

The Logic of Mechanismic Explanations in the Social Sciences

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Abstract

It is argued that the social sciences (including history) are engaged in explaining (so called) "social phenomena". How this might be done, has to be explicated within a "theory of explanation" which derives from the Hempel-Popper-Carnap-Model of explanation. This model has to be refined and (to some degree) corrected in order to be able to explain social facts. The essential point is that social scientific explanations have to be reconstructed as deep or micro-foundational explanations of an action-theoretical basis.

The logical architecture of such micro-explanations is developed in form of a multi-level-explanation. On the first level individual actions (and their effects) are explained by help of an explicit action theory (rational choice theories learning theories or what else). In a second step there is an explanation of social interrelations (interdependencies) by showing how the actions of different actors are combined by help of (so called) "social mechanisms". The next step has to clarify which collective action effects have to be expected as a result of the corresponding mechanism. The last step has to fix the recursiveness of these collective effects (seen from the perspective of the actors).

The positive heuristics of this mode of explanation is documented (including its importance for historical explanations). The characteristics and functions of the (logically necessary) action theory are discussed.