
**About the book:** Unlike psychologistic paradigms, the non-atomistic variant of methodological individualism discussed in this book explains society in terms of complex emergent structures that unintentionally result from human actions, and that in turn influence those actions. Friedrich Hayek is an emblematic representative of this approach, the origins of which date back to the Scottish Enlightenment. One of Hayek’s most original – but also less well-known – contributions is his linking of this non–atomistic methodological individualism to a cognitive psychology centered on the idea that mind is both an interpretative device and a self-organizing system. This book uses Hayek’s reflections on mind as a starting point to investigate the concept of action from the standpoint of non-atomistic methodological individualism, and it explores the connections between Hayek’s cognitive psychology and approaches employed in various fields, such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, neo-Weberian sociology and enaction. Focusing on the interpretative foundations of social life, the book conceives action as a product of the human mind’s cognitive autonomy, i.e. of its hermeneutic skills.
CHAPTER 3: AUTONOMY AND SOCIAL SYSTEMS

1. Introduction

Methodological individualism, like many other social and philosophical concepts, is not univocally defined. According to a widespread interpretation, it is a form of atomism which is unable to account for the real nature of social life and the structural constraints that influence action. We reject this interpretation of methodological individualism because it is both conceptually and historically incorrect. There is no equivalence between methodological individualism and atomism: the latter is the most simplistic variant of the former. Two different approaches can be distinguished within the tradition of methodological individualism: one is atomistic, whereas the other is non-atomistic. The atomistic approach, which neglects many socio-cultural constraints which influence the individual, deals with fictional situations and unrealistic hypotheses about human agency (standard economic models are a good examples of this branch of individualism). By contrast, the non-atomistic approach – which is supported by Hayek – is centered on the real historical and socio-cultural characteristics of man and social interactions, and it takes full account of the effects of social conditioning on agency. Since the aim of this book is to clarify the real sociological presuppositions of social life, as well as the meaning of Hayek’s philosophy of action, it focuses exclusively on the non-atomistic variant of methodological individualism. Although it may seem somewhat paradoxical, the idea that the individual is hermeneutically autonomous – an idea which is central in Hayek’s work – is strictly related to recognition of the importance of social conditioning. The hermeneutical theory of action is incompatible with atomism because the former considers agency to be historical, socio-culturally situated and related to inter-subjectively shared meanings.

In previous chapters we attempted to show that no aspect of an individual lived experience is a pure reflex of his or her external environment. Moreover, we stressed that there is an incompatibility between the autonomy of the actor as intended by Hayek in *The Sensory Order* and the socio-cultural determinism of the holistic paradigms. It is time to analyze carefully how the interpretative autonomy of the actor is related to the systemic structure of the social world within the frame of a broader social theory. From the perspective adopted here, the individual is influenced by the network of social relations in which he/she is embedded, and by the cultural tradition shared by the members of his/her social group. This chapter attempts to clarify the theory of social systems as intended by
non-atomistic methodological individualism and also the way this approach reconciles the indeterminism of action and the existence of social conditioning. Clarifying this point is crucial in order to correctly understand in what sense methodological individualism, as intended by Hayek, is based on a theory of the hermeneutical autonomy of the actor and also why it challenges the holistic paradigms. The latter paradigms assume that there is an objective social system which exists independently of individuals as an autonomous substance, and which mechanically controls human minds and deeds. Within this frame, the meanings that individuals attach to their actions are irrelevant to study of the relationship between social context and agency because the ultimate cause of action does not lie in individual meaning-constructs. Human meaning-constructs are supposed to be epiphenomena of supra-individual substances, and these substances are regarded as the real causes of social phenomena. Non-atomistic methodological individualism argues, by contrast, that social reality must be explained in nominalist terms, and that the ultimate cause of action and global social phenomena must be sought in how the context is hermeneutically appropriated by the agents. According to non-atomistic methodological individualism, social conditioning can only be explained by considering how individuals understand their social situations and interpret their constraints in light of their projects of action.

The widespread view that the entire individualist tradition ignores the effects of social conditioning is often expressed by saying that all the variants of this tradition support reductionism. The term ‘reductionism’ is not univocally defined by the critics of methodological individualism. Two variants of the reductionist interpretation of what we call ‘non-atomistic methodological individualism’ can be distinguished. The first, which is supported by authors such as Archer (1995), Bhaskar (1979) and Udehn (2001), considers the individualist paradigm to be a form of idealist reductionism that denies the reality of social conditioning. The nominalist and inter-subjectivist theory of social systems, which is supported by the individualists – a theory which insists on the hermeneutical presuppositions of action – is interpreted as maintaining that social constraints are mere mental constructs – opinions – to which no objective limitations correspond. The approach of authors such as Weber and Schütz is supposed to be a form of idealism in that it neglects the fact that the agent is embedded within a social structure which has concrete and real effects on his/her liberty of action – effects which exist independently of the agent’s opinion about what he/she is free or not free to do. Supporters of this interpretation of methodological individualism argue that the
agent’s voluntaristic powers are bounded by social rules and sanctions that exist even if the agent is unaware of their existence and consequences.

The second variant of the reductionist interpretation of methodological individualism, which is supported by authors such as Mandelbaum (1955), Kincaid (1995) and Sawyer (2002; 2003), likens this approach to a kind of semantic reductionism. According to this interpretation, which developed within analytic philosophy, the individualist criticism of sociological substantialism, which entails that social systems and their mechanisms must be explained in terms of individuals, is supportive of a principle of semantic reduction of social properties to individual ones. Proponents of this interpretation of methodological individualism argue that this approach must be rejected because social phenomena are characterized by systemic properties that cannot be analyzed without referring to semantically irreducible concepts and laws. Because it is regarded as semantic reductionism, methodological individualism is supposed not to understand the importance of the systemic properties (such as social roles, cultural rules and linguistic structures) which causally influence action and limit the freedom of the individual.

In this chapter we criticize both the variants of reductionist interpretation of methodological individualism and elucidate the reasons why we believe that they are historically and logically incorrect. Contrary to the dominant view, we stress that methodological individualism (or, at least, its non-atomistic variant) is a structural approach which acknowledges the existence of social constraints and also the necessity for social research to refer to semantically irreducible concepts and laws. In our opinion, the difference between sociological holism and (non-atomistic) methodological individualism is not about whether there is an influence of structural and irreducible factors on the individual or whether there is no such influence. Instead, it depends on how this influence is analyzed and explained. Both sociological holism and (non-atomistic) methodological individualism are linked to a structural theory of the social world. However, unlike sociological holism, (non-atomistic) methodological individualism interprets social systems and social conditioning in nominalist terms and uses the concepts of hermeneutical autonomy and unintended consequences of action. By contrast, sociological holism defends an anti-nominalist position and removes from the analysis of social conditioning both interpretation of the actors and study of the unintended consequences. Sociological holism assumes that social structures are substances which exist independently of individuals, and by ‘social conditioning’ it means the fact that human actions are mechanically determined and controlled by those independent substances.
In explaining the persistence of social systems, (non-atomistic) methodological individualism uses an approach based on a bottom-up and "emergentist" logic, whilst sociological holism, which studies social relations in terms of ontological collectivism and heteronomy, presupposes a top-down logic.

The chapter is articulated as follows. Section 2 reconstructs the cultural and intellectual roots of sociological holism and of its way of conceiving the social system. Section 3 focuses on the historical origin of methodological individualism. It shows the intimate connection between the theory of the unintended consequences and emergent properties which is defended by this approach and the understanding of the autonomy of the actors. Section 4 analyzes the ontological differences between methodological individualism and sociological holism. Section 5 clarifies the notion of system. It explains that the use of the concept of ‘system’, being based on selective presuppositions, does not match the substantialist epistemology of sociological holism. Section 6 investigates in detail what a social system is from the standpoint of the theory of the individuals’ heteronomy which is endorsed by the holistic paradigms. Section 7 makes clear the reasons why methodological individualism must not be confused with social atomism. Section 8 investigates why nominalism and the systemic approach are two compatible perspectives and should not be regarded otherwise. Section 9 explains that the individualist concept of social system is strictly linked to an intersubjectivist theory of the social world. Section 10 analyses what social conditioning is from the standpoint of methodological individualism. Section 11 criticizes the interpretation of this paradigm in terms of idealist reductionism. Section 12 rejects the interpretation of methodological individualism in terms of semantic reductionism which has been promoted by linguistic analysis. Section 13 argues that Hayek’s theory of group selection is not incompatible with methodological individualism. Section 14 analyzes the attempt to promote a middle ground paradigm between sociological holism and individualism – an attempt which wrongly takes for granted the equivalence between methodological individualism and atomism.

2. From Religious Historicism to Scientistic Sociology

It is impossible to clarify the meaning of methodological individualism, as well as the systemic and anti-reductionist presuppositions
of the non-atomistic branch of this approach, without referring to the
history of the debate between holists and methodological individualists. For this reason, in what follows, we will focus on the salient features of
this history.

According to Popper (1966a, p. 16 ff.), the cultural roots of the
theory of the heteronomy of action which is defended by methodological
holism are old. They must be linked to two archaic and pre-philosophical
traditions. The first one is the “theistic interpretation” (p. 17) of history,
which assumes that history is not the consequence of human intentions and
actions, but the product of divine will. Some examples of this view are
Homer’s theistic, or rather polytheistic, conception of history and the
Jewish doctrine of the chosen people. As Popper (p. 19) points out, along
with modern holistic theories of social change, these kinds of interpretation
of human life belittle the importance of individuals as historical actors
precisely because they share “a certain vague feeling of destiny, and the
idea of powers behind the scenes”. The second archaic tradition which has
influenced the development of methodological holism is “tribalism, i.e. the
emphasis on the supreme importance of the tribe without which the
individual is nothing at all” (p. 17). Tribalism is strictly linked to the old
religious forms of historicism and also inspired the modern ones that “still
retain an element of collectivism” (p. 18). They “still emphasize the
significance of some group or collective—for example, a class—without
which the individual is nothing at all” (p. 18). For Popper (1966a; 1966b),
both these archaic traditions influenced Plato’s thought, namely what he
calls, at the risk of looking somewhat anachronistic, his organicism and his
historicism. In Popper’s opinion they are two important sources of the
modern deterministic theories of social change as well as of overall non-
individualistic sociologies (see also Di Nuoscio 2006, p. 109; Hayek
1952a, p. 199; Pribram 2008, p. 120).

As Hayek (1952a, pp. 189-206) underlines, methodological holism,
as it is properly understood, developed in France and Germany in the first
half of the 19th century, thanks in particular to the works of two authors
who are usually considered to be completely antithetical, i.e. Comte and
Hegel. In spite of the strong and undeniable differences between
Positivism and Idealism, Comte and Hegel share nevertheless some
common points. In particular, both defend a theory of action which is
based on the idea of heteronomy and is connected to a deterministic
conception of historical development. These two philosophers, as well as
their follower Marx, lived during a period of traumatic and profound socio-
cultural transformations. They provided – each in a different and specific
manner – reassuring interpretations of these changes by elaborating new
sophisticated variants of the old historicist and collectivist theories of society (see Hayek 1955, pp. 189-206). Hayek (pp. 13-16) argues that both combined a secularized version of theistic conceptions of human destiny with the scientistic and hyper-rationalistic mentality, typical of their age. Obviously Hegel cannot be considered a scientistic thinker in the same sense that the positivist Comte can be, but he shares with him a certain epistemological optimism which is partly rooted in the cultural context of their epoch.

During the 19th century the impressive success of the natural sciences strengthened confidence in the forecasting abilities of human reason and provided new arguments supporting the historicist faith in the possibility of discovering the meaning and definitive goal of human destiny. The core of scientism is precisely the idea that, by imitating, at least partially, that which the mechanist and objectivistic epistemology of the time wrongly considered as the proper and correct method of the natural sciences, the social sciences could enormously improve their ability to predict outcomes (Hayek, 1955, p. 14; 1967, pp. 3-ff; see also Popper, 1957, pp. 1-3). According to Hayek (p. 53 ff.; p. 191 ff.), although Hegel does not argue at all that the analysis of history and society must be based on the approach of the empirical sciences and although he uses a vocabulary which is very different from Comte’s, he paradoxically develops some ideas which are very similar to those of the latter author. First of all, he maintains, like Comte, that the study of the different historical epochs is not based on the use of interpretative and theoretical frameworks, but is the study of “given” realities, i.e. of substances which exist independently from any selective standpoint and also independently from individuals. Moreover, he comes to the conclusion, which is also shared by Comte, that, as the objects of historical analysis are “given”, the problem of historical investigation is to understand, in an almost inductive manner, the causal connections between these given realities by uncovering the laws of historical progress – laws which completely deny the autonomy of the actor. For Hayek (1952a, p. 197), “it makes little difference” that Comte presents the laws of evolution “as natural laws while for Hegel they are metaphysical principles” precisely because, from a general standpoint, their views are fundamentally similar.

“We have here the root of that curious alliance between 19th century positivism and Hegelianism” which is the basis of the development of all the holistic sociology (Hayek 1952, p. 58).
Hegel’s and Comte’s social theories also share the influence of another principle which is typical of the scientistic epistemology of their time: determinism. Determinism is the idea that causality necessarily means predictability in the sense that there is nothing which is non-forecastable. As the most recent epistemology has shown, determinism is an illusion because, although everything is governed by the principle of causality, there are systems that, due to their complexity, are unpredictable (see Di Nuoscio 2006, p. 45-48). As we have already pointed out, the impressive success of the natural sciences seen at the time of Hegel and Comte strengthened confidence in science, but created an unwarranted optimism regarding human studies. Nineteenth-century experimental physics was able to successfully predict outcomes largely because it dealt with only “simple phenomena” rather than the “complex phenomena” that the social sciences deal with (see Hayek 1978, pp. 12; 30-34). Complex phenomena are highly unpredictable due to the interpretative presuppositions of human action as well as the impossibility of applying the ceteris paribus clause – the "all other things held constant” clause. Unable to understand the difference between simple and complex phenomena, scientistic social theories, like those of Hegel and Comte, defended a deterministic view, i.e. the principle “of the necessary development of humanity according to recognizable laws” (pp. 196-197). On the basis of this view, they imply a total denial of actors’ cognitive and behavioral autonomy.

“Even the outstanding individuals are, with Comte, merely "instruments" or "organs of a predestined movement, or with Hegel Geschäftsführer des Weltgeistes, managers of the World Spirit", whom Reason cunningly uses for its own purposes”

(p. 200).

Moreover, it must be added that in order to understand the roots of the holistic sociology a specific contribution of Positivism to the development of this sociology and of its heteronomous philosophy of action must equally be considered. The contribution we are talking about is the idea that “being scientific means…eliminating from explanation any unobservable elements” (Boudon 1998, p. 138). This idea legitimates and strengthens the position that the subjective conscious views must not be considered in sociological explanation. It has been “very influential” also in psychology as, for instance, the rise of behaviorism shows.
Thanks to the combined influence of Hegelian Idealism and French Positivism, the deterministic and heteronomous approach to the study of human action became largely popular. As this approach was accepted by these “opposing schools”, for many its heuristic validity acquired the status of an evident truth, i.e. of a dogma (Hayek p. 191). Moreover, the “joint influence” of these two opposed philosophical traditions was very important for the formation of Marx’s holistic methodology – the third pillar on which contemporary methodological holism developed (p. 200). Indeed, contrary to what is usually assumed, the latter methodology can be considered, due to its “materialist” orientation, in many aspects, “nearer” to Comte’s view than to that of Hegel (p. 197). According to Hayek, from a general standpoint, we can precisely trace to the idealistic and positivistic source “much of what has been known as sociology…, and especially its most fashionable and most ambitious branch, the sociology of knowledge” (p. 194). Although contemporary holistic approaches in the social sciences renounced long-term predictions as a consequence of the failure of eighteenth-century historicist prophecies (see Boudon 1991), they maintain the basic setting of this heritage as well as the old and reassuring crypto-religious idea according to which human action is intimately linked to a force that transcends it. As Popper (p. 410) stresses, the aim of recent variants of holistic sociology remains to “unveil…the hidden…determinants” which inspire our behaviors.

It would be hard to understand the origins of methodological holism without considering a final point. Although Comte, Hegel and Marx are, in many respects, three followers of the hyper-rationalistic tradition, which began with Descartes and continued with scientism, their view is also a reaction to a particular aspect of this tradition. During the French Enlightenment especially, the hyper-rationalistic mentality favored the development of an atomistic and contractualistic conception of society (see Laurent 1994, p. 14-26). According to this conception (which was anticipated by Hobbes and continued by Descartes, Leibniz and Rousseau), individuals, meant as perfectly rational beings, must be viewed as logically and historically prior to social institutions, the latter resulting from their mutual agreement expressed in social contract terms. Methodological holism is partly based on a reaction to this social atomism (which, in spite of what is often affirmed, must not be assumed to be a pillar of methodological individualism). Such atomism is undoubtedly a weak theory. Its fallacy is clear for two reasons. The first is that it views human beings as being intelligent and cooperative since the beginning in spite of the fact that originally they shared neither socio-cultural linkages nor common institutions. The second is that, following the mechanist doctrine,
it assumes that society is nothing but the sum of its parts, its parts being individual atoms and their doings. As a reductionist approach, social atomism leaves no room for systemic or structural analysis of social processes. Reductionism is not a correct description of the nature of social phenomena because the existence of global irreducible properties can hardly be denied.

Both French Positivist Sociology and German Idealist Historicism share an organicist conception of society (see Hayek 1964, p. 191-206). Their heteronomous, deterministic and historicist theory of action is linked to a non-atomistic and non-reductionist view. Following Saint-Simon, Comte underlines that the individual is a socio-cultural product as well as a cog of a structured system which, as a whole, is irreducible to the sum of its components. As is well known, Comte endorses the reactionary ideology against the French Revolution typical of the beginning of the nineteenth century. He taught that the ideas that led to the Revolution, namely the hyper-rationalistic and atomistic theory of society, were not only mistaken, but also a danger to social harmony and order (see Laurent, p. 1994, p. 16; see also Dawe 1970, pp. 201-209). Regarding these issues Romantic Historicism’s position was precisely similar to that of Sociological Positivism – this in spite of the strong differences which characterize these approaches concerning other issues. Hegel’s organicist view is based on a criticism of the Enlightenment’s atomistic and hyper-rationalistic theories as well (see Popper 1966b, pp. 229-282). Moreover, Hegel defends a standpoint which is even more reactionary than Comte’s. As is well known, he despises the heritage of the French Revolution and praises Prussia’s absolute monarchy, considering it to be the achievement of Destiny, i.e. as the supreme “goal” of history (p. 249).

3. The Theory of Autonomy as the Premise of the Paradigm of Social Complexity

Methodological individualism, unlike holistic sociology, does not conceive history and social phenomena as caused by superhuman hidden powers (see Pribram 2008, pp. 123-126). Although the individualistic paradigm cannot be reduced at all to a theory of action because it mainly studies emergent properties and unintended consequences, the idea of the

---

1 The criticism of atomism and mechanist philosophy developed by the originators of sociological holism influenced the interpretation of methodological individualism in terms of semantic reductionism which has been put forward in recent years by some analytic philosophers (see section 12).
self-determination of the human being is a basic and necessary assumption of this approach. To use Hayek’s words, from methodological individualism’s standpoint, historical and social phenomena are “spontaneous orders” which emerge from intentional choices rather than pre-determined and pre-programmed outcomes. The crucial importance of the concept of autonomy for the theory of the spontaneous order becomes clear if we consider Hegel’s concept of “the cunning of Reason”. This concept admits the existence of a sort of unintended consequences, but only in the sense that men are unconsciously led to achieve a pre-programmed historical progress as instruments of the Spirit. Within this theoretical framework, the concept of unintended consequences loses its true meaning or, at least, the meaning it acquires within the individualist analysis. The development and functioning of society is not based on a principle of order deriving from chaos in the sense of the complexity theory. It must be added that grasping the intimate connection between autonomy and unintended consequences helps us to understand correctly, among other things, the nature of autonomy according to methodological individualism. The fact that this orientation recognizes the existence of unintended consequences is one of the reasons why it does not argue that autonomy means omnipotence. Man is free, but only in the sense that he is self-determined, not in the sense that he can do anything. Autonomy only means that the effects of the environment on the actors are not mechanical and deterministic, but largely depend on the way the actors interpret the environment.

According to some authors, methodological individualism begins with the development of economic science between the 18th and 19th centuries – a development implying, they contend, the arrogant attempt to extend the method of this science to all other social disciplines (see, for instance, Przeworski 1986, p. 77). This view can be criticized (see Cubeddu 1996, p. 29). Although explicit and detailed theoretical analyses of the principles of methodological individualism only began during the 19th century, the origins of this approach are older (Laurent 1994, p. 25). They are prior to the development of economic science. Among the fathers of methodological individualism Hayek (1948, p. 4) includes philosophers such as De Mandeville and Hume (see also Pribram 2008, pp. 152 ff.). Probably the ultimate origins of this approach must be sought in the development of scientific history which implied emancipation from a religious conception of social phenomena. Indeed, Thucydides, the father of the scientific history put an end to the theistic interpretation of history which assumed the existence of divine powers behind the scenes. He explains, for the first time, social phenomena as being only the intended or
unintended consequences of human intentions (see Di Nuoscio 2004). Although Thucydides can be considered neither a methodological individualist in the strict sense of the term, nor a theorist of the spontaneous order in Hayek’s sense, he began a style of analysis of the social world that, in a sense, paved the way for the development, many centuries later, of an interpretative sociology and of an individualistic theory of institutions and the social order. Thucydides’ revolution is a premise of the formation of what Dupuy (1988; 1992a; 1992b) calls “complex methodological individualism” (see also Heritier 1997 pp. 95 ff.; Nemo, 1988, pp. 392-393). It must not be forgotten that, as both Hayek (1952a) and Gadamer (2006) argue, Hegel’s and Comte’s holism developed right against the traditional interpretative and individualistic method of history which acknowledged the autonomy of the individual. Hayek underlines that, by denying this autonomy, the originators of holism became unable to understand the social complexity and the unintentional nature of the social process. They laid the groundwork for a sociological analysis which only focused on the study of the social conditioning and the hidden determinants of action. No theory of the spontaneous order could develop within a paradigm which conceived the social system as pre-programmed and the individuals as unconsciously controlled. Order was a logical implication of heteronomy.

4. Two Different Ontologies

The disagreement between methodological individualists and holists about what is the ultimate motor of history – i.e. about the epistemological status of action – is related to ontological issues (see Antiseri & Pellicani 1992, pp. 13-18; Petitot 2012, pp. 206-210; Pribram 2008, p. 117 ff.). The assumption of the holistic sociology that individuals’ subjective interpretations and motivations are irrelevant to the explanation of deeds is closely connected to the “tendency to look for the "real" attributes of the objects of human activity which lie behind men's views about them” (Hayek 1955, p. 50). Following Merleau-Ponty (1964b, p. 136), we can say that methodological holism, especially its culturalist versions, is a sociological variant of objectivist psychology. Methodological holism, like this kind of psychology, is a form of substantialism. It argues that there are social factors which exist “out there” as given realities and considers our consciousness and actions as epiphenomena of these given realities.
This position implies an ontological stance. If one looks for external determinants of action having a social and superhuman nature, one is obliged to endorse a realist ontology of the abstract proprieties and collective nouns to which social sciences used to refer. Plato, the father of modern collectivist social theories, was also, unsurprisingly, a precursor to this kind of metaphysical view (see Popper, pp. 26 ff.; 204 ff.; Pribram 2008, pp. 120; Varzi 2010, p. 62 ff.). Due to logical reasons, realist ontology is the necessary presupposition of social determinism. As Hayek (1948, p. 6) states, collectivist paradigms precisely “have their roots in the ‘realist’…tradition”. Within the frame of holist sociologies, substantialism intended as the idea that human consciousness is molded by external given data is thus strictly connected to substantialism intended as hypostatization of abstract social concepts. From the standpoint of collectivist approaches, social “wholes” like ‘society’ or the ‘economy,’ ‘capitalism’…or a particular ‘industry’ or ‘class’ or ‘country’” are supposed to be *sui generis* substances which exist “out there” independently from individuals, similar, for instance, to a stone or tree (Hayek 1955 p. 53). These entities are considered to be endowed with “laws” governing “their behavior as wholes” and the individuals’ ideas and actions are viewed as mere manifestations of these laws (p. 53). Following the platonic tradition, these collective entities are supposed to be the only entities which have real existence in the sense that actors are reduced to a kind of ‘appearances’, i.e. the reflex or emanation of these essences or forms. According to methodological holism, the universal concepts which are used in the social sciences are thus, to use the terminology of medieval metaphysics, “ante rem, in re”, i.e. before things, in things. They precede both logically and temporally individuals who are precisely nothing but manifestations of their existence (see Antiseri and Pellicani, p. 13-18; Di Nuoscio 2006, p. 110; Laurent 1994, p. 33; Watkins, 1952b, 1955).

Methodological individualists reject this "conceptual realism" or “misplaced concreteness" and endorse a view which ontology calls “nominalism” (Hayek 1955, p. 54; 1948, p. 6; see also Pribram 2008, p 121; Varzi 2010, pp. 68-77). According to them, the only existing entities are concrete individuals. As Mises (1998, p. 312) writes, society is not a *sui generis* entity; “there is I and you and Bill and Joe and all the rest”. From the viewpoint of methodological individualism, collective nouns describing social phenomena do not refer to independent substances. They are nothing but convenient ways of talking – synthetic expressions having practical usefulness and referring to a collection of individuals, habits and ideas of individuals, actions of individuals, unintended effects deriving from these actions, and systemic properties regarding this set of
individuals (see Petitot 2012, p. 209). The error in collectivist ontology, Hayek (1955, p. 54) writes,

“is that it mistakes for facts what are no more than provisional theories, models constructed by the popular mind to explain the connection between some of the individual phenomena which we observe”.

Paradoxically, those sociologists

“who, by the scientistic prejudice, are led to approach social phenomena in this manner, are induced, by their very anxiety to avoid all merely subjective elements and to confine themselves to "objective facts," to commit the mistake they are most anxious to avoid, namely that of treating as facts what are no more than vague popular theories” (Ibid.).

It is implicit in the above that, although methodological holism is strictly linked to ontological realism, while methodological individualism is closely connected to nominalism, methodological individualism, as understood by Hayek and the non-atomistic individualist tradition, is not related to ontological issues alone. Hayek’s non-atomistic individualism also includes some epistemological rules regarding the analysis of action and that of more global social phenomena. Precisely due to this fact, the endorsement of social nominalism does not necessarily imply the acceptance of what we mean by methodological individualism. For instance, one can be a nominalist and a behaviorist at the same time – a behaviorist lodging the cause of action outside the individual, i.e. in the material structure of the world. As a research program, Homans’ ‘behavioral sociology’, is based on the combination of these two standpoints (see Udhen 2001 pp. 191-195). From Hayek’s anti-atomistic and interpretative perspective, Homans’ approach cannot be considered to be fully compatible with what he means by methodological individualism.

5. “Wholes” and the Selective Nature of Knowledge

An important point that must be stressed is that the criticism of the atomist social theory developed by the holist and historicist tradition, especially by Hegel and Comte – a criticism that undoubtedly contains some truth – is partly vitiated by a serious epistemological mistake linked
to the substantialist approach and ontological realism of ideas upon which this tradition is based. Hayek and Popper developed a symmetrical line of reasoning about this point. As they stress, the perspective that the historicist sociology uses to challenge the atomist theories of society is, in a sense, pseudo-systemic due to the fact that it lacks a fundamental aspect of any true systemic approach, i.e. its theoretical and selective presuppositions. Since the organicist views of Hegel, Comte, and their followers consider social wholes as given realities, the latter authors assume that these “wholes” can be “intuitively comprehended” or recognized (Hayek 1955, p. 73). Their approach, which is based on an ancient theory called intuitionism, does not acknowledge the intimate connection between knowledge and interpretation. According to the intuitionist perspective, which has been defended by both Plato and Aristotle, “we possess a faculty, intellectual intuition, by which we can visualize essences” in an immediate and obvious way (Popper 1966b 218).

As Popper (1957, p. 76) upholds, the essentialist intuitionism endorsed by two opposed thinkers such as Comte and Hegel as well as by their followers contributed to the creation of a fundamental “ambiguity” in the use of the word 'whole' in the social sciences. This word

“is used to denote (a) the totality of all the properties or aspects of a thing, and especially of all the relations holding between its constituent parts, and (b) certain special properties or aspects of the thing in question, namely those which make it appear an organized structure rather than a 'mere heap’”.

(Ibid.)

From the standpoint of the historicist approach, social wholes are wholes in sense (a). In other words, for this approach, the true “significance” of an action is “determined by the whole” (Popper 1957, p. 22), understood as “the structure of all social and historical events of an epoch” (Popper 1957 p. 78). To designate the whole in this way, i.e. as “everything that can be known about” a certain epoch (Hayek 1955, p. 69), methodological holists sometimes speak of “group-spirit” (Popper 1957, 19) or “super-mind” (Hayek 1955, p. 52).

As both Hayek and Popper underline, wholes thus understood cannot be the object of a scientific analysis.

“If we wish to study a thing, we are bound to select certain aspects of it. It is not possible for us to observe or to describe a whole piece of
the world, or a whole piece of nature; in fact, not even the smallest whole piece may be so described, since all description is necessarily selective”

(Popper 1057, p. 77).

“According to the question we ask”, Hayek writes (1955, p. 70), “the same spatio-temporal situation may contain any number of different objects of study”.

This being so, only “wholes” in sense (b) can be considered by science. As we have already pointed out, the word “whole”, as it is understood in sense (b), means “certain special properties or aspects” of a thing, “namely those which make it appear an organized structure rather than a 'mere heap’” (Popper 1957 p. 76). Examples of wholes in sense (b) might be taken from studies of the 'Gestalt' school of psychology. Of things that possess such structures as wholes in sense (b) “it may be said, as Gestalt theory puts it, that they are more than aggregates--'more than the mere sum of their parts”’ (Popper 1957, p. 76).

“If, with the Gestalt theorists, we consider that a melody is more than a mere collection or sequence of single musical sounds, then it is one of the aspects of this sequence of sounds which we select for consideration. It is an aspect which may be clearly distinguished from other aspects, such as the absolute pitch of the first of these sounds, or their average absolute strength…By thus being selective, the study of a Gestalt, and with it, of any whole in sense (b), is sharply distinguished from the study of a totality, i.e. of a whole in sense (a)”

(p. 77).

These considerations allow us to argue that the way in which holist and historicist sociology uses the word “system” is incorrect. For Hegel and Comte, synchronic social analysis deals the “treatment of social wholes [that embrace] the 'structure of all social and historical events of an epoch’” (Popper 1957 p. 78). However, a systemic approach cannot study “the totality of all the properties…of a thing, and…of all the relations holding between its constituent parts” (p. 76). “The term 'society’”, Popper (p. 79), writes “embraces, of course, all social relations, including all personal ones; those of a mother to her child as much as those of a child welfare officer to either of the two”. However, he points out that it is precisely “impossible to control all, or 'nearly' all, these relationships”
(Ibid.). Paradoxically, the prestige and intellectual influence of Gestalt theory during the twentieth century ended up reinforcing the belief that the social systemic approach does not consist in selective and abstract knowledge. Authors such as Mannheim appealed to the fact that “wholes”, in the sense of Gestalt theory, “can be studied scientifically in order to justify the entirely different claim that” social wholes as intended by Comte and Hegel “can be so studied” (p. 77). Curiously, these scholars often “admit that, as a rule, science is selective” (p. 78). However, they do not quite understand what this means. They do not see that Gestalt perception simply has nothing to do with wholes in the sense of totalities,

“that all knowledge, whether intuitive or discursive, must be of abstract aspects, and that we can never grasp the 'concrete structure of social reality itself'

(Ibid.).

The acknowledgment of the selective nature of all knowledge also implies the acknowledgment of the autonomy of action from context. If nothing can affect us as a substance, if both what I do and the way I see things necessarily presuppose abstraction and interpretation, the cause of my action must be sought within my categorizing mind rather than outside of it. Action derives from the fact that I impose a meaning on reality. As Hayek (1978, p. 35) points out, both perceptive knowledge and scientific knowledge are characterized by what he calls “the primacy of the abstract”.

6. The Holistic Theory of Social Systems

Comte’s and Hegel’s organicist theory of society is related to their concern for the profound social changes of their epoch. Their organicism must be considered, among other things, as a conservative reaction to the French Revolution, its subversive ideas and the destructive egoism of modern industrial society. Both Comte and Hegel, in spite of their philosophical differences, developed a collectivist and historicist theory to provide a reassuring view and drive out the fear of chaos. In other words, as Dawe (1970, p. 207) remarks, they “sought the restoration of a supra-individual hegemony” as a solution to “the problem of order”. They held a kind of
“Hobbesian view of human nature. It is central to this view that, in the absence of external constraint, the pursuit of private interests and desires leads inevitably to both social and individual disintegration” (Ibid.).

Thus, for them, “society became the new deus ex machina” (p. 207); without social constraint, they argue that “the only possibility is the war of all against all” (p. 208). In spite of their philosophical differences, both Comte and Hegel share the idea that the society is an organized and harmonious structure (or system) due to the fact that individuals are not autonomous beings, but rather externally controlled beings. In other words, these two authors employ the concept of system to describe the way in which society, understood as an independent substance or sui generis entity, creates collective harmony by defining “the social meanings, relationships and actions of” its members (Dawe 1970, p. 208). According to Hegel and Comte, ‘society’ and ‘system’ are two synonyms referring to the same external essence working as a kind of mold organizing the way in which its human byproducts behave. This mold, they argue, is settled “over” the individuals “in such a way as to impose a common meaning and, therefore, order upon them” (p. 208). In other words, Comte and Hegel link the theory that society is a system with substantialism in Merleau-Ponty’s sense, ontological realism, and the heteronomous theory of action (see Boudon 1971, pp. 32-33; Di Nuoscio 1996, p. 307; Laurent 1994 pp. 18-19).

This particular kind of systemic approach which denies the intentionality of the individual and which we can call objectivist systemism influenced many scholars, starting with Durkheim and structural functionalists such as Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Parsons who, following Comte and Durkheim, merge culturalist holism with the theory of biologic systems. All of these authors consider society to be the source of shared values and beliefs which, “through the medium of functionally-specific norms”, structure “roles and institutional sub-systems into the total system by defining the network of functional activities necessary for the latter’s survival” (Dawe 1970, p. 208). Like Comte’s and Hegel’s social organicism, structural functionalist sociology gives great importance to the problem of order. Indeed, a crucial idea within the framework of structural-functionalism is that of the “system’s self-production” (p. 209) which explains that the aim of every social system is to promote solidarity and stability and to, by these means, perpetuate itself as well as social harmony. In Dawe’s words, this orientation assumes that “the problem of
order can only be solved by conceiving of the actor as a reflex of the social system and meaning as a reflex of the cultural values that this system imposes on him both through the socialization process and the social sanctions mechanism (Ibid.). The more recent variants of objectivist systemism, which can be more or less linked to the structural functionalist tradition, largely use vocabulary and concepts typical of general system theory—a theory which, as is well known, has been developed since the forties and was described in detail by Bertalanffy (1968; see also Lugan 1993).

The incompatibility between this conception of the systemic approach and methodological individualism is clear. If subjective meaning is derivable from the features of the social system, “then it does not have to be treated as a significant variable” (Dawe 1970, p. 209). The system is supposed to determine the way in which actors categorize situations and interpret reality. As soon as definitions of the situation become properties of the system— that is, as soon as the elements of action are, in effect, reduced to the single element of situational conditions—then, in terms of initial premises of subjectivity and historicity, action disappears” (p. 211). In other words, the concept of action is simply removed from the analysis.

The tendency to explain social phenomena by combining a systemic approach, substantialism and determinism flourished not only within conservative and functionalist sociology. It is also shared by many left-wing social scientists who, in Marx’s footsteps, often link this tendency to the theory that an occult oppression exists—an oppression which the social scientist is supposed to reveal (see Di Nuoscio 2006, pp. 113-114). The works of French structuralists such as Althusser, Balibar, Bourdieu, Foucault, and Lacan are instructive in this regard. Those authors consider the different historical epochs as dominated by different structures, and by “structure” they mean either a particular socio-cultural system or an economic system. As Boudon and Bourricaud (1986, pp. 387-393) stress, French structuralism, as it was developed in the sixties, is a theory of cognitive and behavioral heteronomy which, like older organicist theories of society, is anti-humanist (see also Nemo 1975). It is based, Boudon and Bourricaud (p. 392) point out, on two propositions; one is methodological; the other is ontological:

“‘Methodological’ proposition: social phenomena are the result or the manifestation of structures and cannot be seen as the result of man’s actions. Ontological ‘proposition’: only the structures have a ‘real’ existence; individuals are simple appearances or ‘support structures’.
They are of interest only in so far as they allow the structure to be visible”.

In other words,

“the social agents…are…simple supports or, at best, willing or blind *ersatz* through which social structures are made up, express themselves, reproduce, and change”

(*Ibid.*).

7. Social Atomism as a Product of Hyper-Rationalism

Methodological individualism, as we understand it, does not challenge solely the holistic sociologies, but also, in the opposite direction, so-called social atomism (see Cubeddu 1996, pp. 27-33). This section attempts to explain what social atomism is and what its origins are.

As we have already mentioned, the ultimate origins of methodological individualism must be sought within the development of scientific history. As Gadamer (2006, pp. 175 ff.) remarks, the latter discipline, considering social phenomena as intended or unintended effects of human intentions, focuses on the notion of “understanding”. Its key feature is that it lodges the cause of action inside individuals rather than outside of them. During the Age of Enlightenment, there began a systematic attempt to extend the theory that actors are autonomous beings from history to sociological issues (Laurent 1994, p. 25-28). That age was partly characterized by scientistic and objectivistic aspects which later helped the development of holist sociology during the 19th century. However, it is also marked by a generalized rejection of conservative and religious conceptions of the origins and functioning of social rules and institutions. At that time, traditionalist moral philosophy and legal theory, considering the structure of society as created and organized by a superhuman power, were criticized. “Divinely-ordered, universal situations became man-made, historical situations” (Dawe 1970, p. 212; see also Petitot 2009, pp. 153 ff.).

The Enlightenment is also the age of Kant’s criticism of substantialism – a criticism which was maintained and improved by both phenomenological hermeneutics and fallibilist epistemology. Kant’s view undoubtedly contributed to the development of a non-objectivist theory of
social systems. If things do not affect the human mind regardless of the way the human mind built a meaning of things, action cannot be considered to be the mechanical consequence of a cause existing “out there” as a given reality – a cause triggering it. Rather action must be viewed as being based on “an attempt to impose ideal meanings on existing situations”, i.e. on an attempt by the individual “to make sense” of these situations (Dawe 1970, p. 212). Weber’s and Simmel’s interpretative sociology, which arises in the 19th century, is probably the clearest example of the beneficial influence of Kantianism in the social sciences (see Boudon 1994, pp. 26, 105).

However, the legacy of the Enlightenment is not exclusively positive. We must now focus on one of its negative aspects, one that we have already mentioned. During this time the eagerness to affirm the principle that man is the ultimate cause of social phenomena was sometimes accompanied by the tendency to overestimate the powers of human reason (see Petitot 2002; 2012, p. 210). As is well known, Hayek (1978, p. 3) calls this phenomenon “constructivism” (see also Nemo 1988, pp. 23 ff.). The mechanist and atomist theories of the social contract which developed at that time, mainly in Continental Europe, conceiving individuals as hyper-rational beings, represent an expression of this presumptuous mentality (see Agassi 1960, pp. 252-253; Hayek 1948, p 6; Laurent 1994, p. 14-16). According to these theories, man historically precedes social institutions such as language, culture, money, law, forms of political organization and so on in the sense that he is their conscious creator and that “they correspond to some preconceived design” (Hayek 1978, p. 4). These atomist theories consider social institutions as an outcome of a mutual agreement expressed in social contract terms between actors whose ability to reason and interact is ahistorical and does not presuppose common socio-cultural linkages. This view is obviously unrealistic. As Hayek (1978, pp. 3-4) writes, contrary to what the Cartesian tradition affirms, “man did not possess reason before civilization. The two evolved together”. Consequently, he could not use reason to find common ground with his fellow men and design civilization.

“Mind is as much the product of social environment in which it has grown up and which it has not made as something that has in turn acted upon and altered these institutions”

(Hayek 1973, p. 17).
One needs merely to consider the role of language to understand this point. Language is a necessary presupposition of the capacity for reasoning and entering into agreements with others. Man could not create language by contract and rational discussion because this would require that he already possess a language. It makes no sense to assume, as the social atomists do, that the human being has been biologically endowed with reason since the beginning of history. Rational skills are acquired through the process of socialization and presuppose the formation of a transmissible cultural heritage.

“The mind is embedded in a traditional impersonal structure of learnt rules, and its capacity to order experience is an acquired replica of cultural patterns which every individual mind finds given”

(Hayek 1979, p. 157).

Social institutions cannot be conceived as the outcome of a social contract due to yet another reason. As a consequence of the limitations of human knowledge, individuals’ intentions tend to produce “unintended” results (Hayek 1955, p. 65; see also Boudon 1982; Cherkaoui 2006). Hayek (1979, p. 154) stresses that, due to this fact, the “present order of society has largely arisen, not by design” or by conscious control (see Nemo 1988, pp. 73 ff.). Again, let us consider the example of language. The first words were not established by mutual agreement, but derived from screams of fear, joy, alarm, or complaints of hunger, thirst and so on. Our primitive ancestors screaming at the sight of a dangerous beast was not an intentional contribution to the development of language. However, simply by behaving in such a way, they unintentionally created the presuppositions for the formation of a specific word. Today, we still have examples of onomatopoeic sounds which help us to understand the logic which determined the spontaneous emergence of language due to actions which were not intended to create a language (see Antiseri Pellicani 1992, pp. 94-95).

Social atomism implies a third problematic issue. If human beings are assumed to be isolated monades who do not share socio-cultural links, their actions cannot be considered to be taking place within the framework of stable systems of interaction. However, actions do in fact take place within such systems. To understand the relevance of social institutions such as language, law, money, market, or ethics, one needs to understand, amongst other things, that social phenomena are characterized by “structural coherence” (Hayek 1955 p. 38). This means, as Boudon and
Bourricaud (1982, p. 389) remark, that these phenomena “must be seen as a dependable (not random) combination of elements”. The individualist paradigm, because it does not subscribe to atomism, sees social phenomena in exactly that way. The individualist paradigm’s aim is precisely to study the development and functioning of “persistent social structures which we have come to take for granted and which form the conditions of our existence” (Hayek 1955, p. 83). These “structures of interpersonal relationships” (1955, p. 85) presuppose typical ways of perceptive categorization and behavior deriving from a common cultural heritage. Very often they also define specific social roles. By providing a substantially stable framework, social institutions enable their “members to derive…expectations that have a good chance of being correct” (1973, p. 106). They help them to have reference points and to achieve their goals. Moreover, they represent a source of conditioning for individuals: institutional rules and social roles influence their actions (see also Nemo 1988, pp. 91 ff). Because structural phenomena exist in society, and because not only the development but also the persistence of these stable systems can often only be explained in terms of the invisible hand (consider, for instance, the way a market functions), Hayek comes to an important conclusion. Distancing himself from psychological reductionism, he stresses that the task of the social sciences is a “different task” than “the task of psychology” (Hayek 1955, p. 39). In other words, he points out that the social sciences are not reducible to the study of human intentions (Hayek 1955, pp. 36-43).

A criticism of the constructivist perspective of the theory of social contract had already been formulated during the Enlightenment (see Hayek 1955 p. 80 ff.). At that time, the idea that social institutions must be explained by assuming the autonomy of the individual, i.e. by considering the latter as the ultimate cause of social phenomena, was also defended by scholars recognizing the limitations of human reason as well as the existence of unintended consequences of action. This anti-constructivist school brought together especially, though not exclusively, British thinkers, namely Locke, Burke and the members of the Scottish Enlightenment (de Mandeville, Ferguson, Hume, Smith, and Tucker). As Hayek (1948, p. 6) points out, this school did not at all assume “the existence of isolated or self-contained individuals”. It “starts from men whose whole nature and character is determined by their existence in society” (p. 6; see also Infantino 1998, pp. 73-80; Schatz 1907, p. 558). This anti-atomistic methodological individualism was defended by many authors of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, such as Menger, Mises, Hayek, Spencer, Tocqueville, Weber, Simmel, Schütz, Merton, Popper,
Watkins, Elster, Boudon and Crozier. These authors can be more or less directly linked to the tradition of the British and Scottish Enlightenment.

8. The Systemic Approach and Nominalism

By methodological individualism, Hayek means the anti-atomistic individualism that relates to the tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment. He criticizes the widespread, but historically inaccurate, tendency to equate methodological individualism with atomism. According to Hayek (1948, p. 6), this tendency is “the silliest of the common misunderstandings” (see also Watkins 1957, p. 112). As Popper (1962, p. 421) states, because this tendency is wrong, “there is some similarity” between methodological individualism, understood as a non-atomistic approach, and sociological holism. “But”, he points out, “there are very considerable differences also”. The most basic of them is ontological. Methodological holists

“argue that, since we owe our reason to ‘society’…‘society’ is everything and the individual nothing; or that whatever value the individual possesses is derived from the collective, the real carrier of all values”.

(Ibid.)

As opposed to this, the position of methodological individualism, which endorses nominalism,

“does not assume the existence of collectives; if I say, for example, that we owe our reason to ‘society’, then I always mean that we owe it to certain concrete individuals — though perhaps to a considerable number of anonymous individuals — and to our intellectual intercourse with them”

(Ibid.).

Therefore, in speaking of a ‘social’ theory of reason, Popper (Ibid.) adds,

“I mean more precisely that the theory is an inter-personal one, and never that it is a collectivist theory. Certainly we owe a great deal to
tradition, and tradition is very important, but the term ‘tradition’ also has to be analysed into concrete personal relations”.

According to methodological individualism, not only must the origin of social institutions be studied from a nominalist standpoint, but also the fact that these institutions imply stable systems of interaction. The argument that is endorsed by methodological individualists is that social systems do not exist “independently from the individuals” (Hayek 1948, p. 6; see also Di Nuoscio 1996, p. 302-303). Both methodological holism and methodological individualism conceive the social world in systemic terms. For this reason, both stress the existence of emergent systemic properties. However, there is an important difference between methodological holism and methodological individualism. While the second approach postulates that there are systemic irreducible properties which concern a set of individuals, the first approach assumes that, since only supra-individual entities truly exist, systemic properties are the manifestation of these supra-individual entities. According to methodological holism, individuals are epiphenomena of social structures which exist ‘out there’ as independent substances and impose, as such, regularities on the individual’s behavior. Conforming to methodological individualism, the opposite is true: only individuals exist and what matters is the “continuous process of interaction” between them – a process which implies emergent properties (Dawe 1970, p. 213; see also Elster 1989, p. 158: Petitot 2012, pp. 209 ff.). Because human “beings are supposed to be the only moving agents in history” and “superhuman agents” do not exist (Watkins 1957 p. 106), action is not viewed “as the derivative of the system”, but the “system as

---

2 Some authors have stressed that Popper’s theory of “World 3”, which argues that culture is an objective reality which can influence the physical reality and change it, is inconsistent with his explicit defense of methodological individualism (see, for instance, Pellicani 2002, pp. 51 ff.). However, this view is incorrect. It stems from a misunderstanding of the meaning Popper attaches to the word “objective” within the frame of his theory of the three worlds. When Popper argues that culture is an objective reality he does not mean that it is an holistic entity in the sense of Durkheim and that, as such, it controls individual minds. Unlike Durkheim’s theory of culture, Popper’s theory of “World 3” does not criticize the central thesis of methodological individualism, i.e. the idea that individuals are autonomous beings and that they are thus the causes of their actions. According to Popper, World 3 (the world of culture) does not affect world 1 (the physical world) in a mechanical way, i.e. by determining the actions of the individuals and canceling their intentionality. “World 3” is interpreted by the individuals and affects “World 1” only through the evaluations and choices of the individuals (“World 2”) which cannot be reduced to an epiphenomenon of “World 3” (See Popper 1977). It must be noted that Popper’s theory of the three worlds is related to a dualist theory of mind and that Popper criticized Hayek because The Sensory Order defends a monistic conception of mind (see Birner 2007). The analysis of Popper’s and Hayek’s disagreement about the mind-body problem is beyond the scope of our research. We decided not to deal with it due to two reasons. First, the debate between monists and dualists in philosophy of mind is not strictly related to the debate between holists and methodological individualists. Second, we think that the analysis of Popper’s and Hayek’s disagreement about the mind-body problem can only be achieved by dealing with it extensively and devoting to it a huge number of pages. Popper’s and Hayek’s disagreement is related to central issues in the philosophy of mind that, due to their complexity, cannot be adequately investigated in a book that does not focus on these issues and analyzes quite different topics. It is impossible to investigate the mind-body problem in short.
the derivative of action” (Dawe 1970, p. 214). Note that this theory of the system, which argues that the system exists only because of the interaction among the individuals, whose actions are not determined by superindividual entities, is consistent with the idea that there are systemic effects that influence the actor (this point will be analyzed in detail in the following sections and especially in section 3.12).

Because methodological holists tend to confound nominalism with a reductionist theory which denies the existence of emergent systemic properties, they tend to consider themselves as the only defenders of the theory according to which ‘the whole is more than the sum of its parts’. Moreover, they also tend to exaggerate the importance of this theory. This is probably because they view it as proof that heteronomous powers act in history and create social order. As Popper (1962, p. 82) points out,

“the triviality as well as the vagueness of the statement that the whole is more than the sum of its parts seems to be seldom realized. Even three apples on a plate are more than 'a mere sum', in so far as there must be certain relations between them (the biggest may or may not lie between the others, etc.): relations which do not follow from the fact that there are three apples, and which can be studied scientifically”.

Any set of things is characterized by global properties in nature. However, a difference must be made between different kinds of systems. Consider the social sciences – there are systems of interaction within which, for instance, the reciprocal influence of the parts is not based on a set of rigid and well-defined social roles. On the contrary, there are other systems of interaction within which the opposite is true. A group of pedestrians walking down a street is an example of the first case, while a bureaucratic organization, in which binding social roles exist, is an example of the second. Boudon and Bourricaud (1986 p. 401) call the systems which are based on role relations “role systems” or “interaction systems”, while they call the other systems simply “relation systems” (see also Nemo 1988, p. 394). In any case, it is wrong to think, as many Gestalt theorists used to think, that there are

“'heaps', in which we cannot discern any order, and 'wholes', in which an order or symmetry or a regularity or a system or a structural plan may be found”

(p. 83).
“so-called 'heap', as a rule, has a Gestalt aspect too… (consider the regular manner in which pressure increases within a heap of stones). Thus the distinction between ‘heaps’ and ‘wholes’ “is not only trivial, but exceedingly vague; and is not applicable to different kinds of things, but merely to different aspects of the same things”

(Ibid.).

Because any “whole” is more than the sum of its parts and because that fact is common sense and is always implicitly taken for granted in our descriptions of social reality, the analysis of social wholes in terms of emergent and systemic properties must be considered a necessary characteristic of any social theory rather than a specific characteristic of the holist approach. (Di Nuoscio 1996, p. 303; see also Boudon 1971, pp. 1-4; Boudon & Bourricaud 1982, pp. 387-388). Indeed, as we will see in section 12, there are no examples of explanations of social phenomena which do not refer, at least implicitly, to some global and irreducible properties (see Petitot, 2009 pp. 102 ff.). The use of the concept of emergence is implicit in our common sense and is also implicit in social research, including the individualist tradition.

Moreover, there is a further point that needs to be stressed. As Hayek (1955, p. 85) states, “it is only by the individualist…method that we can give a definite meaning to the “much abused” statement that the “whole” is more than the sum of its parts. This is because the explanation of global properties presupposes the existence of the parts which imply these properties. If one endorses holist ontology and considers elusive supra-individual entities as the only real substances – as do, for instance, Comte or Foucault –, one falls into the paradox of being obliged to see global properties as implied by a single macro-entity. This clearly makes no sense: “there is no system without components” (Bunge 1996, p. 261). Methodological individualism is not vitiated by this contradiction. It argues that human systems are systems of interaction between individuals which are characterized by emergent properties. Endorsing nominalist ontology, it considers these properties to be attributes which are irreducible to the sum of the attributes of the parts. This is necessarily true with respect to any set of things.

The ontological realism of methodological holism is strongly related to an intuitionist standpoint. As we have already pointed out, holism “claims to be able directly to comprehend social wholes as such” (Hayek
Due to the fact that all knowledge is selective or abstract and that social systems cannot be considered to be ‘given data’, this is impossible. Following Simmel’s Kantianism we can say that systems are “forms” which we impose on reality in order to give an order to it. Popper’s theory of the Gestalt, understood as a selective construction, is an exemplification of this. Social “wholes”, Hayek (p. 82) writes, are not given data, “but are recognizable only by a process of mental reconstruction” (Ibid.). Like perceptive patterns they are interpretatively built. However, unlike these patterns, they are consciously or purposely built in the sense that they presuppose an intellectual effort. When we speak of a social system “we are not concerned with a whole that obtrudes itself on popular notice or that is ever definitely given; we can only reconstruct it” by considering the intentions and the actions “of many individuals” as well as the “effects” derived from these actions (p. 57). Due to this fact, the method of the social sciences must be considered as a “compositive method” (p. 85).

According to this method, the place of theory “is thus in forming or constituting the wholes to which” social science “refers; theory is prior to these wholes which do not become visible except by following up the system of relations which connects the parts” (p. 73). Consider the case of economic systems. Concepts such as “‘price’ or ‘monopoly’ are not names for definite ‘things’” (p. 75). They

“are objects which can be defined only in terms of certain relations between human beings and which cannot possess any attributes except those which follow from the relations by which they are defined. They can be recognized by us as prices or monopolies only because, and in so far as, we can recognize these individual attitudes, and from these as elements compose the structural pattern which we call a price or monopoly”

(p. 15).

In other words, the “basic contention” of methodological individualism “is that there is no other way toward” an explanation of social phenomena and their global properties “but through our understanding of individual actions directed toward other people and guided by their expected behavior”

(Hayek 1948, p. 6).
9. An Intersubjectivist Theory of the Socio-Cultural World

According to methodological individualism, society cannot be considered a substance existing ‘out there’ independently from us, because society is precisely and solely the result of interactions between individuals – individuals who share a common set of interpretative schemas, meanings and expectations which make this interaction non-chaotic, i.e. rule-governed. Thanks to this shared horizon, which is mainly cultural, social interaction is organized “in a particular manner” (Hayek 1967, p. 70; see also Heritier 1997, pp. 54 ff.; Nemo 1988, pp. 39-58). Hayek (1955, p. 54; 57) stresses that the tendency to hypostatize the social system and believe that the horizon we share with our fellow human beings is a byproduct of a “given” reality which is external to us is an archaic “anthropomorphic” tendency. It is implicit in our common sense which naturally leads us to endorse both “naïve realism” and ontological collectivism (p. 54). Indeed, it is counterintuitive to deny that society exists ‘out there’ as substance and that, due to this fact, it purposefully ensures, as a sort of “superperson” or “super-mind”, the order which characterizes human actions and interactions (p. 57). Phenomenological sociology, an approach which is based on the attempt to merge Weber’s methodological individualism and some aspects of Husserl’s thought that are relevant for social studies, helped clarify the flaws of the holistic and objectivist views.

“Society as such is a concept, an abstraction – What exists in reality are individuals in whose mind society exists as a factor determining certain types of behavior. If the mental attitude no longer exists, society does no longer exist either. If people were not aware of each other’s existence, society would not exist, even if all the same people where still in existence…Thus society is an attitude in the mind of the individual which is subject to X changes each second. It is unstable and undermined, although it may appear constant and concrete on the surface during long periods, or made to appear this way by the social theorists”

(Landheer 1955, p. 22)

This statement clearly synthetizes the core of the view endorsed by Schütz, the father of phenomenological sociology. As Schütz (1967, p. 218) remarks, from a nominalist and anti-objectivist standpoint, the social world only exists as an “intersubjective” construction (see also Husserl 1970). It is “common to us all” – interacting beings – because it is based on
collective and typical ways of interpretation (Ibid.). Because we share certain cognitive schemas with our fellow human beings, we also “share a common environment with them” (Schütz 1967, p. 171). This common environment depends on what exists in our minds as meaning rather than on what is outside of us. The individual’s “feelings” and “doings” (which are related to these feelings) are crucial because they “lie at the bottom of the whole system”, which is called society (1976, p. 49).

Consider, for instance, collective interpretative categories such as “friend”, “family dinner”, or “postal service”. Specific “expectations” are linked to them (p. 189). Collective schemas of this type are the basis of social interaction and constantly help us to attach a meaning to different situations as well as to organize our behavior. They help us in understanding what is going on around us, what we have to do, and which kind of regularities will characterize the actions of other individuals. Following Weber, Schütz (p. 189) calls these shared schemas “ideal types”. Because of their existence, the other is more or less “anonymized” (p. 184) within the social world. This fact makes interaction and reciprocal understanding also possible between strangers. The action of the anonymous other is linked to specific “meaning-contexts” (Ibid.) and, sometimes, to “a certain function” (p. 180), referring to a typical structure of interaction (for instance, ‘a bank cashier’). The fact that the members of the same society share a horizon of common meanings largely depends on the fact that they have a cultural tradition in common – a tradition they have interiorized by learning a set of interpretative schemas that their predecessors created. The social world is thus connected to the “world of predecessors” which is “what existed before I was born” (p. 208).

As Udhen (2001, p. 140) remarks, Hayek shares Schütz’s intersubjectivist theory of society (see also Laurent 1994, pp. 54-56.). Also, according to Hayek (1955, p. 31), “the relations between men…cannot be defined in…objective terms…but only in terms of human beliefs”.

“Society as we know it is, as it were, built up from the concepts and ideas held by the people; and social phenomena can be recognized by us and have meaning to us only as they are reflected in the minds of men”

(Hayek 1955, pp. 33-34).

Like Schütz, Hayek argues that the study of the social process must be based on the interpretative approach used by Weber, i.e. based on the
understanding of ideal-typical ways of thinking and acting which are parts of ideal-typical structures of interaction (see Di Nuoscio 2006, p. 123-124). As he points out, the intersubjectivist theory of society and the systemic analysis of social life are clearly connected.

“The individuals are merely the foci in the network of relationships and it is the various attitudes of the individuals towards each other (or their similar or different attitudes towards physical objects) which form the recurrent, recognizable and familiar elements of the structure”

(p. 34).

On the basis of these presuppositions, Hayek attacks the holistic idea that the views which are shared by members of the same society do not really matter because they are nothing but effects of the social system, understood as an independent substance. According to Hayek, the opposite is true.

“The structure of men's minds, the common principle on which they classify external events, provide us with the knowledge of the recurrent elements of which different social structures are built up and in terms of which we can alone describe and explain them”

(Hayek 1955, p. 34).

To use the words of two methodological individualists, Crozier and Friedberg (1980, p. 263), who helped develop this intersubjectivist theory of society, Hayek’s approach “accords a primary importance to the experience of the participants” of the social process. From his standpoint, understanding

“the ‘experience’ of the actors is much more than a kind of symbolic tip of the hat to ‘the importance of [the] human factor’. By the same token it is much more than a perfunctory complement to knowledge of the formal characteristics of the field. It is the primary condition for a genuine understanding of the field in question”

---

3 Hayek (1952, p. 37) notes the marked differentiation between, on the one hand, “motivating or constitutive opinions” which imply, quite unintentionally, social phenomena, and on the other hand, “speculative or explanatory views” that people develop about such phenomena. As Cubeddu (1995) points out, this radical differentiation is refutable. Speculative or explanatory views can be the cause of social phenomena. Consider, for instance, the influence of the Marxist theory of society and economics on the history of the 20th century.
10. Social Conditioning

We have already underlined that methodological individualism must not be confused with atomism. As Hayek (1948, p. 3) explains, considering the social world in nominalist and intersubjectivist terms does not imply the denial of social conditioning. On the contrary, it is necessary in order to conceive the concept of social conditioning in correct terms by purifying it from a set of substantialist and deterministic prejudices and by linking it to the idea of autonomy. This point has been analyzed in detail by Boudon and Bourricaud in their work *A Critical Dictionary of Sociology*. The existence of social conditioning is clearly evident in many ways.

“If the elementary actions of individuals are alone capable of accounting for macrosociological phenomena, this does not mean that they are the product...of an individual liberty which is conceived as absolute. Individual action always occurs within the framework of a system of constraints which are more or less clearly defined, more or less transparent to the subject, and more or less rigorous”

(Boudon and Bourricaud 1989, p. 13).

Let us try to further clarify this point.

One of the most important kinds of social constraints relates to the fact that action takes place within rule-governed structures of interaction. Deviance from the typical ways of behaving on which the latter are based incurs social sanctions (if I do not want to risk a hefty fine – and, also, my life – I should not drive on the right in the United Kingdom). Some structures of interaction are based on social roles. Due to this fact, social conditioning sometimes derives from the existence of norms which only apply to a specific category of persons rather than to all individuals indiscriminately. A Catholic priest, for instance, is not as free as other people in choosing his dress (see Boudon and Bourricaud 1989, p. 190). Moreover, most of the rules on which social interaction is based are not set up by the actors who have to respect them. They are “cultural patterns which every individual mind finds given” (Hayek 1979, p. 157). Coming into the world, man discovers them and has to reckon with them. These pillars of social life are interiorized by the actor through the socialization
process. The latter process is an important aspect of social conditioning not only because it provides the individual with an interpretative horizon on which to orientate his or her interaction with others, but also because it influences the whole of his or her personality. Namely, it affects the actor’s preferences and ethical feelings as well as his or her evaluation of the means that can be used in order to satisfy the most varied of goals. Although individuals are not pre-programmed machines or mere epiphenomena of cultural tradition, one cannot explain why the members of a tribe accept cannibalism or endorse the belief in the effectiveness of a rain dance if one neglects the socialization process they have undergone.

Social conditioning is also related to the existence of aggregate effects deriving unintentionally from the combination of many purposive actions. For instance, many social sanctions can be explained as unintended consequences of shared views. A man who laughs watching another man dressed in an extravagant manner does not aim to ensure social control. The same “spontaneous” logic explains the way the price system influences actors and their possibility of choice within a market economy. As Hayek (1948, p. 77-91) stresses, this system is a cybernetic mechanism based on a feedback principle. The formation of market prices is an aggregate effect deriving unintentionally from the common respect of a set of internalized and socially sanctioned rules regarding private property and bargaining. There are two more forms of social constraints we have to mention. One depends on the fact that the actor’s freedom is limited by the personal resources at his or her disposal (level of education, monthly wage, possibility to rely on family help and so on) which can vary depending on the individual. It is clear, for instance, that a rich man’s possibility of choice is in many ways greater than a poor man’s. A last type of social conditioning which also has to be considered depends on the openness of social systems. Within social systems, the behavior of actors is influenced not only by the rules and principles governing these systems, but also by the way in which the environment affects their global functioning (see Hayek 1967, p. 71). For instance, the possibility of wage increases for employees of a firm is related, among other things, to the demand for the goods they produce. Another example might be the way in which the possibility of renting a house for cheap in a town can be reduced, at least in the short term, by a rapid increase in population due to massive immigration from other towns.

Although methodological individualism in its non-atomistic variant accepts the existence of the different kinds of social constraints that we have mentioned, it rejects the idea that these constraints are mechanical and exist independently from the individual’s lived experience (see Crozier
and Friedberg 1980, pp. 17 ff.). This idea is the pillar of the holist theory of social conditioning. Consider the last example that we presented. That the possibility of renting a house for cheap is reduced by a rapid increase in population is a kind of constraint which cannot be defined in purely neutral and scientistic terms, i.e. independently from human views and projects. It is a conditioning which is related to the fact that the way in which the environment influences the action ultimately depends on the way in which the environment is interpreted. The above mentioned constraint simply would not exist for someone who did not want to rent a house in the town in question.

Within the framework of methodological individualism, the theory of social conditioning is – a bit paradoxically – linked to that of autonomy, i.e. to the intentionality of individuals. Theorists with this approach endorse this view precisely because they argue that each aspect of the social world is hermeneutically built. Holistic sociology does not follow this line of thinking. Another interesting example that we might consider is the structural-functionalist theory of the ‘social role’. This theory assumes in a sense that a ‘social role’ is something that exists ‘out there’ independently of the individuals and their way of seeing things – something that limits the hermeneutical autonomy and the intentionality of the man from without. Methodological individualism conceives a ‘social role’ in quite a different manner. It views the latter as an intersubjective meaning construction which implies specific regularities of action and particular expectations. In other words, it considers a social role to be a shared idea about what a social role is – an idea which guides the behavior of both the one who is supposed to act in conformity with this role – let us say a waiter – and of those who interact with him – his customers (see Weber 1978, p. 3 ff.). This shared idea has concrete effects, including social conditioning. The waiter “cannot move among his customers giving out blessings” (Boudon and Bourricaud 1989, p. 190). However, the point that we have to make here is that this conditioning does not come from alleged objective constraints, but from the way in which the waiter interprets the situation. He does not have any interest in looking mad or in losing his job (see also Bronner 2007, pp. 166-167).

Endorsing nominalist ontology, methodological individualism argues that social conditioning does not involve an elusive supra-individual organism. It is rather a process of mutual conditioning between interacting individuals which is often based on unintentional effects. Each participant in this process is an autonomous being not only because collective entities do not exist, but also because the way in which he can be influenced by others individuals is strictly linked to his hermeneutical and evaluative
skills. According to methodological individualism, the very socialization process must be studied from an interpretative and nominalist angle. Indeed, following his birth, the child does not meet what some Durkheimian sociologists mean by ‘culture’, i.e. an objective reality which exists independently from individuals and that programs their behavior. Rather, he or she meets other concrete individuals who share specific skills of perception and action. He or she is influenced by them. By interacting with these individuals he or she learns their skills through imitation (see Antiseri and Pellicani 1992, pp. 73 ff.). Moreover, during the socialization process, a young person is not led to internalize instructions “that will make up a kind of syllabus designed to be achieved later on, more or less mechanically” (Boudon and Bourricaud 1989, p. 357). The socialization-programming analogy must be rejected due to many reasons.

First of all, this analogy would only be correct if one supposes that, during their lives, actors “are confronted by a limited number of repetitive situations” (p. 356). On the contrary, they prove to be capable of coping with unexpected events (see Gadamer 1975). In addition, the acquired memory which structures the way in which individuals interpret the world and behave is, at least partially, ever changing (see Hayek 1952). In other words, new experiences lead them “to enrich” their “cognitive resources or to modify” their “normative attitudes” (Boudon and Bourricaud 1989, p. 357). Although certain effects of socialization are difficult to erase (a French person who speaks English usually has an accent and the same is true for a British person who speaks French), what is learned is not absolutely unchangeable.

“When facing a new situation or a new environment, an actor will have, generally speaking, the ability to alter certain effects of the previous socialization he has been exposed to”

(p. 358).

This is showed, for instance, by the fact that one can switch between different accents in the same language. It is possible for an undergraduate student from the Southern United States to gradually change his way of speaking if he were to spend several years in New York City pursuing his university studies.

Another point which must be stressed is that while “some values or norms can be interpreted unequivocally, others are…very versatile” (Boudon and Bourricaud, 1989, p. 359). This means that following a rule requires a creative effort. “Some norms are precise and in no way
ambiguous (‘thou shalt not kill’); others might be interpreted in a variety of contradictory ways” (p. 359). The principle “help your neighbor” – another principle that finds its origins in Christianity – has been interpreted in very different manners by political theorists as it is shown by the contrast between theorists of socialism and those of a market society (see Nemo 2004; 2006a). Like Boudon and Bourricaud, Hayek (1976, pp. 24-25) illustrates the vagueness of norms:

“All real moral problems are created by conflicts of rules, and most frequently are problems caused by uncertainty about the relative importance of different rules. No system of rules of conduct is complete in the sense that it gives an unambiguous answer to all moral questions; and the most frequent cause of uncertainty is probably that the order of rank of the different rules belonging to a system is only vaguely determined. It is through the constant necessity of dealing with such questions to which the established system of rules gives no definite answer that the whole system evolves and gradually becomes more determinate, or better adapted to the kind of circumstances in which the society exists”.

Even norms that define social roles are not characterized by absolute clarity and precision. If one wants to understand, for instance, the functioning of a particular bureaucratic system, one cannot focus only on the organizational chart describing the rules on which the system is based. It is necessary to understand the way in which actors interpret these rules as well as their different roles. It is also necessary to understand the strategies that they develop in order to improve their situation within the organization. They usually tend to take advantage of the fact that the procedures to follow cannot be hyper-detailed. Within bureaucratic organizations “everyone seems capable of profiting from the ambiguities, incoherencies, and contradictions inherent in his role” (Crozier and Friedberg 1980, p. 49). In particular, there is

“an instinctive and more or less conscious tendency on the part of all the actors to modify their assigned functions so as to elude the expectations and pressures of their partners in order to maintain or enlarge their margin of liberty”

(Ibid).
Following Weber, Boudon and Bourricaud (1989, p. 13) also underline another reason why data on socialization are extremely useful, yet “insufficient in themselves to understand the reasons for the action”, which is that the effects of socialization on different individuals are not identical (see also Di Nuoscio 2006, p. 121). The way in which actors react to the socialization process is not rigidly standardized. For instance, some people are very traditionalist and conformist, while others are not. These differences depend on the fact that individuals interpret not only the physical world, but also cultural tradition. As Gadamer (1975) and Hayek (1952) have shown, hermeneutical presuppositions of knowledge cannot be perfectly identical. Due to this fact, the personality of an individual and the way in which he or she interprets things, including his or her cultural tradition, are variable.

According to the culturalist and structural-functionalist tradition, the internalized norms – or, at least, a part of them – can be considered as instructions which are more or less mechanically followed by the actors. Due to the reasons we have already mentioned, this holist theory of social order must be rejected. If individuals tend to follow a typical set of rules, this does not depend on the fact that they are “extradetermined” (Boudon and Bourriccaud 1989, p. 358). They can transgress a rule if their interpretative horizon changes, modifying the way in which they attach a meaning to things. If they respect certain rules, they do so because they do not see viable alternatives to them and have no reason to violate them. Consider, for instance, the rules of pronunciation which create the different regional accents in the United States. It is possible – we have already considered a similar example – that a young person – let us say an undergraduate – who has a rural accent and moves to New York City to complete his studies might start feeling a bit uncomfortable with his accent. It is also possible, that as a consequence, he gradually changes to adopt the New York City accent through practice. If the shame a person feels can affect his accent, this means that the way in which one speaks cannot be dissociated from his intentionality and lived experience as holist and culturalist paradigms assume. It follows that shared local accents cannot be explained in terms of heteronomous determination. If inhabitants of the region from which our young student comes share a particular accent, this is not the mechanical consequence of the fact that they learned the same phonetic tradition. The fact that they, unlike some people who leave their hometown, feel no need to change their way of speaking is equally important.

This kind of anti-objectivist approach can be applied a fortiori to explain the respect of shared moral norms. If individuals follow these
norms, they do so because they are not motivated to do otherwise. There can be different reasons for their attitude. They might believe in their intrinsic value on the basis of what Boudon (2001) calls “cognitive rationality”. Or they might consider the consequences of their violation as undesirable (they might tend to avoid, for instance, certain social sanctions or the sense of loss or confusion related to the abandonment of familiar reference points). Further, they might combine these two perspectives. In any case, individuals follow certain ethical rules because it makes sense to them and it is their intentional attitude, which presupposes a tacit or implicit interpretative evaluation, that implies, mainly unintentionally, the “overall order” (Hayek 1967, p. 68).

11. Methodological Individualism and Idealist Reductionism

Methodological individualism has been interpreted by some of its critics as a form of idealist reductionism, where idealist reductionism means an anti-realistic theory of the social constraints which conceives man in atomistic terms. According to these critics (e.g. Archer 1995; Bhaskar 1979; Udehn 2001), the Verstehen approach developed by authors such as Weber and Schütz is flawed because it assumes that social constraints are nothing but subjective mental constructs – i.e. opinions – to which no real external limitations correspond. Methodological individualism is supposed to neglect the fact that the agent is embedded in a social structure which has concrete effects on his/her liberty of action – effects which exist independently of the agent’s opinion about what he/she is free or not free to do. This structure, which influences human thoughts and actions, is characterized by a set of rules, sanctions and social positions that are objective in the sense that they exist independently of a single individual’s consciousness and entail that the agent’s voluntaristic powers are bounded.

The interpretation of methodological individualism in terms of idealism misunderstands the nominalist and interpretative perspective of the Verstehen approach. It is useful to consider here the concept of “hermeneutic sociology” developed by Anthony King (2004) in his book “The Structure of Social Theory”. King analyzes the sociological implications of Gadamer’s philosophy and criticizes the idealist interpretation of Verstehen developed in recent years by authors such as Bhaskar and Habermas. Unlike older and more radical versions of antinominalism, recent criticisms of Verstehen do not deny the existence and importance of individuals, but assume a “dualistic ontology”, i.e. that “society consists of two divisible elements; structure and agency” (King
2004, p. 5). For this reason, they maintain that society “can never be reduced merely to human social relations” (p. 230). Within this dualistic perspective, social conditioning is explained by arguing that the agent “confronts an imposing and distant structure”, an “objective social reality” which “precedes” the individuals and “directs” a part of their actions (Ibid.). Since Verstehen defends a nominalist stance and insists on the importance of interpretation in the social sciences, it is accused “of reducing society to the opinion which any individual has of it” (Ibid.) – whatever an individual believes to be reality is reality – and therefore of denying the objective reality of social structural constraints.

According to King, the criticism of nominalist and hermeneutic sociology developed by the proponents of the dualistic ontology of structure and agency reflects a misunderstanding of Verstehen. Acknowledging the importance of the interpretative dimension means neither “promoting...a form of idealism” (p. 187), nor arguing that “individuals are free to do whatever they want” (p. 230). Hermeneutic sociology does not deny “the often brutal reality” of social conditioning (p. 230). It asserts only: (a) that “society is nothing but human social relations” (p. 13); (b) that, although the power of society to influence the individual is real, this power is nothing but “the pressure that humans mutually impose on each other in their social relations” (p. 152); and (c) that social interactions “cannot be comprehended without taking into account the common understandings on the basis of which humans interact with each other” (p. 230). The Verstehen approach explains social conditioning as a product of these common understandings. This does not mean that this approach reduces sociology to the study of purely personal and subjective opinions. Hermeneutic sociology is not interested in how a particular individual interprets his/her social environment, but focuses on intersubjectivity. It acknowledges that “merely thinking differently” about the social world does not alter the social world for an individual because the social world is not the product of a particular mind, but rather the largely unintentional consequence of intersubjectively shared meanings (p. 167). From the hermeneutic viewpoint, social conditioning must be explained in terms of both collective beliefs and aggregate social effects.

Bhaskar, who is supportive of the idea that hermeneutic sociology is a form of idealism, points out that there are phenomena, like war, “which seem resistant to interpretation in hermeneutic terms” (King 2004, p. 187).

“War seems to demonstrate decisively that society cannot be reduced merely to the idea which people have of it. War has the most
manifestly material consequences. People are killed and their property is destroyed, however they interpret it”. (p. 187).

As stressed by King, contrary to what Bhaskar thinks, hermeneutics is not an anti-realist account of social life, and it is indispensable for explaining the dramatic and brutal consequences of war. The form of a specific war

“who fought with whom, who was killed and who survived, is not explicable without reference to the understandings of the human involved. This does not mean that sociologists need to take into account how particular individuals interpret their deaths or how individuals personally viewed the conflict.”

(King, 2004, p. 190).

From the standpoint of the hermeneutic analysis of social conditioning, these purely subjective interpretations “are more or less irrelevant” because “they are not the basis of social life.” (King, 2004, p. 190).

“Individual interpretations, made alone away from social interactions, are irrelevant to social life unless an individual can persuade other group members to accept these interpretations as the public basis of everyday action.”

(King, 2004, p. 190)

The constraints created by warfare must be explained by focusing on shared meanings and on the concrete intended and unintended consequences related to these shared meanings. This is what is argued by hermeneutic sociology, which must not be reduced to mere idealism. Hence, contrary to what Bhaskar thinks, hermeneutic sociology does not conceive the interpretative presuppositions of the social world in anti-realistic terms. According to King (p. 190), Verstehen, which analyzes war only in terms of interactions between individuals and recognizes “the meaningfulness” of these interactions, is a more realistic account of war than the dualistic ontology of structure and agency. War is a specific type of social relation, and social relations “are not independent of the ideas that humans hold about them” (p. 191).

“[The] warring groups sustain themselves as unities only as long as members recognise their social relations to each other. Any combat
which follows is dependent upon the existence of these groups, and war therefore involves human understanding.” (p. 190).

12. Methodological Individualism and Semantic Reductionism

The entire individualist tradition is often labeled in derogatory manner as reductionism, but the term ‘reductionism’ is not univocally defined by the critics of methodological individualism. Two variants of the reductionist interpretation of what we call non-atomistic methodological individualism can be distinguished. The first, which we analyzed above, is the idealist interpretation of *Verstehen*. The second, which developed within analytic philosophy, is the idea that the entire individualist tradition is tantamount to a kind of semantic reductionism. It argues that the individualist idea that social phenomena must be explained in terms of individuals is supportive of a principle of semantic reduction of social properties to individual ones (see Rainone 1990, pp. 169 ff.; Petroni 1991, p. 16). According to this interpretation of methodological individualism, this approach must be rejected: (a) because social phenomena cannot be analyzed without referring to concepts and laws which are semantically irreducible to properties of individuals; (b) because semantic reductionism denies the self-evident truth that there are semantically irreducible concepts and laws which causally influence action. Examples of the interpretation of methodological individualism in terms of semantic reductionism can be found in Kincaid (1986; 1996), Lukes (1973), Mandelbaum (1955), Ruben (1985) and Sawyer (2002; 2003).

Arguing that the social sciences need to use semantically irreducible concepts and laws is correct and can hardly be denied. Trivial examples of this fact are easy to find. Consider, for instance, the following sentence (a sentence which expresses a very simple concept): ‘nation X is richer than nation Y’. In this sentence there is a social predicate which cannot be semantically reduced to a set of predicates concerning qualities of individuals because it does not entails that any member of nation X is richer than any member of nation Y. In other words, in this sentence there is a social predicate that does not truthfully reflect a set of predicates about individual qualities (see Di Nuoscio 2006, p. 119). Let us consider another example – an example of an explanation which is semantically irreducible to individual laws and which assumes the existence of semantically irreducible factors which causally influence the action. Take the analysis of market coordination in terms of the ‘invisible hand’, i.e. in terms of a self-organized system. This explanation is semantically irreducible to
individual laws (namely to psychological laws) because it argues that market coordination is an unintended consequence which results from many actions which are not deliberately directed to achieving this coordination. Moreover, this explanation assumes that there are factors such as the market prices (which are semantically irreducible to psychological laws because they unintentionally emerge from the combination of different individual evaluations) that causally influence action. There is a circular causality between individual choices and market prices: choices influence prices and the latter influence in turn choices. According to the explanation of the market in terms of invisible hand, market prices are supposed to coordinate economic activities because they affect and limit the freedom of choice of individuals (See Hayek 1952a).

The validity of the interpretation of methodological individualism in terms of semantic reductionism seems implausible. One of the reasons for this implausibility is that explanations in terms of unintended consequences such as the explanation of market self-organization mentioned above are typical examples of individualist explanations (see Boudon 2013). Mises’ and Hayek’s explanations of the market system rule out the possibility that social phenomena can be semantically reduced to psychological laws and acknowledge the causal influence of semantically irreducible factors. The equivalence between methodological individualism and semantic reductionism does not hold because semantic reductionism is supported only by some atomistic variants of methodological individualism (like the theory of the social contract that emerged during the Enlightenment and was strictly related to mechanical philosophy and some reductionist economic theories). Semantic reductionism is opposed by non-atomistic individualists (see Rainone 1990 pp. 169 ff; Tuomela 1989; 1990). Authors such as Menger, Hayek and Popper point out that the whole is semantically more than the sum of its parts, and they also insist on the impossibility of reducing social explanations to psychological laws (see appendix 1). They see social dynamics as based on a recursive loop between individual and systemic emergent properties (e.g. institutions, social roles, market prices) that are unintentionally implied by human actions and causally influence the context of decision-making (see Dupuy 2004). This concept of recursive loop is an individualist concept, and it is inconsistent with sociological holism for two reasons: (a) the emergent properties are not regarded as features of ontologically independent social substances, but rather as global semantically irreducible properties related to a set of individuals (see Copp 1984; Nadeau 2003; Rainone 1990; Tuomela 1989); (b) the emergent properties are seen as having a causal power, but not in the sense that they control the human mind and cancel


individual intentionality; their influence on the individual is real, but it is not mechanical. It is mediated by the individual hermeneutical skills, i.e. by how the individual builds a meaning of things (this meaning is regarded by methodological individualism as the ultimate cause of human action). The interpretation of methodological individualism in terms of semantic reductionism, which wrongly reduces methodological individualism to atomism, led to a misunderstanding of the individualism/holism debate because this debate was not about the semantic reducibility of social concepts and laws. Unlike semantic reductionists, the individualists involved in this debate, which was mainly related to sociological issues, rejected atomism and openly supported a systemic theory of the social world.

In our opinion, the authors who argue the equivalence between methodological individualism and semantic reductionism misunderstand: (a) the meaning of the individualist criticism of the substantialist theory of social wholes; (b) the meaning of the explanation in terms of heteronomy which is related to this theory. On developing their criticism of holism, methodological individualists often used sentences like “Only individuals exist, thus we must explain social phenomena only in terms of individuals” (e.g. Popper 1966b). Sentences of this type have been wrongly interpreted as proving the commitment of methodological individualism to semantic reductionism. However, sentences like this, as it is showed by a careful hermeneutical analysis of the works and explanations of non-atomistic individualists, do not mean that the use of semantically irreducible concepts and laws must be avoided. They mean something completely different: i.e. that the holist view that the social world consists of supra-individual substances, which exist independently of individuals and control them, must be rejected. In other words, sentences like the one above provide a criticism of the idea that individuals are nothing but emanations of these supra-individual substances, the laws of which are the ultimate engine of history and social dynamics. By ‘explanations in terms of individuals’, methodological individualists mean explanations which challenge the holist ontology and the sociological theory of heteronomy which is intimately connected to this ontology.

There is a difference between the concept of wholes as independent substances which control individuals (a concept which is criticized by the individualists) and the concept of wholes as semantically irreducible entities (a concept which is accepted by the individualists) – a difference which seems to escape those authors who consider methodological individualism to be naively committed to semantic reductionism. The individualist rejection of the idea that ‘wholes’ are independent substances
does not imply any endorsement of semantic reductionism. As Tuomela (1990, p. 134) stresses, “all theories utilizing social predicates can be regarded as individualistically acceptable as long as they do not postulate any supra-individual social wholes”. Non-atomistic methodological individualists defend both a nominalist perspective and the idea that, in Menger’s words, “social structures...in respect to their parts are higher units” (Menger 1883, p. 142). Similarly, there is a difference between the concept of holistic sociological laws – which assumes that the individual is an heteronomous being and describes the behavior of independent social substances which mechanically determine the behavior of its human emanations (e.g. historicist laws of progress like Comte’s and Marx’s or social deterministic laws in the sense of structural functionalism) – and the concept of irreducible laws in the sense of laws which are semantically irreducible to individual laws. Non-atomistic methodological individualism rejects the former kind of laws. Conversely, it has nothing to say against the latter, which it considers to be the foundations of the invisible-hand explanation theory.

According to non-atomistic individualism, irreducible explanations are unavoidable. As Manzo (2014, p. 21) points out, the non-atomistic variant of methodological individualism “can handle: (1) macro- and meso-level entities and properties; (2) downward causation; (3) macro-level emergence; and (4) macro-to-macro and meso-to-meso correlations”. The above mentioned explanation of the market in terms of invisible hand provided by Mises and Hayek is an example which can be used to clarify points (1), (2) and (3). Let’s focus in detail on point (4). The existence of laws which describe causal relationships between macro-level emergent properties (like “the increase of the interest rate is followed by a rise of the savings rate” or “suicide rates decrease during severe political crises”) is often regarded as proving that there are phenomena that methodological individualism cannot account for because these laws does not provide explanations in terms of individuals (e.g. Kincaid 1986; 1995). The crucial point here is what ‘explanations in terms of individuals’ means. According to Kincaid (Ibid.), Weber’s and Popper’s idea that social sciences must be based on ‘explanations in terms of individuals’ means that social sciences must be based on semantic reductionism. However, as we already argued, this is incorrect. Kincaid confuses individualistic explanations with reductionist explanations. Since there is no equivalence between methodological individualism and semantic reductionism, the fact that laws which describe macro-to macro causal relationships are semantically irreducible does not prove that these laws describe phenomena that methodological individualism cannot account for. Laws of this type can be
explained in individualistic terms, which means as (semantically irreducible) unintentional macro-effects of human decisions. Methodological individualism challenges holistic sociological laws. On the contrary, it is consistent with the use of macro-to-macro laws because, unlike holistic sociological laws, they are not necessarily linked to a theory of heteronomy, i.e. to the assumption that the ultimate causes of action and social phenomena are supra-individual substances which control human minds and reduce agents to passive social zombies.

As stressed by Boudon (1998, pp. 172-173), according to methodological individualism, macro-to macro laws “can exist and be useful”, but they must be precisely interpreted as the product of human intentions. This means that it is important trying to identify the micro level mechanisms triggering the social phenomena which we describe in terms of (semantically irreducible) macro-to macro laws. This does not entail achieving a semantic reduction, but clarifying how laws of this type are largely unintentionally produced by human decisions. As Boudon (1998, p. 173) remarks, theories which argue the existence of macro-to macro causal relationships “lead…to further questions: “Why is that so? Under which circumstances do the effects occur, and so forth?”. From the standpoint of methodological individualism, if we find out macro-to-macro regularities, but we do not answer the above questions and clarify the micro-foundations of these regularities, we are faced with a mystery and we need to solve it (see also Demeulenaere 2011, pp. 15 ff.; Manzo 2014, pp. 20-21).

A last point must be addressed. The interpretation of methodological individualism in terms of semantic reductionism appears strictly connected to a theory that we can call “theory of the primacy of institutions over the actions of individuals” – a theory that is central to the analytic tradition (see Rainone 1990, pp. 180-181). According to this theory the explanation of human action presupposes institutions – i.e. abstract social concepts referring to systems of common rules – which causally influence action (see. Kincaid 1995).

---

4 Within the interpretation of methodological individualism in terms of semantic reductionism, one of the arguments used to criticize the individualist explanations is the “multiple realizations problem” (Kincaid 1986, pp. 492 ff.; 1995, p. 159). The concept of multiple realizations, which is a sophisticated criticism of reductionism, grew out of cognitive science and has been subsequently applied to the debate on emergence in social science. As understood by the critics of methodological individualism, the multiple realizations problem is just another way to say that, since there are social concepts and predicates which are irreducible to individual properties, methodological individualism is mistaken (for details, please see Kincaid 1986; Rainone 1990; Tuomela 1989). As we already pointed out, demonstrations of the irreducibility of social explanations do not undermine methodological individualism as the equivalence between this approach and reductionism does not hold.
“The idea of war, for instance, […] is an idea which provides the criteria of what is appropriate in the behaviour of members of the conflicting societies. Because my country is at war there are certain things which I must and certain things which I must not do. My behavior is governed, one could say, by my concept of myself as a member of a belligerent country. The concept of war belongs essentially to my behavior.”

(Winch 1990, pp. 127-128)

All this means that

“it is impossible to go far in specifying the attitudes, expectations and relations of individuals without referring to concepts which enter into those attitudes, etc., and the meaning of which certainly cannot be explained in terms of the actions of any individual persons.”

(p. 128)

The argument that methodological individualism must be rejected because there are semantically irreducible shared social concepts that causally influence action seems to us mistaken. This is not only because methodological individualism is not committed to semantic reductionism, but also because methodological individualism cannot be equated with a radical form of behaviorism as the supporters of this argument seem to suggest (see Rainone 1990, pp. 182-187). Arguing that methodological individualism denies the role of “shared concepts” in the sense of Winch, means assuming that this approach is an attempt to explain social phenomena only in terms of observable properties of individual actions. Understood in these terms, methodological individualism would undoubtedly be untenable. The tendency to equate methodological individualism with a form of behaviorism is linked to the fact that the positivist theory of reduction, which inspired the interpretation of methodological individualism in terms of semantic reductionism, connects the concept of reduction of a theory to the idea that the theoretical terms must be reduced to observable terms (see Rainone 1990, pp. 182-187). The assumption that methodological individualism is tantamount to a form of behaviorism neglects the intimate connection between (non-atomistic) methodological individualism and Verstehen (Ibid.). According to the Verstehen approach, the explanation of action cannot be reduced to the study of the observable properties of action because it presupposes shared intersubjective meanings in the sense of Schütz (1967), like, for instance, the concepts of “war”, “army”, “general”, “soldier”, “civilian”,

46
“retaliation”, “bombing”, and so on. In other words, according to the 
Verstehen approach, the explanation of action is inconsistent with 
behaviorism because it presupposes the understanding of the individual’s 
intentionality, which is related to an intersubjective world (see sections 3.9 
and 3.11). This point has been largely clarified by many methodological 
individualists. For instance, Mises (1957) and Hayek (1952) strongly 
criticized behaviorism, as well as other theories, like Neurath’s 
physicalism, which deny that it is necessary to explain action by taking 
unobservable shared meanings into account. The idea that the institutions 
causally influence the actions of individuals is consistent with non-
atomistic methodological individualism, whilst it is clearly incompatible 
with the atomistic theories of action (see Demeulenaere 2000).

From the standpoint of (non-atomistic) methodological 
individualism, the theory that the actor is influenced by social factors is 
correct insofar as the actor is not regarded as a passive and heteronomous 
being mechanically directed by social factors, i.e. insofar as the actor is not 
regarded as holist sociologists regard him/her. The analytic philosophers 
who criticize methodological individualism reject methodological 
individualism because they confuse it with atomism and semantic 
reductionism. Yet, in spite of what they argue, they actually see things in a 
way similar to that in which methodological individualists see them, 
because they criticize sociological holism and social determinism. 
According to methodological individualists, rules are never blindly 
followed by the individual. If they are followed, it is because they have 
been interpreted and accepted by the individual. Rules “cannot be held 
responsible for being followed” (Demeulenaere 2000, p. 15). This means 
that, in a sense, there is always a primacy of the individual over 
‘institutions’ – a primacy which explains the historical evolution of 
institutions: the fact that rules change (*Ibid.*).

To conclude, we may say that, for the reasons that we have discussed 
above, application of the concept of semantic reduction to the analysis of 
the individualism/holism debate has created confusion about the meaning 
of this debate, which is unrelated to the issue of semantic reduction. Both 
sociological holism and non-atomistic individualism (the variant of 
methodological individualism generally defended by the critics of holism), 
acknowledge the necessity to use semantically irreducible concepts and 
laws in the explanation of action and social phenomena. However, unlike 
non-atomistic methodological individualism, sociological holism assumes 
that semantically irreducible properties concern independent social 
substances which control individuals. Sociological holism interprets these 
properties as proof of the existence of these supra-individual entities. By
contrast, from the nominalist standpoint of non-atomistic methodological individualism, semantically irreducible global properties are an implication of the existence of individuals. They are properties of a set of individuals\textsuperscript{5}. Another difference between the two approaches derives from the fact that, according to non-atomistic methodological individualism, the semantically irreducible global properties influence the action, but do not mechanically determine its contents because the ultimate cause of action resides in how these properties are interpreted by the individual. By contrast, sociological holism argues that the individual is unconsciously controlled by the global properties, and that the meanings that he/she attaches to his/her conducts are unimportant: action is a by-product of the social system.\textsuperscript{6}

### 13. Group-Selection

An example of the confusion created by the interpretation of methodological individualism in terms of semantic reductionism is the idea that methodological individualism is incompatible with Hayek’s theory of cultural evolution – a theory according to which cultural evolution “operates...through group selection” (Hayek 1988, p. 25). This incompatibility is argued by many authors, including Boehm (1989), Gray (1986), Hodgson (1993), Steele (1987), Udehn (2001), Vanberg (1994), and Witt (1994). These scholars’ viewpoint is also partly shared by Caldwell (2009), Heritier (1997) and Laurent (1994). The core of the theory of incompatibility is that an explanation of cultural evolution in terms of group-selection is inconsistent with methodological individualism because it is based on references to societal concepts of the “group” and “group advantage” rather than on references to the concepts of the “individual” and “individual benefits” (Vanberg 1994, p. 84). In other words, the incompatibility is assumed to depend on the fact that the theory

\textsuperscript{5} Some authors (e.g. Nadeau 2003; Rainone 1990; Tuomela 1989a) call “supervenience” this relationship between nominalism and emergent properties within non-atomistic methodological individualism.

\textsuperscript{6} The interpretation of methodological individualism in terms of semantic reductionism has influenced the methodological debate in economics. Some economists criticize methodological individualism on the grounds that, since this approach is committed to semantic reductionism, it is unable to consider the crucial role that socio-economic institutions play in the economy because socio-economic institutions are semantically irreducible factors (see, for instance, Arrow 1994; Hodgson 2004). Other economists (e.g. Blaug 1992; Hoover 2009) argue that, since methodological individualism is committed to semantic reductionism, it is inconsistent with the approach of macroeconomics because macroeconomics studies the relationship between semantically irreducible factors. For this reason, they reject methodological individualism. These criticisms against methodological individualism are misplaced because, although it is true that there are atomistic economic approaches that support a reductionist individualism, there is no equivalence between methodological individualism and semantic reductionism. For instance, the Austrian School of economics defends a non-atomistic variant of methodological individualism that is not committed to semantic reductionism (although this school criticizes macroeconomics for neglecting that economic knowledge is distributed).
of group-selection implies the reference to concepts which are semantically irreducible to individual properties. Due to the fact that Hayek conceives cultural evolution in these anti-reductionist terms, he is accused of being incoherent in his explicit defense of methodological individualism. He is accused of endorsing a kind of “collectivist functionalism” (Vanberg 1994 p. 84).

We maintain that this criticism of Hayek must be rejected: (a) because the equivalence between methodological individualism and semantic reductionism does not hold; (b) because the difference between holism and individualism is not related to the issue of semantic reductionism. Within the framework of methodological individualism, the reference to societal and systemic concepts of group and group-advantage is perfectly legitimate. This reference does not presuppose the hypostatization of groups nor the denial of the individual’s autonomy because it is linked to a nominalist and intersubjectivist theory of social systems which has nothing to do with holist sociology. Max Weber used the concept of ‘caste’ and Ludwig von Mises that of ‘price’ which are both semantically irreducible concepts. However, the fact that these two authors used these concepts does not mean that they were committed to sociological holism. From the standpoint of methodological individualism, group-selection does not concern sui generis entities. It is rather a selection of shared rules which are intentionally followed by individuals on the basis of a “situated rationality” and which create a specific system of interaction (see Di Nuoscio 2000, p. 178; Nadeau 2003, p. 18; Petitot, 216-217).

Group-selection is dependent on unintentional and unpredictable aggregate effects which are implied by the generalized respect of collective rules – aggregate effects which give an evolutionary advantage to certain structures of interaction as compared to others. Since group-selection is an invisible-hand explanation, it is inconsistent with structural-functionalism. It is an individualist explanation which combines the idea of individual autonomy with that of unpredictable unintended consequences. The individualistic nature of Hayek’s standpoint is confirmed by the fact that, in analyzing the logic of group-selection, he does not conceive cultural innovation in historicist and heteronomous terms. Indeed, Hayek (1988, p. 16) remarks that the mechanism of group-selection interacts with another crucial mechanism, i.e. that of the “variations of habitual modes of conduct”. He stresses that the latter mechanism precisely presupposes the autonomy of actors, i.e. the possibility of violating a rule. In addition, it must also be noted that Hayek was not the first methodological individualist to have used the concept of group-selection. As Di Nuoscio (2000, p. 174 ff.) remarks, this concept has been used before and in a very
similar way by Spencer, another author who has been unsurprisingly and unfairly accused of being a crypto-holist (see also Boudon and Bourricaud 1989, pp. 367 ff.).

14. The Middle Ground Paradigm: a Criticism

Although both the interpretations of methodological individualism in terms of idealist reductionism and those in terms of semantic reductionism developed in recent years are critical of methodological individualism, they are very often linked to the assumption that there is some truth in methodological individualism’s conception of the social world: especially in its idea that the actors’ views and intentions matter and cannot be erased from the analysis as unimportant – an idea that is not shared by holist sociology. Both the two above-mentioned interpretations of methodological individualism are usually linked to the idea that this approach is partly wrong in that it is a form of atomism which denies the importance of “the social structure” as well as of the “positions” and “roles” related to this structure (Udhen 2001, pp. 319; 347). The point stressed by many contemporary critics of methodological individualism is that this orientation does not understand that, in explaining action, the intentionality of the individual is not the only factor that matters, because the causes of action must be sought in both individuals and the structural factors that limit the individual possibility of choice (see Udhen 2001, pp. 331-336). Methodological individualism is supposed to deny the existence of these structural factors and to assume, consequentially, that the actor is free from social conditioning.

The deterministic theory of action supported by holist sociology is usually criticized by the contemporary critics of methodological individualism. However, these critics maintain that this sociology has the merit of having stressed, unlike methodological individualism, the need for a systemic approach within the social sciences and the existence of structural constraints on action. These authors are often engaged in defending what they consider a middle ground between sociological holism and methodological individualism – a “synthesis” of these two approaches providing a systemic analysis of social phenomena which is disconnected from a deterministic and heteronomous theory of action. Systemic analysis is understood to be a specific and peculiar feature of the holist tradition which can be used to improve traditional and reductionist individualism (Udhen 2001, p. 318). This theory of the middle ground has been called by Udehn (2001, p. 318), following Wippler (1978), “structural
individualism”. Besides Udhen, supporters of this approach of the middle ground include, among others, Agassi (1960; 1975), Bhaskar (1979), Bunge (1996), Bearman, Hedström (Hedström and Bearman 2009), Kincaid (1986; 1996), Pettit (1993) and Sawyer (2002; 2003). Some of these authors prefer to use terms other than “structural individualism” to refer to the middle ground paradigm they defend, but this does not really matter here. Their viewpoints are substantially identical.

Since we disagree with the interpretation of methodological individualism in terms of an atomistic and non-systemic approach developed by these authors, we also reject their idea that we should get rid of methodological individualism and replace it with structural individualism. In our opinion, contrary to what the theorists of structural individualism believe, the concept of structural individualism does not denote a new approach which corrects some errors of traditional methodological individualism and improves its explanatory power. Instead, this concept refers to a method which has always been applied by the non-atomistic variant of methodological individualism. As Demeulenaere (2011, p. 11) remarks, “methodological individualists have always defended the idea that individuals are, let us say, “embedded” in social situations that can be called “social structures,” and are in no respect isolated atoms moving in a social vacuum”. The notion of “structural individualism…is… inherent to sociological methodological individualism from the very beginning, as opposed to some versions of economic atomism” (Ibid). Within this sociological individualism, institutions and rules clearly have “effects upon individual action” (Ibid) even though they “have no direct ‘energy’ of their own” (Ibid; see also Demeulenaere 2012, pp. 25-26).

It is not difficult to find examples of “structural” explanations in the works of methodological individualists. Consider, for instance, Mises’ criticism of the planned economy. Mises (1981a), who like the other Austrian economists rejects atomism, argues that a planned economy is impossible because without private property, economic calculation is impossible since market prices are absent. His criticism of the planned economy is based on references to systemic factors that limit the individual’s freedom of choice. In analyzing the differences between a planned economy and a market society, Mises assumes that a market society is based on specific rules protecting private property and regulating contracts and also that these rules create a specific structure of interaction and a set of constraints. For instance, his concept of a market society presupposes that in such a society, if you steal, you risk going to jail. More importantly, Mises stresses that it is precisely the existence of the structural
constraints that are implied by private property that allow us to solve the calculation problem. This is because private property implies market prices which cannot exist in a communist system and which are the presuppositions of the economic calculation. Moreover, Mises argues that one of the reasons why market prices allow the coordination of economic activities is because they impose structural constraints upon individuals. Market prices obviously influence and limit the possibility of choice. According to Mises, they force the individual to choose in a way that is consistent with the global coordination of economic activities.

It is not complicated to find other examples that show that methodological individualism (or at least its non-atomistic variant) has always employed a structural approach. When Tocqueville explains how the centralized character of the French administration made the French social and political ‘system’ very different from the English system, he refers to structural properties that influence the choices of the actors and social dynamics. Tocqueville provides an explanation which cannot be described as atomistic and which is based on analysis of the consequences of specific structural constraints. So does Weber when he analyzes the caste system in India and the way this system imposes highly restrictive professional, religious and social obligations on individuals. As Boudon (1971) points out, the use of a structural approach is not a specific and peculiar feature of sociological holism, as the critics of methodological individualism seem to believe; rather, it is a necessary characteristic of social research and an integral part of the individualistic model of explanation since the very beginning. Both sociological holism and methodological individualism are structural approaches in the sense that both develop explanations that refer to structural constraints although they conceive these constraints in a very different way. The analytic philosophers who criticize methodological individualism because they confuse it with semantic reductionism are right on one point: semantic reductionism is logically impossible and the reference to systemic factors which influence action is always necessary in the social sciences. Although some theories may be empirically flawed because they wrongly neglect some specific structural constraints that are causally relevant to explaining the phenomena under investigation, there are no examples of explanations that do not refer at all to structural constraints and that are thus non-systemic. The reference to various forms of structural constraints is implicit in common sense and cannot be avoided. Even the atomistic approaches, which deal with (non-empirical) fictional situations in which many of the structural constraints which limit individual freedom in the real world do not exist, cannot completely avoid reference to structural
factors which influence the individual. So, although these unrealistic approaches describe the behavior of a hypothetical man who is free from many constraints that affect the real man, and although these approaches sometimes explicitly defend a mechanist philosophy and semantic reductionism, they do not consider this hypothetical man to be free, so to speak, one hundred percent. Take the contractualist tradition. Although the members of this tradition deny many social constraints and describe social interaction in purely fictional terms, they are obliged to implicitly assume the existence of some semantically irreducible global and systemic properties which limit individual freedom. This can be understood if one considers that no social contract is possible without an agreement and that the possibility of an agreement presupposes a shared language. A language is a system that implies structural constraints and limitations which affect individual behavior and that are semantically irreducible to observable individual properties. Obviously, speaking a language requires compliance with a set of rules such as, for instance, phonological and syntactic ones.

APPENDIX 1

From Chapter 2

2.9. Concluding Remarks: Consciousness and Social Systems

This short conclusion anticipates some aspects of the following chapter. As we have explained, the theory of the actor’s autonomy as intended by methodological individualism is often misunderstood. Methodological individualism is often confused with a form of atomism which denies social conditioning (see, for instance, Udehn 2001). This is mistaken because, as Hayek remarks, methodological individualism links the theory of the actor’s autonomy to the idea that society must be considered as a system and must be studied in terms of emergent properties which causally influence action. According to Hayek, a society “is more than the mere sum of its parts” (1967, p. 70). Moreover, it “presupposes also” that its constitutive “elements “are related to each other in a particular manner” (Ibid.). Merleau-Ponty (1960) agrees with Hayek’s systemic approach.

Already in 1883, Carl Menger, a major influence on Hayek, points out that, according to methodological individualism, the individual’s intentions and actions must be considered as parts of a structure (see
For Menger (1985, p. 142), “social structures…in respect to their parts are higher units”. Moreover, they are endowed with “functions” which “are vital expressions of these structures in their totality” (p. 139). Society is a system because each part of it – each individual or each social subsystem (like a family or a firm) –

“serves the normal function of the whole, conditions and influences it, and in turn is conditioned and influenced by it in its normal nature and its normal function” (Menger 1985, p. 147).

Unlike sociological holism, methodological individualism does not assume that social structures are substances which exist “out there” independently of individuals and which control human actions from without. Instead, methodological individualism argues that social structures are systems of interaction between individuals that must be explained by considering consciousness as an expression of cognitive autonomy. In other words, methodological individualism considers social structures to be the consequence of subjective meanings which are shared by individuals and imply regularities in human actions as well as emergent properties. The existence of these shared meanings and of the systems of interactions created by them imply social conditioning; but social conditioning influences individuals only through the way in which it is interpreted by them. Social conditioning cannot be considered to be the mechanical effect of a pre-given socio-cultural world (see Di Nuoscio 2006).

Due to human cognitive autonomy, the socio-cultural world is not an external force which programs and controls passive social zombies. As Menger (1985, p. 133) writes, human systems are not deterministic machines. Deterministic machines are “composed of elements which serve the function of the unit in a thoroughly mechanical way. They are the result of purely…mechanical…forces”. The so-called social systems,

“on the contrary, simply cannot be viewed and interpreted as the product of purely mechanical force effects. They are, rather, the result of human efforts, the efforts of thinking, feeling, acting human beings.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Schatz, A (1907), L’individualisme économique et social, Armand Colin, Paris.


