should not forget that for a Critical Realist, generalisability is not to be identified with the use of statistical techniques for extrapolating from the studied to the unstudied. According to this empiricist conception, the larger the sample the more accurate the extrapolation. The problem with this conception is that it equates generalisability with the domain of the empirical. On the contrary, a CR approach to generalisability refers to the conditions that make something — a social relationship, an action, an institution or a social structure — what it is, not something completely different (Danermark et al. 2002: 77). Using the terminology that we have developed thus far, researchers try to detect how mechanism interacts with context so that a specific outcome is produced. For O’Mahoney and Vincent (2014), researching mechanisms asks, ‘how do the properties of one or more entities affect those of others?’; researching context asks, ‘what conditions are needed for an entity’s causal mechanisms to be triggered?’; and researching outcomes asks, ‘what are the empirical manifestations produced by causal mechanisms being triggered in a given context?’

The difference between the empirical and CR conception of generality lies in the inferential logic that sustains them, with induction prioritised for the former and retroduction and abduction identified with the latter. Retroduction is an inferential move from the empirical domain to the generative mechanisms and its core element is related to abstraction, which one should not confuse with data enforcement. Abstraction refers to the re-description of how the differing elements of a phenomenon are combined in such a way as to affect events. As they put it, abstraction involves combining observations, often, though not inevitably in tandem with theory, to produce the most plausible explanation of the mechanisms that caused the events. Re-description means that researchers observe, describe, interpret and explain something within the frame of a new context. It does not mean that one discovers something that nobody knew anything about before but that what is discovered is ‘connections and relations, not directly observable, by which one can understand and explain already known occurrences in a novel way’ (Danermark et 2002: 91). In the next section, I discuss how Spyridakis’ edited book *MvS* could be viewed through a causal-explanation line of thought.

From How to Why: A Mechanism-based Explanatory Framework for MvS's Case Studies²

The central phenomenon with which MvS deals revolves around three interrelated issues. They are:

1. What market-based institutional practices does the capitalist economy set in motion to overcome the 2009 financial crisis?
2. How do the various social groups located in differing urban spaces respond to these practices?
3. In what ways does the encounter between market-based practices and social groups' actions transform urban places?

In addition, the common core permeating all the chapters of MvS is that the means-ends scheme of rationality not only is theoretically misguided but it is also a disguised imposition, identifying rational action with the capitalist conception of homo economicus. On the contrary, by drawing upon the Weberian value-laden approach to rational action, which takes into account the emotional and moral dimensions of rationality, MvS exemplifies how one could treat rationality as a total social fact.

In his chapter titled “We Are All Socialists”: Greek Crisis and Precarisation’, Spyridakis (2018: 113-133) shows how the Weberian conception of rationality finds its way into precarious forms of life created by the 2009 financial crisis in Greece. Within these forms of life people cannot schedule their future lives, they tend to be isolated and socially excluded, doing short and dead-end jobs and mostly they are forced to find recourse in public programme schemes in order to get by. The idea researched by Spyridakis is that the financial crisis creates precariousness which is reproduced by the economic policies implemented for remedying it. He uses as a case study an E-funded programme for the reduction of poverty in Greece in which each EU member had to identify a specific target group deserving financial and psychological support. In Greece, the members of the target group are those: (1) with an annual income that does not exceed 3000 Euros for each individual, 4500 Euros for two-member families, 5400 Euros for a three-member family, 6300 Euros for four-member families and 7200 Euros for five-member families; (2) the total taxable value of whose property does not exceed 115,000 Euros per person and 250,000 for the whole family, plus 20,000 Euros for each additional adult and 15,000 for each dependent minor, with a maximum total value for each individual or family of 250,000 Euros. Spyridakis views this policy as a case that not only confirms Foucault's theory of the microphysics of power but also acts as a template for crafting a mechanism through which a precarious life is constructed. This policy creates a kind of dependency on the state, which provides material items (food, clothes, unemployment allowances and other income supports), and makes the recipients unable to get out of precariousness. This is why the beneficiaries of this programme have the ironical feeling that they are ‘all socialists’.

In a similar vein, Julia Soul (2018: 134-153) examines how neoliberal policies for overcoming a crisis transform the sense of being a worker and a member of the working class.

² For the full contents of this volume, see: <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9783319741888>

She takes as a case a group of steel workers from San Nicolas de los Arroyos, the city where SOMISAc the state-owned steel mill privatised in 1992 was located. Through a detailed analysis of the workers' responses to the privatisation of the factory, Soul highlights the distinctive features of being a worker before and after privatisation and the causal path of this transformation. In particular, during the state-owned period, the steel mill workers had access to relatively better reproduction conditions than other groups, because of higher wages and a set of corporate policies linked to household reproduction. In addition, this set up provided them with a sense of personal worth, as they could build their own homes, lengthen their children's educational trajectories and keep their households financially supported by male breadwinners. Their commitment to the 'collective worker' was tied up with upward mobility.

However, the lived experience of being a worker was deeply individualised when the factory was privatised. For example, retirement decisions became a personal and family matter, not a puzzle to be solved by the labour union; at the same time, workers obtained the power to purchase ten or twenty percent of the company's stock. The feeling of individualisation intensified as workers gradually became 'shareholders', their family incomes increased and employment relationships were replaced by commercial relations. In other words, Soul identifies labour subsumption and the changing role of union mediation as the two causal mechanisms that made the lived experience of the worker individualised.

In his chapter in *MvS*, Budel (2018: 209-227) describes the close relationship that developed between farmers and their livestock and how it faced a challenge in the context of the Common Agricultural Policy. The small milk-producing farms had to process their milk directly on the farm while others had to convert to breeding cattle for meat production if they wanted to keep their farms. Applying what I have described as a 'maximum variation sampling', Budel examines various kinds of farms by size, location and production and forges a spectrum on which farmers are located. At one end of this continuum, there are farmers with a strong work ethic who run their farms with idealism and sometimes accept relatively low technical standards (ancient working practices); at the other extreme, there are farmers who regard their work not as a vocation but see their farm more like a business that could be sold if no longer profitable. In other words, he describes the differential causal process that corresponds to the different ways in which farmers dealt with the market-based agricultural policies devised to overcoming crisis.

Similarly, D'Aloisio (2018: 153-171) explores the effects of FIAT's internal relocation in Italy as a policy aimed at managing the financial recession. Using a longitudinal research design based on ethnographic observation and life narratives, she underlines the difference in the meaning and the value attached to holding a job at FIAT between the findings from the interviews conducted in the first phase of research, six years after the factory's opening, and those from the interviews conducted ten years later. She identifies the workers' specific strategies for 'managing their existence' (as Pardo would put it, 1996), like having the support of their families (the parents of the families in crisis), who helped guaranteeing daily meals, and of their friendship and neighbourhood networks, which helped including small services of a technical and/or domestic nature and reducing certain costs through arrangements such as collective car-sharing.

To conclude this short overview of MvS, Nissim (2018: 171-189) uses a sampling logic in order to sharpen the Gramscian theory of hegemony and to explain how the dominant have the symbolic power to impose their worldview on the dominated. In particular, he highlights the fatalism which shapes the political worldviews of workers' committees, who had many stories of uncontrollable forces to tell (globalisation, investors, the garment industry, the Chinese), leading to shutting down production in Israel. This fatalistic stance adopted by workers' committees lead them to one of the following practices: a) resignation from whatever union claim, believing that combative acts like striking were useless, b) collaboration with the employers or conceiving the capital-labour conflict in personalised terms (the idea that the only thing that matters is the person holding the class position) c) seek the assistance of lawyers, who are experts in Labour Law and d) pursue academic degrees in business administration in order to become professionals in this field. The causal explanation offered by Nissim is that the labour struggle is transformed through market logic and business tools. He proposes the causal hypothesis that the professionalisation of unionism and the personalisation of the public sphere raise the probability of workers' resistance becoming both local and non-radical.

Discussion

I hope that the foregoing has sufficiently illuminated the main idea of this article that case studies and ethnographic fieldwork have a crucial contribution to make, not only in relation to the description of people's lived experiences and of the attendant web of meanings but also to the causal explanation of why things happen in this way and not another. Drawing on a Critical Realist approach to causality and to emergence, I applied the mechanism-based account for explaining social phenomena to the urban fieldwork brought together by Spyridakis in his MvS. I have shed light on specific mechanisms (dependency on the state, labour subsumption, workers who become 'shareholders, CAP, unionism professionalisation, to name a few) which work in ways that produce specific outcomes (precariousness, individualisation of the sense of being a worker, types of farms, weakening of labour-unionism) within specific conditions. In a comprehensive chapter in the MyS book, Durrenberger points to the emergent contexts which give shape to the abovementioned mechanisms and outcomes and which make people unaware of the forces that form their reasons for actions. Among the various and inspiring ideas offered by Durrenberger, I choose that which is closer to the central tenet of the present discussion: that ethnographers can claim causal explanations without resorting to methodological individualism or forcing data through deductive reasoning. Emergentism is a powerful ontological argument for grounding this idea. I argued that the best way to defend causality as an emergent phenomenon and not as stemming from people's reasons for action is to turn our attention to the details of connecting sampling with various explanatory statements whose causal character can be singular or universal. The fact that qualitative researchers deal with the singular does not mean that they are preoccupied with the particularity of an inexplicable thing or with ungraspable peculiarities for which the only thing that can be done is to describe their uniqueness. On the contrary, the singular is not an empirical matter as positivists conceive of it in a nominalistic

way but it always tells us something about the objects of which it is an instantiation. It has, in other words, an illustrative value, as ethnographers know, in so far as it elucidates the whole by detailing its social formation. The merit of the comparative ethnographies gathered in MvS lies in the fact that they lead to causal hypotheses that shed light on the conditions that increase the probability of specific things happening. As Pardo and Prato have argued (2017), understanding the urban world presupposes socio-anthropological theorisation grounded on empirically based, holistic analysis of singular cases. A lot of work has yet to be done for this goal to be achieved.

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