

## *Authority: a Social Coordination Mechanism with Effects*

A Contribution to the Explanation and Analysis of Social Mechanisms

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### **1 The topic: authority**

Authority structures are wide-spread in modern societies and are a main characteristic of social relationships. When saying authority, I mean social relationships in which the right to rule or control actions is accepted by those ruled. Max Weber defined this as follows: “Authority is the probability (chance) that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons.” (Weber 1985: 28; translated by A.M.). Authority structures can be found in business as well as in non-profit or state organisations, in international relations as well as in local communities. And we can see that, besides some tendencies of decentralization, hierarchical structures are extremely stable and exist almost everywhere in social, economic and political life.

Authority has been analysed for a long time and from many different theoretical perspectives. Especially the individualistic approach has been focusing on the problem of why free-willed and intentional acting individuals accept authority (see Maurer 2004; 2006a).

The very first theoretical version from an individualistic point of view was Thomas Hobbes’ Leviathan. Hobbes (1984; <sup>1</sup>1651) described the problem of actors living together who may use violence, especially when competing for scarce resources. The solution given by Hobbes is that the individuals first promise each other not to use violence. And secondly, to guarantee this, to establish collectively a powerful hierarchical position: the Leviathan. The work of Thomas Hobbes can be perceived as the very starting point of dealing with social

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<sup>1</sup> A full version of this draft will be published in: Democracy, Capitalism and the Prevention of War and Poverty, eds. Peter Graeff, Guido Mehlkop, Routledge, November 2008.

institutions or mechanisms installed by rational actors supporting social life. On the other hand we have to note that Thomas Hobbes elaborated the problem of living together from an individualistic point of view but he introduced the guarantee for the private contracts with regard to social functions. In doing so, Thomas Hobbes dismissed all the problems the Leviathan can cause and didn't discuss how to structure, control or re-build authority structures.

Although authority is a major issue in modern life, sociology hasn't given much attention to the subject in the last 20 years. I believe the reasons for this are the implications and foot-steps of Max Weber's overwhelming concept of authority.

So what I am doing is the following: First I am reconstructing Weber's concept by discussing the problem of social order and its general solution: the legitimate order guaranteed by officials, given by Weber. My main focus will be to explain that the solution needs specific conditions and restricts the analysis of authority. Secondly, I am demonstrating how to build up an action-based, multi-level logic of explanations which can help outlining particular conditions under which individuals install and maintain social mechanisms. I am using this action-based, multi-level model then to explain authority by outlining two typical situations in which obedience is rational. But I also show how to use this frame to analyse authority as a structure which offers new opportunities and benefits. In summary, I will argue that the heuristic of an action-based, multi-level approach is to explain authority with regard to problems of social action which make precisely this mechanism rational for individuals but have unintended effects. Thus positive and negative effects of authority can be reconstructed in social, economic as well as in political fields.

## **2 State of research**

In the last 20 years a lot of criticism has been voiced about the absence of explanatory power of sociology and the problems of strictly microanalysis or macro analysis (Boudon 1980; Hedström und Swedberg (eds.) 1998; Bunge 2004; Mayntz 2004). The same can be said about the sociology of authority. In my opinion one reason for the absence of explanations and analysis of authority is the overwhelming influence of Max Weber who determined the sociological focus for a long period of time.

It is very important to have in mind that Max Weber saw the main problem of social action and relationships in the existence of credible and reasonable expectations. For Weber the key problem of social life results from the complexity of the world and the variety of individual motives. This can, however, be managed because of the individual's ability to attach meaning to the world and to define collective 'ideas'. Authority can therefore create stable social expectations when it is founded in such collective ideas that define what is right or not. Such 'collective ideas' can get normative power in real life and in this case rule-oriented actions are to be expected. When a legitimate order is created in response to ends and when it is guaranteed by a bureaucracy, actions are highly governed by rules and this enables individuals to coordinate their actions to achieve different ends (compare Maurer 2006a).

This is why authority is a general mechanism of coordination and bureaucracy is inevitable. In arguing that the kind of common beliefs founding *legitimacy* is essential for the structure of authority relations and systems, Weber distinguished between three ideal-types of authority. To remember: Legitimate authority can occur due to a belief in the formal correctness of an order or the process of defining it. Secondly, it can occur due to the belief in the holiness of tradition. Thirdly, it can occur due to the belief in the extraordinary skills of the ruler (Weber 1985: 124ff; 1973; <sup>1</sup>1922). The obedience results from the interpretation that the order is correct and obedience therefore is a duty. That implies that both, the ruled and the officials are regarded as rule-oriented without situational references.

Only because the principles are more or less rational the three types of authority systems can be regarded as more or less rational (Weber 1973; <sup>1</sup>1922). A legal order and a bureaucratic hierarchy are therefore the most rational formal mechanism of coordination. The well-known thesis of Max Weber claims that a legal authority is the most rational form of coordination because of the rational definition and enforcement of mean-ended rules. Weber therefore thought that formally defined hierarchical structures are the best way to generate coordination and getting more pervasive in modern societies with their immense demand for coordination.

In the tradition of Weber who specified the problem of order from an individual point of view: getting *credible expectations*, social mechanisms are explained and analysed, based on the assumption of a given collective legitimacy which is not explained or related to

individual desires in concrete situations (see also Wittek 2006). Because of this, concrete interests do not become relevant for analysing the functioning and maintenance of social mechanisms. But it seems so as Weber assumed that collective ideas response to essential common interests. Instead his conception of authority implies that also the officials act rule-oriented. And whereas he clearly described that authority enables groups of individuals to act more efficiently in a coordinated way, he could not comprehend that these characteristics of social capital or public good might cause problems by establishing it because of 'free-rider incentives' (Olson 1992; <sup>1</sup>1965); Tullock 1974).

For a long time, sociology has worked within this framework of a given legitimacy that allows abstracting from concrete situational interests. The main consequence was that rule-oriented behaviour and therefore the effects of coordination were over-valued. Sociology ignored non-intended by-products and problems of maintaining and re-structuring authority and could not analyse typical problems of hierarchical coordination.

It is therefore not surprising that little or no interdisciplinary exchange has taken place concerning authority as a social mechanism in social, political, or economic fields.

### **3 Action-based, multi-level explanations**

At the end of the twentieth century, the discussion about an adequate logic of explanation within social science (see Hempel and Oppenheim 1948; Hempel 1965) was intensified due to the growing criticism of strictly micro-level or strictly macro-level explanations and inspired by the individualistic approach postulated in the work of Max Weber (Alexander et al. (eds.) 1987). As a result, a lot of work has been done in recent years on multi-level, action based explanations which focus on the problem of social order.

This resulted in rediscovering connections between an action-based working sociology and economics and also an increasing interest in explaining social aspects with regard to individuals and the problems of social action (see Boudon 1980; Coleman 1990; Lindenberg 1989; Wippler und Lindenberg 1987; Hedström 2005).

### *Approach*

The claim is to connect assumptions on the micro-level and on the macro-level so that social phenomena can be explained both as the planned and unintended result of the actions of intentional actors responding to social situations.

Therefore an action theory is needed that informs the two links: At the first step the general assumptions about individuals help to figure out relevant aspects of the macro-level and translate it in possible, more or less useful actions. Thereby models of social interdependence in contrary to competitive market structures can help to specify the problem of social order. And then the explained actions have to be transformed into social or collective effects. This can be done by formal rules as economists would normally do. But institution theories, describing institutional settings and arguing the relevance of institutions for individuals can also help (see for example Maurer 2006a).

Because explanations have to focus on few situational factors sometimes further steps are necessary to consider when and how additional assumptions on the macro- and the micro-level should be made in order to be more realistic (Lindenberg 1989; Opp and Friedrichs 1996). The guide-line for this can and should be the variables of the action theory. The heuristic for sociological explanations results mainly from models of social situations which make social expectations advantageous. In response to general problems of social actions or coordination, the need of social mechanisms and institutions for individuals can be shown and so explained with regard to individual interests in specific situations (vgl. Maurer and Schmid 2009).

### *Variations*

Such general models of situation can thus be specified with regard to intentions. This can be achieved by taking additional situation factors into account and by formulating specific bridge-assumptions. Siegwart Lindenberg, for example, developed a theory of social production functions - contrary to the strict economic utility theory (that he describes as 'relatively empty') - in order to address the social definition of needs and ends (compare Coleman 1990; Lindenberg 1985; 1990). James Coleman, on the other hand, described

situations not as distribution of private goods but as distribution of social *rights* which generate social relations. The progress of multi-level explanatory models has attracted a lot of interest within the scientific community. These models are meant to be the foundation of an integrative research program on the basis of a theory of action. Rational choice theories are often used as a foundation, either because of their ability to formulate precise functions between desires, beliefs and social aspects or, more instrumentalistically, because of their simplicity on the micro-level. But the action model can also be expanded as it is done by framing-theories. It seems to me that most of the work in the last 10 years has been focused on expanding the action model.

However, models of social situations are the key to discuss the problem of social order and to connect both the disciplines and the two levels. The transformation-step, coming up from the micro-level to the macro-level again can be done by formal rules as well as by institution theories explaining when and why institutions shape individual actions and to what structural effects. I'll show in the next section how we can get such information from an action based explanation and analysis of authority.

#### **4. Action-based explanations of authority**

In accordance with the arguments given, I am going to regard authority as a social mechanism established by actors in different situations to solve particular problems of social action. Authority is a challenging issue for a social program based on an action theory which assumes intentional individuals. The question which has to be answered is why do intentional actors establish and maintain demand and obedience relations. The answer can be found by identifying situations which make credible expectations advantageous for individuals. In addition to Weber's findings, I will focus on situations with direct responses to individual interests and thus understand specific problems of social action which give good reasons for establishing authority by guaranteeing mutual expectations. This means a legitimate order is regarded as a special case where the installation of hierarchical structures is no problem because an argument can be given why individuals contribute either of belief or of interests. Second the maintenance of authority has to be explained by analysing its functioning with

regard to the individuals. This can be done by interpreting the established authority as an institutionalised setting which defines new incentives and restrictions for the individuals. In doing so we provide some insight, helping to compare the inner logic of different authority systems as well as different social mechanisms. This also means stating conditions under which individuals have good reasons to maintain, rebuild or change authority systems.

### *Common interests*

A very well-known problem creating a need for hierarchical coordination can be found in the classics, ranging from Hobbes to Weber. First of all, common interests define the problem of a coordinated collective action. This might be the case when division of labour is effective or when big issues have to be addressed. In this case hierarchical positions can provide coordination by defining and enforcing aims, actions and ends.

Analysing this logic from the perspective of intentional selfish actors as done by Thomas Hobbes, Mancur Olson and also James Coleman, authority can be regarded as a public good. Establishing authority systems for pure coordination effects thus has to face the problem of free-riding normally and cannot be explained by a social effect. Furthermore it has to be shown whether there are additional institutions which make free-riding more expensive and obedience less expensive. For example formal or informal control mechanisms or incentives. The important point here is that hierarchies are to be explained by finding additional situational factors which make the contribution useful for the individuals besides the coordination effect. Second we have to conclude that the inner logic of authority systems has to focus new particular interests. This is because authority systems need to install officials who are granted the right to rule and who need not automatically have the same interests or beliefs as those ruled. The main proposition of authority is that these new actors need to be controlled but have power. Therefore we can now argue that the success and maintenance of established authority systems depends highly on further mechanisms of control. That means in contrast to the analyses presented by Hobbes and Weber that in addition to coordination effects unintended consequences in the form of more and more control are to be expected and can provide need for restructuring authority or other social mechanisms.

### *Divergent but complementary interests*

Extending the problem of coordination James Coleman introduced the model of complementary interests in response to the exchange theory. Authority is thus to be explained by the voluntary, rational exchange of action rights by compensation. An authority system then produces coordination effects only for few persons who have specific resources that enable them to buy and use rights to control and thus receive more benefits than costs. The exchange of rights to act by compensation results in an authority system in which the aims of one actor are realised through the coordinated actions of others. The ruled normally receive compensation for their actions but have no incentive to act in favour of the system. Therefore agency problems arise as well as the need for further mechanisms of control or additional incentives. As mentioned above, the problem of officials has also to be considered as a control problem. Or in other words: credible expectations guaranteed by authority normally have to deal with control problems and questions of how to structure hierarchies and to hire officials.

## **5. Perspectives**

To summarise: An explanation program which is based on an action theory can look for various types of situations by focusing on problems of social action caused by individual interests. Authority can thus be explained as a mechanism that enforces credible expectations. With critical regard to classical sociology two main problems or social situations can be out-lined for which authority is to be expected as a rational mechanism: common interests and complementary interests

In order to analyse the functioning and success of authority I have argued that it is necessary to analyse hierarchies as a social situation which offers new opportunities for particular actors. This means that we have to explain the success and maintenance of authority by reconstructing the incentives and beliefs of the ruled. This might be called the inner logic of the authority mechanism. We have to state that the coordination success is influenced by incentives given to the ruled. Therefore we can now differentiate two main inner logics of authority coordination. In the case of common interests the ruled can act as free-riders and

therefore mechanisms to ensure their input are necessary. In the second case, the ruled usually do not share the system's objectives and therefore further incentives as well as control systems should be discussed. Generally is to consider that every authority system needs to install a hierarchical structure and thereby hire officials. This means that these new actors are the essential new proposition of all authority systems because the system offers them new possibilities that can affect the coordination effects tremendously. And only when specific conditions make clear that they have no interests or the same interests as defined in the system they cause no problems as Weber assumed. Sociology therefore can and should give more attention to problems of hierarchical coordination and analyse situational factors which can help solve them.

An integrated program of *social coordination mechanisms* can be built up when other social mechanisms are explained in this way. Hence their main effects and their unintended consequences can be compared. A systematic research program should explain when and why actors are establishing and maintaining authority and when and why they will use other mechanisms like markets, social capital, norms, trust and so on.

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