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On Analytical Sociology

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by Peter Bearman

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I was invited to comment on Daniel Little's article in this issue, "Analytical sociology and the rest of sociology". The article advances the premise that analytical sociology is one of a number of variants of good sociology. By good sociology he means a sociology that describes and then accounts for the ways in which the worlds we inhabit come to be as they are. That definition is consistent with what analytical sociology strives to achieve, viz:

Analytical sociology is concerned first and foremost with explaining important social facts such as network structures, patterns of residential segregation, typical beliefs, cultural tastes, common ways of acting, and so forth. It explains such facts not merely by relating them to other social facts – an exercise that does not provide an explanation – but by detailing in clear and precise ways the mechanisms through which the social facts under consideration are brought about. In short, analytical sociology is a strategy for understanding the social world.

Little endorses this definition. The question, then, is whether or not analytical sociology is the only kind of sociology that can be good sociology. Little says no, and I agree with him completely. Why anyone would think otherwise is beyond me. That some people who think this also think that they speak for analytical sociology is also surprising. It is too early in the day to figure out who speaks for analytical sociology.

Little proposes that other styles of explanation that detail in clear and precise ways the mechanisms by which outcomes arise that are not explained under the "Coleman boat" model advocated by some analytical sociologists as the ideal model

(or some other narrow model) are also instances of good sociology. Little cites work by Andy Abbott on the emergence of the professions as an example (among other work). He is absolutely right; that is a great study. I think I could identify another fifty or so, easily.

Little discusses a series of studies that he likes. I could quibble with some of those. In some instances the explanations offered look more like just-so stories than real mechanisms to me. In others, things are acting that really cannot be acting as I see it. The reader will have to judge whether all of the cases proposed fit the Little bill.

There are always tensions in any intellectual effort between purists and the pragmatists. Analytical sociology attracts its share of purists who police the boundaries of what we do and define out of the canon one heresy after another. This is not a program that is shared by everyone who is interested in analytical sociology as a way of thinking about, inducing, and making come alive a new sociological sensibility. From the outside, Little would like to do that as well. Hopefully the inside purists and the outside boundary builders will both fail in their missions.

I would go farther than Little, by the way. Good sociology often involves explanation but I think good sociology can also be in the business of description without any explanation at all. Description in our discipline is a low-level farming activity with the farmer-sociologist plowing up facts, for example the frequencies of “behaviors” like drinking five drinks in a row, having an “attitude” in response to a question, and so on – but it need not be. Some of the richest descriptions of things are those things that cannot be seen or known by individuals. And when those are described, I think we get some pretty good sociology. That is, we get the promise of sociology: a way to create totally new objects in the world, or to see old objects in new light.

Analytical sociology is a heterogeneous movement of people frustrated by the fact that most sociology seems vacuous. Some of the adherents are missionaries and wish to convert everyone to their views. Others police the boundaries of sociological work in order to define what is in and what is out. Still others try to claim jurisdiction over this or that sub-discipline of sociology. Some go for boats. All of us are searching for better explanations of things than just-so stories. Our biggest problem is not that we still have to agree on exactly how an explanation should be constructed but that we haven’t found enough tangible messy problems to work on.

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Abstract: The critics and adherents of analytical sociology are both too often engaged in a purification ritual whereby they try to eliminate the aspects of the approach that they consider to be polluted. If successful, these efforts will result in an analytical sociology as dry and unresponsive to the messy realities around us as rational choice. And if that occurs, very few actual sociologists would have an interest in the project. To keep analytical sociology open to possibility means that those who are in favor of good arguments about how things come to be and good descriptions of what things are or could be should spend less time talking about what is in and what is out of the canon and spend more time working on empirical problems.

Keywords: analytical sociology.

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