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Individualism-Holism Debate in the Social Sciences: Political Implications and Disciplinary Politics

[ABSTRACT:] The debate between the individualist and the holist understanding of social items (social entities, events, institutions, phenomena and so on) has a long history and potentially a wide range of political implications. Political positions and political assumptions often play a significant role in the debate and it is not rare that participants in the discussion seek to associate the positions they oppose with unpopular political views, instead of providing actual theoretical arguments. The tendency to associate individualist positions in the social sciences with political libertarianism and neo-liberal economic agendas are particularly common. At the same time, disciplinary politics and concerns about the integrity of the social sciences (especially in the form of fears from their reducibility to psychology) also play an important role in the debate. In this paper I analyse such political assumptions that often motivate, or are stated to motivate, the debate. [ABSTRACT ENDS]

The debate between individualism and holism in the social sciences is often marred by political assumptions, alleged ideological connections and (as we shall see) even unpleasant political insinuations. It is particularly common to associate individualist positions with libertarian political views and neo-liberal economics. Not rarely, advocates of social holism state or imply such associations as their motivation or even as direct arguments against individualist views. In this paper I will start by analyzing the impact of such assumptions on the quality of the debate in general and then proceed to show that such assumptions cannot be theoretically defended. I will then argue that numerous social policies in favor of disadvantaged sections of society can be introduced only if one relies on individualist assumptions about social groups. I will also argue that holist assumptions about social entities really favor the interests of administrators and owners of corporate capitalist entities. Finally, I will discuss the consequences of disciplinary politics and especially the concerns that individualism entails the reduction of the social sciences to psychology.

The distinction between methodological and ontological individualism happens to be of secondary significance when it comes to the political implications of the individualist understanding of society. The same political arguments are often used against both methodological and ontological individualism and generally have the same (limited) value and relevance. Consequently, in this paper I am discussing the political claims made in debates about individualism in general—it would be pointless to limit discussion to methodological individualism, since the scope of arguments often pertains to

ontological individualism as well. For the same reason I will not address here various ways to define methodological individualism and differentiate it from ontological individualism—I assume this has been covered in other papers in this volume.

Form of the debate

It is necessary to start here by analyzing the general form of the debate between individualism and holism in the social sciences, otherwise it will be impossible to understand the impact that political claims and assumptions make on these discussions. The discussion between individualist and holist perspectives on society has been going on for more than a century, and it has been quite lively at least since the 1960s. One aspect of the form of the debate that is particularly important for our analysis here is the disproportionately high number of articles and books that seek to refute individualism, ontological or methodological. One rarely reads articles that argue in favor of individualism. At the same time, the arguments against individualism presented in these publications are often marked by remarkably poor quality. As we shall see from the examples presented below, one can talk about an actual avalanche of poor and unconvincing anti-individualist arguments that have passed reviewers and editors and have been published in top-ranking journals or in books produced by prestigious publishers. Not rarely, the same weak arguments are further repeated in later publications, even though they have been refuted in the meantime. All this suggests that strong extra-theoretical motivation plays a major role in the debate. The phenomenon should not escape our attention especially since political views are often stated to motivate the debate between individualism and holism. In order to provide the wider perspective that is necessary in order to explain the politicization of the theoretical dilemma it is necessary to start here by describing the phenomenon.

Consider, for instance, the anti-individualist claim that social entities cannot be understood as individuals and their interactions because in order to identify these individuals one has to refer to other social phenomena. In other words, it is argued that one cannot say that educational or penal systems are sets of individuals and their interactions, because some of these individuals have to be teachers or inmates—while without social items such as schools or prisons there can be no teachers or inmates. The obvious individualist response is going to be that schools or prisons, being social entities, are themselves nothing more than sets of individuals and their interactions. The argument assumes that they are not, while this is something that it is only meant to prove. In other words, the argument seeks to prove that social institutions cannot be individuals and their interactions by assuming that social institutions are not individuals and their interactions. Although it relies on a classic logical fallacy, the argument has had extremely wide circulation in the literature. So far I have managed to trace its

history, it was mentioned for the first time in an article by Mandelbaum (1955: 309). Subsequently it was repeated in articles by Lukes (1968: 122) and Weldes (1989: 362) and in an article and a number of times in a book by Kincaid (1986: 499; 1997: 23, 34, 35, 51). Giddens (1979: 94-95) seems to imply it as well.¹ Similarly, Zahle and Kincaid (2019: 658) *de facto* endorsed the holist view that describing an individual as a CEO presupposes the existence of corporations and corporate structures, without noting the logical error.² For the analysis of the politics of the debate later in this article, the significant point is not merely that all these authors made the same elementary logical error, but that their texts that contain that same error received institutional endorsement by the editors and reviewers of *The British Journal of Sociology*, *Theory and Society*, *Philosophy of Science*, *Synthese* and The Macmillan Press who published them. In fact, reviewers of leading journals sometimes endorse invalid arguments even after they had been repeatedly refuted and rejected in earlier publications. Ritchie (2013: 266) in an article published in *Philosophical Studies* argued that teams, committees, clubs or courts cannot be sets of individuals because such ‘groups’ (as she calls them, Ritchie, 2013: 257) can change members, whereas sets cannot. The simple individualist response is that the claim that institutions (‘groups’) are sets of individuals and their interactions does not mean that every institution is a *single* set of individuals and their interactions. An institution can be various sets of individuals and their interactions at various times. For instance, one can conceive of the Supreme Court of the USA as different sets of justices and their interactions at different times—or, alternatively, as a set of *all* justices who have ever served or will serve on the Court, whereby different subsets of these justices make decisions for the Court at different times. These two responses were presented in well-known papers by Uzquiano (2004: 139) and Ruben (1982: 301), before the publication of Ritchie’s paper. Again, the interesting point is not merely that Ritchie presented an invalid argument, but that reviewers failed to notice the fallacy that had been already well established in the existing literature. They also failed to notice the absurdity of another argument she presented in the same paper, that because sets are ‘normally taken to be abstract’ they cannot be in space: ‘Sets are not, and groups are in space,’ she said. (Ritchie, 2013: 266-267) The idea of the argument is that ‘set’ is a

¹ Giddens (1979: 94-95) is somewhat unclear, but I assume that he relies on this argument when he says that social institutions ‘are the outcome of action only in so far as they are also involved recursively as the medium of its production.’

² Since Kincaid and Zahle (2019: 658) refer to Kincaid’s own book *Philosophical Foundations of the Social Sciences* for this argument, one can assume that they endorse it, though the situation is unclear because they do not state the page. Their statement later on the same page ‘explanations invoking roles in organizations are the most social’ confirms that they assume that individualist understanding of organizations is impossible. There is no reason why individualist explanations could not invoke roles in organizations.

mathematical concept, and such concepts are abstract entities that exist outside space and time. Since human individuals are in space and time, it is impossible to talk about 'sets of individuals' or assume that they participate in social institutions (which are also in space and time). This is like arguing that there cannot be seven cars on a parking lot because the word 'seven' refers to a number and numbers are mathematical abstract entities outside space-time. Since cars are physical objects, it would follow that they can never be counted. Following the same reasoning, any application of mathematics to the physical world would be impossible. The simple response is that sets of human individuals or any other physical objects are modeled on mathematical sets. Many mathematical concepts were originally derived from our everyday experience. The terms used to refer to such experience do not cease to be applicable to our everyday experience once mathematicians start theorizing about them. As for sets, the founder of the set theory, Georg Cantor, actually did not conceive of them as abstract Platonic non-mental entities.³

Looking at the wider picture, it is sometimes hard to resist the impression that *any* claim can be endorsed by reviewers and published in well-reputed journals, insofar as it purports to refute individualism. Consider the following claim presented by Bunge (2000: 394) in an article published in *Philosophy of Social Sciences*:

If methodological individualism were adequate, to know a triangle it should suffice to know its sides regardless of its relations, namely, the inner angles—which is not even true in the exceptional case of equilateral triangles.

In other words, Bunge is actually arguing that:

If methodological individualism were adequate, then knowing the sides of a triangle should suffice to know its inner angles.

But knowing the sides of a triangle does not suffice to know its inner angles (not even in the case of equilateral triangles).

Therefore, methodological individualism in the social sciences is inadequate.

The claim is nonsense: the dilemma between individualism and holism in the social sciences has nothing to do with the relationship between the sides and the angles of a triangle. To make things worse, it is directly embarrassing that the

³ As he put it, he regarded them as 'Objecten [sic] unserer Anschauung oder unseres Denkens.' (Cantor, 1869: 481)

author would state, the reviewers endorse and a reputed journal would publish a false claim about high-school-level trigonometry as a supporting thesis for the argument. If all sides of a triangle are known, it is easy to calculate the angles on the basis of the cosine theorem. In the case of an equilateral triangle, all angles are 60° and no calculation is necessary.

The impression that anything goes when theorists of the social sciences want to refute individualism is further strengthened by the widespread presence of straw-man refutations in the literature. The most common tactic is to disregard the emphasis that advocates of individualism have traditionally placed on the role of interactions in social phenomena, redefine individualism as the claim that social phenomena consist of passive individuals who do not interact, and then easily refute it. It should be obvious that interactions have to play a central role in all individualist attempts to explain social phenomena. They are standardly mentioned in the existing literature when it comes to definitions of individualism. Agassi (1987: 150) actually described the view 'that social phenomena are but interactions between individuals' as 'classical individualistic idea.' The understanding that individualist understanding of social phenomena must refer to interactions goes back at least to Simmel (1908: 3-5 and 1917: 6-15), who emphasized the role of interactions and joint actions early in the last century (he used the terms *Wechselwirken* and *Zusammenwirken*). It is also not hard to find references to interactions in various definitions of individualism proposed by modern authors. Elster (1992: 13) thus defined methodological individualism as the view that explanations of social institutions show how they arise 'as the result of the action and interaction of individuals.' Sawyer (2005: 6) identified methodological individualism as the approach that seeks to explain how macro social phenomena, such as institutions, social movements, norms and role structures result from 'individual actions and dyadic interactions.' List and Spiekermann defined methodological individualism as the thesis that good social-scientific explanations should refer solely to facts about individuals and their interactions. (List and Spiekermann, 2013: 629) One may agree or disagree with the theoretical views of these authors, and one may oppose or endorse their definitions—but in any case, it is hard to deny that there exists a long and established tradition to include interactions in definitions of individualism. This is certainly reasonable. A soccer match is not a set of individuals who belong to two teams, it is what these individuals do on the field. Very often, the interactions in which individuals engage define the nature of the social entity. One and the same set of bank employees can also constitute a rugby team, and when they play rugby they are not a bank, they are a rugby team. They are a bank when they perform bank-specific interactions. Also, it is natural to assume that they can interact with the material environment (e.g. computers) as well as non-members of the set (e.g. clients of the bank). Finally, when individualists talk about individuals, it is natural to assume that the properties (intrinsic and

extrinsic) of these individuals are included as well—it would be absurd to talk about individuals without properties.⁴

Classic straw-man arguments against individualism simply omit any reference to interactions from the definition of individualism and then seek to refute the position that they have thus defined as individualism. In the article cited above Bunge points out that ‘social facts can only be understood by embedding individual behavior in its social matrix and by studying interactions among individuals.’ (Bunge, 2000: 394) Contrary to standard definitions in the literature, he claims that individualism does not take individuals’ interactions into account and then proceeds to refute it by pointing out that social facts cannot be understood without taking interactions into account. Hodgson (2007: 220) in an article published in the *Journal of Economic Methodology* accurately notes that attempts to explain social phenomena in terms of individuals alone have never been successful and that ‘[i]n modern social theory, structures are typically defined as sets of interactive relations between individuals.’ He then decides that it is unwarranted to use the term ‘methodological individualism’ for the position that takes individuals’ interactions into account and calls this refutation based on such re-definition of individualism ‘devastating.’ As we have seen, such re-definition is in obvious collision with the common practice to include interactions in definitions of individualism. Hodgson actually recognizes that ‘many advocates of methodological individualism’ as he says ‘fail’ to specify individualism in terms of individuals alone—i.e. the way he needs them to define their position so that his refutation would be valid. *De facto* this recognition amounts to an open admission that his is a straw-man refutation. The impression is that Hodgson felt compelled to reject something called ‘individualism’ and then adjusted the definition in order to fit his agenda. The only thing that is really devastating is the thought that reviewers would pass and the *Journal of Economic Methodology* (note the word ‘methodology’ in the title) would publish a paper whose author almost openly admits that he is presenting a straw-man refutation.

A similar, but more elaborate straw-man refutation of individualism was presented by Epstein (2009). Epstein’s main target is ontological individualism, but this kind of straw-man argument could be seen as directed against methodological individualism as well. His account of individualism completely omits to mention interactions in which individuals engage. As he presents it, ‘Ontological individualism is committed to the claim that individual people are the ultimate constituents of the social world in which they reside. ... [It] holds

⁴ An intrinsic property is the property of the object (Paul is six feet tall) whereas an extrinsic property is the property the object has in relation to other objects (Paul is taller than Peter). (For an explanation of this distinction see Weatherston and Marshall, 2017.) Extrinsic properties are also sometimes referred to as ‘relations.’ The fact that a person has a certain mental state that instantiates a mental content is an intrinsic property of that person. Sometimes extrinsic properties may be accounted of in terms of interactions, as Weatherston and Marshall put it, ‘We have other [extrinsic] properties in virtue of the way we interact with the world.’

that once the individualistic properties of people and relations among them are appropriately understood, those properties and relations suffice to determine the social facts.’ (Epstein, 2009: 208) In his view (ontological) individualists ‘mistakenly commit themselves to limiting the determinants of social properties to the properties of individuals.’ (Epstein, 2009: 209) The understanding that for individualists interactions in which individuals engage often play important role in the constitution of social entities, events or phenomena has been suppressed.⁵ It hard not to wonder about the motivation of the *Synthese*’s reviewers who overlooked such an omission—especially since Epstein’s ‘refutation’ of ontological individualism is precisely based on that omission. The line of argument then leads him to claim:

It is difficult even to conceive of any satisfactory characterization of explanation of a social phenomenon such as dance or an orchestral performance or a riot, without incorporating physical factors as well as psychological ones. Likewise, physical factors are involved in the determination of membership in groups as well. It is not only the dance and the orchestra and the riot that involve physical factors, but also the holding of the properties being a dancer, being a cellist and being a rioter. If there were no cellos, then regardless of Yo-Yo Ma and the rest of us thought and did, there would be no cellists. (Epstein: 2009: 202)

However, rioters with their rioting equipment or musicians with musical instruments are not enough for a riot or an orchestral performance; they must also *do* something. They must interact with that physical equipment for something to happen. In other words, cellos and musicians could exist, but if musicians did not interact with cellos (i.e. played them), there would be no concerts. Yo Yo Ma would not be a cellist if he did not interact with cellos. Since

⁵ One may be tempted to try to interpret his concept of ‘individualistic properties’ (i.e. the properties of individuals) to include interactions in which individuals engage. Similarly, the definition of ontological individualism in the Abstract of his article says that ‘[o]ntological individualism is the thesis that facts about individuals exhaustively determine social facts’ and one may think that ‘facts about individuals’ include facts about interactions in which individuals engage, including their interactions with the physical environment. However, these interpretations cannot be correct, considering the point that Epstein seeks to make. His line of argument is to point out that the physical environment contributes to the social environment—which in his view is meant to show that individuals and their properties are not sufficient to explain the properties of the social environment. Obviously, the impact of the physical environment on the social environment is something that individualists would seek to explain by referring to the interactions of individuals with the physical environment. Since he leaves this line of response unanswered, one can thus infer that by ‘individualistic properties’ he does not mean the interactions in which individuals engage. He actually cites J. W. N. Watkins’s statement that physical causes in society ‘operate either by affecting people, or through people’s ideas about them’ and then claims that according to Watkins ‘the social facts themselves are not dependent of physical factors at all.’ (Epstein, 2009: 202) Here too, it is significant to note that such openly self-contradictory interpretation of Watkins’s view could have passed unnoticed the reviewers of *Synthese*.

definitions of individualism commonly include a reference to the interactions, and interactions are often with the physical objects, one cannot refute individualism by merely pointing out that the physical environment plays an important role in social phenomena. That is a platitude. When definitions of individualism mention interactions this necessarily includes the physical environment as something that is interacted with. In order to refute individualism, one would have to show that the impact of the physical environment on social phenomena can be independent of interactions between individuals and the physical environment.⁶

Arguments about coincidence are another group of straw-man anti-individualist arguments that systematically disregard the role of interactions in the individualist understanding of social reality. Gabriel Uzquiano's article published in *Nous* presents three fine examples of this strategy. (Uzquiano, 2004) It is enough to present one of them here in order to illustrate how it works (for the remaining two see the footnote).⁷ Uzquiano's arguments pertain to the

⁶ In a later book Epstein presented an equivalent straw-man argument in the form of a thought experiment about Starbucks that also suppressed the consideration of interactions between individuals and the physical environment. (Epstein, 2015: 46) Epstein there imagined that a late night power spike causes serious damage to a great number of Starbucks stores and the company became insolvent. He claimed that '[i]n this example, the transition to insolvency involves property and equipment, not individuals.' However, insolvency is impossible if no human individuals are involved. For insolvency to occur some human individuals would have to discover the broken equipment, employees had to be prevented from doing their work, and customers would have to stop buying coffee from Starbucks. If the spike merely affected equipment that was not in use, and its destruction passed completely unnoticed, insolvency would not have happened. This thought experiment is thus not suitable to show that individualism cannot deal with the impact of the physical on the social environment. In order to show this, one would have to construct an example in which the physical environment can affect the social environment in a way that would be independent of its interactions with the human individuals who participate in that social environment.

⁷ Uzquiano's two other straw-man arguments are also based on the suppression of the discussion of interactions. He argues that if the Supreme Court and the Special Committee on Judicial Ethics are one and the same set of individuals, then the Committee on Judicial Ethics is identical with the Supreme Court. However, since the Committee on Judicial Ethics is assembled by the Senate, it would follow that the Supreme Court is assembled by the Senate, which is not true. Like the last one, this argument overlooks the role of interactions in the constitution of social entities. If the Senate appoints 'individuals who perform interaction X' this does not mean that the Senate appoints 'individuals who perform interaction Y'—even though these happen to be the same individuals. In his third argument, Uzquiano imagines a situation in which the Committee on Judicial Ethics, but not the Supreme Court, joins the Committee of Ethics Committees. (As mentioned, the assumption is that the Committee on

imaginary situation in which the Senate of the USA appoints all and only justices of the Supreme Court to a Committee on Judicial Ethics. According to Uzquiano, it is a problem that the set of individuals that make up the Committee on Judicial Ethics will be identical to the set of individuals serving as Supreme Court justices. For instance, the Supreme Court may be in session at a certain time—and yet, he points out, that does not mean that the Committee on Judicial Ethics is in session at the same time. The argument is a mere trick with words. Uzquiano uses the same phrase ‘to be in session’ to refer to different types of interactions that characterize and define these two institutional bodies. Institutions, as mentioned earlier, are often defined on the basis of the interactions that the participating individuals engage in. The Supreme Court is in session when the justices interact in accordance with their duties as Supreme Court justices. When the Committee on Judicial Ethics is in session, these same individuals are performing another kind of interactions. It is perfectly normal that sets of individuals can perform different tasks at different times and that they are classified as different social entities depending on the tasks they perform. The argument is therefore invalid in a very trivial sense—merely because it fails to take into account the well-established role of interactions in definitions of institutions. One certainly has the right to expect that the reviewers who evaluated the article for *Nous* should have recognized the argument as a mere straw-man refutation—and one has the right to wonder why they failed to do so.

The examples presented here are merely the tip of the iceberg. The limited size of this article makes it impossible to list more of them. The examples should be however sufficient to point out that this widespread proliferation of bad arguments, and that their endorsement by reviewers and editors of leading journals constitutes a remarkable phenomenon in its own right. We are talking about an environment in which even false claims about high school-level trigonometry can pass referees of prestigious journals, insofar as they are presented as arguments against individualism. It becomes hard to avoid the unfortunate impression that anything goes and that reviewing practices in the

Judicial ethics and the Supreme Court are the same sets of individuals but they perform different interactions.) If membership in the Committee of Ethics Committees were merely a relation between a set and its elements, Uzquiano reasons, then both the Supreme Court and Special Committee on Judicial Ethics would be members of the Committee of Ethics Committees—and this was not meant to be the case. Once again, the response will be that the phrase ‘Supreme Court’ refers to individual justices together with the interactions they perform as justices, whereas the Committee on Judicial Ethics is individual members of the Committee together with the interactions that they perform as the members of the Committee on Judicial Ethics. Consequently, it does not follow that the Supreme Court joins the Committee of Ethics Committees if the Committee on Judicial Ethics does so.

social sciences—at least when it comes to the polemic against individualism—are merely an instance of what Chomsky (2002: 338) described as ‘the desperate attempt of the social and behavioral sciences to imitate the surface features of sciences that really have significant intellectual content.’ The phenomenon is so pervasive and systematic that it cannot be explained if one does not assume the existence of widespread and unstated motives that inspire it. Considering the nature of the topic, it is reasonable to expect that the motivation has to be a political one.

Political values and (as) argumentation

The tone of the debate, indeed, often suggests that the participants have strong, politically motivated, feelings about the dilemma between individualism and holism. Commonly, individualist perspectives are associated with libertarian political views, neo-liberal economics and opposition to social programs. This kind of association often reminds of Margaret Thatcher’s statement that there is no society but only individuals. Consider Kincaid’s formulation of this view:

Individualism also supports distinctive views about the place of government policy and the nature of social justice. Holists locate the cause of poverty, crime, and the distribution of income in large social forces; individualists look for causes in the traits and preferences of individuals. Quite naturally, individualists are skeptical that governments can solve what they see as individual problems, while holists are likely to demur. Individualists are likewise naturally attracted to accounts of justice emphasizing individual preferences, contributions, merits, and rights; giving social structure an essential place raises doubts about that program. (Kincaid, 1997: 2)

Similarly, in the article that he and Zahle wrote together they say:

Individualism is consistent with the view that social outcomes are entirely the responsibility of individual decisions. This means social circumstances and society are down played for social injustices such as poverty, inequality, racism and the like.⁸

⁸ Zahle and Kincaid (2019: 672). The claim is not only inaccurate but also remarkably badly phrased. ‘Individual decisions’ could be even made by holistically understood social entities in the sense that decisions are countable and thus individual (a holist social entity could thus make its first, second, third individual decision). Also, *decisions* are not human beings and they cannot have responsibility so it is meaningless to talk about ‘the responsibility of individual decisions.’ The authors are likely to have meant ‘decisions made by individuals.’ Such details are significant for the argument made in this article, since they show

The two paragraphs are a remarkable collection of non sequitur conclusions inferred from false claims, based on a misrepresentation of individualist views about the nature of social phenomena. Contrary to what Kincaid and Zahle suggest, there is no reason why individualists cannot see the causes of poverty, crime, and the distribution of income in large social forces. Rather, individualists differ from holists because they assume that these large social forces are themselves individuals and their interactions and not something else. It is true that individualists do not understand social institutions such as governments as something over and above individuals that make them up and their interactions—but that does not mean that individualists cannot advocate welfare programs, free healthcare and education and so on. The assumption that governments as social institutions are sets of individuals (e.g. ministers) and their interactions is not contradictory to the expectation that governments should organize welfare programs and provide for pensions, free healthcare and education. Saying that poverty is always instantiated in individuals does not mean that governments cannot be expected to help overcome problems with mass poverty. It is true that individualists assume that decisions made by social entities result from decisions and interactions of individuals. Social entities such as classes, governments, boards and so on do not have mental capacities over and above the mental capacities of participating individuals that would enable them to make decisions. In that sense all decisions made in a society do depend on the decisions made by interacting individuals. It follows that social entities indeed cannot have responsibilities independently of the responsibilities of participating individuals who make decisions for them. (This is an important point, because we shall see that the opposite holist view absolves from any responsibility the protagonists of the most rapacious practices of corporate capitalism.) But the view that individuals are responsible for the state of society does not entail that ‘social circumstances and society are down played for social injustices such as poverty, inequality, racism and the like’ as Kincaid and Zahle assert in the paragraph cited above. Rather, it means that social circumstances that generate poverty, inequality or racial problems are understood to result from interactions between individuals. For an individualist, there is nothing else they could result from. From the individualist point of view, when a government recklessly reduces spending for the healthcare system and causes it to malfunction in order to decrease taxes, the responsibility for the consequences is not with some abstract entity called ‘the government’—rather, the responsibility is with the ministers who voted for the decision. Similarly, in order to prove their position, holists cannot merely point out that, for instance, widespread poverty causes an increase in crimes. (Not many people would deny this, but this is not

that in the case of a paper that argues an anti-individualist position even sloppy, anything-goes formulations can pass the reviewers and the editors of *Synthese*.

the question.) They need to show that poverty is something more than a property instantiated in individuals.

The association of ontological or methodological individualism with political libertarianism is a yet another non sequitur. First, there are no logical reasons why a political libertarian could not be a holist in matters of social theory. An American libertarian may, for instance, believe that the USA is a supra-individual holistic entity that arranges, or ought to arrange, social relations within the country on libertarian principles. There is no reason why an American political libertarian may not believe that the USA as a holistic political entity is over and above American citizens and their interactions. Libertarians seek to limit the rights of governments to intervene in the society and in interactions between individuals—but this political program need not commit them to a specific theory about the nature of society or social institutions. Also, left-wing individualism has a long tradition and possibly even goes back to the early writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.⁹ It has been pointed out long time ago that it is impossible to make theoretical links between methodological individualism and libertarian economics or politics. Important observations in that sense go back to Joseph Schumpeter's work early in the twentieth century. (Schumpeter 1998 [1908], 88-98) Schumpeter insisted that it is important to differentiate between political and methodological individualism. As he put it, there is 'no connection between individualist research on society and political individualism' and 'the [individualist social] theory provides no arguments in favor or against political individualism.' (Schumpeter, 1998 [1908]: 90)

There are two significant problems when it comes to the association of ontological or methodological individualism with neo-liberal economics and the opposition to social programs. The first is that economic needs and social oppression exist only at the level of (sets of) individuals and can only be addressed at that level. The second is that social programs can only be formulated and developed if one relies on the individualist understanding of human collectives targeted by these programs.

⁹ The attribution of individualist views to Marx and Engels may sound unusual because many people associate their views with various Communist traditions and ultimately a holist worldview. Nevertheless, individualist views are particularly strong in their early writings such as the *German Ideology* and *Holy Family* where they associate individualism with materialism and correlate it to their rejection of Hegelian idealism. (See especially the first part of their *German Ideology*, Marx, Engels, 1953: 9-78). There exists an extensive discussion about their views when it comes to individualist perspectives on social phenomena. See for instance Israel (1971); Elster (1982 and 1985); Dumont (1977: 113, 125, 136-137); Weldes (1989); Wolff (1990); Tarrit (2006); Kumar (2008); Levine, Wright and Sober (1987).

In order to illustrate the first point, consider Burman's (1979: 368) description of the factors that enter in the plight of a black child in an American inner-city school of the 1970s:

'...a home life with little conventional intellectual tutoring; unemployment of parents leading to apathy and hostility towards the society at large; white teachers who have a low opinion of blacks and verbally deficient students; a streaming process in school that perpetuates the poor expectations of the child's performance; absence of role models with which the child can identify; a school program that is geared in its discipline and curriculum to verbal, white, middle-class children; a social system that prizes academic ability, offering few rewards for those who are inept; few job prospects once schooling is over; a socio-economic system that offers all its riches to winners and nothing but contempt, discrimination and the dole to its losers; vested interests who do not want any substantial government support for inner-city schools...' (Burman, 1979: 368)

The list is convincing, but his account is marred by his further claim that individualists are ill-equipped to make an effective diagnosis of these problems. In fact, *many elements of the list*—home life with little intellectual tutoring, unemployed parents, absence of role models and so on—can *only* be understood and described from the individualist perspective. 'Home life with little intellectual tutoring,' 'unemployed parents,' 'absence of role models' can only refer to types of interactions between individuals. There are no supra-individual social forces or holist social entities called 'home life with little intellectual tutoring' or 'absence of role models.' 'Unemployed parents' are human individuals who lack employment, not holist entities. Also, a 'school system,' 'socio-economic system,' 'government support' and similar can affect a child only through that child's interactions with other individuals, and these other individuals can be affected by such systems (represent it, act on its behalf etc.) only as a result of their interactions with other individuals within the system. Only some concepts that Burman's account relies on can have holist interpretations at all ('school program' or 'school system'). At the same time, they can have individualist interpretations as well.¹⁰ Speaking in general, it is hard to imagine how there could be oppression that somehow affects human

¹⁰ The school system is those individuals who work in education and their education-related interactions. There is no need to postulate it as a holistic social entity. School programmes are widely shared mental contents (among teachers, school administrations etc.) that describe the material that needs to be thought in schools. They are instantiated in the minds of individuals and can be codified (e.g. by means of texts)—but there is no need to postulate them as immaterial Platonic entities, over and above mental states of individuals.

collectives understood holistically—i.e. a form of oppression that would not be oppression of human individuals. If this is so, then only the individualist understanding of society can provide the understanding of the specific forms of oppression that is necessary in order to oppose it.

Social welfare programs are often possible only if one assumes rigidly individualist understanding of society. By ‘rigidly individualist’ I mean an understanding of social groups that assumes that they are not only sets of individuals, but sets of *identifiable* individuals. Many kinds of social programs become impossible if one cannot identify all the individuals that constitute the social group that these programs are directed to. One need not always know the personal data of the recipient, but recipients need to be identifiable as recipients—otherwise the social program becomes impossible. Social welfare programs cannot target social groups *in abstracto*. They do not target a social group as a holist entity over and above the individuals that make it up. If a social group is something else and not the individuals that make it up, if it is something over and above these individuals, then it will be impossible to provide free healthcare for the group because it will be impossible to identify the individuals who should be entitled to free healthcare. If individuals that make up a social group cannot be identified as the set of individuals who would be the recipients of social programs, then social programs cannot be applied to the group. Holist perspectives on social groups thus make social welfare programs impossible.

Social holism as the ideology of corporate capitalism

So far I have argued that methodological or ontological individualism in the social sciences do not entail political individualism, libertarianism or neo-liberal economics. Nevertheless, such claims have been repeatedly made, and it is hard to avoid the impression that they belong to the culture of poor arguments that, we have seen, dominates polemics against individualism. The coin however, has its other side. If we consider the political implications of holism, one of its significant implications is that the holist understanding of social entities absolves government officials, army officers, various CEOs and so on from any responsibility for the actions of these social entities, bureaucracies, military units or companies that they lead. I will concentrate here on the implications of social holism in the context of corporate capitalism. Legal systems in various countries make it easier or more difficult to prosecute, for instance, a CEO of a medical company whose drugs kill people or a CEO of a car company that produces cars that pollute more than this is allowed. If companies and corporations are, however, consistently understood as holistic entities, then this should not be possible—an individual could not be held responsible for the actions of a collective body such as a corporation even if this individual ordered these actions. Insofar as it understands social entities as entities *sui generis*, as entities on of their own kind, as something over and above individuals and their

interactions, social holism entails the impunity from prosecution of various CEOs, military officers, high government officials and bureaucrats for the illegal or criminal actions of the corporate bodies that they lead.

For our discussion here New Zealand's leaky buildings disaster is particularly suitable example. In the late 1980s and the early 1990s the New Zealand government passed a series of laws that deregularized building industry and opened it to market forces.¹¹ Up to that time New Zealand had a strong system of building codes and regulations that ensured good technical quality of residential architecture. Problems with waterproofing were rare. All this changed within a decade after deregulation. By 2008 there were over 89,000 dwelling failures and in 2011 the total damage was estimated to NZ\$ 23 billion (or about 12% of the country's yearly GDP). Most issues pertained to waterproofing—precisely the kind of problem that would arise once building codes have been abolished. The problems were not limited to the extremely high cost of repairs. Humidity in buildings caused a wide range of health problems. Many apartment owners were forced to file for bankruptcy because they were unable to pay for the necessary repairs and some committed suicides.

The disaster illustrates two important points. First, critics of neo-liberal economic principles may rightly point out that such deregulation is a perfect example of the negative consequences of economic neo-liberalism. It would be hard to deny that the New Zealand government was motivated by neo-liberal ideas during the era. The system of strict building codes and regulations was arguably rigid and it slowed down the introduction of new (untried) building technologies. The government may have believed in the power of market to regulate the quality of work in building industry. It may have assumed that if some developers and building companies sold bad apartments, their reputation would make it impossible for them to survive on the market. All this admitted, there is nothing about ontological or methodological individualism that would make them incompatible with the idea of building codes and regulations. Individualists are not obliged to oppose the idea of building codes, regulations or legislations introduced by governments. For instance, an individualist may think that rules, regulations, codes, are contents of mental states instantiated in individuals that specify how things should (not) be done. Individuals learn about them through interactions, verbal or written, from other individuals. There is nothing in the individualist perspective that would make rules and regulations impossible.

At the same time, there is another side of New Zealand's leaking buildings scandal, that illustrates the consequences of the holists' incapacity to individualize the responsibility for the actions of social entities, as discussed earlier. We have seen that for individualists decisions of social entities result

¹¹ There exists a massive literature about New Zealand problems with leaking buildings. See Dyer (2012).

from decisions and interactions of participating individuals. Consequently, the individualist view is that responsibility for the decisions made by social entities falls on those individuals who contributed to decisions. (Obviously, one also has to take into account that some decisions may have unintended consequences.) Contrary to this view, the holist position has to be that decisions of social entities do not result from decisions and interactions of individuals. It follows that no responsibility can be assigned to the individuals who participated in the decision-making process. The New Zealand's leaking buildings scandal finely illustrates the perils of such holist understanding of social institutions. Implicit¹² holist assumptions about social institutions were actually an important contributing factor to the leaky buildings disaster, since they removed the responsibility from individual developers and the owners of building firms that built leaky buildings. This made it possible for developers to build a shoddy buildings, sell the apartments, take the profits and close down their companies. By the time the problems with the building were discovered and the owners faced repair bills, the building companies had ceased to exist and could not be held responsible or sued. The developer could not be held responsible because (in line with the holist understanding of social institutions) the financial responsibilities of the company are separated from those of the company owners who derive financial gain from the profits of the company. The company was seen as an entity on its own and its responsibilities could not be identified with those of the owner. Individualists thus do have a good case to argue that social holism supports some of the worst and most dishonest practices of capitalist economy. From the holist point of view, it is acceptable that capitalists, developers, various managers, CEOs and so on earn profits and salaries by making decisions without being responsible for the outcomes of these decisions; the responsibility is located in the corporate body. To make things worse, problems with the holist incapacity to assign responsibility to individuals for actions of the social entities that they manage are not limited to absolving the officials of corporate capitalism from the responsibility for their decisions. The same kind of reasoning easily expands to numerous other social issues pertaining to the responsibility for actions of various other social entities. Following similar logic, for instance, it becomes unclear how one could hold responsible and prosecute military officers who order their units to commit war crimes or government officials whose decisions actively violate human rights.

¹² By 'implicit' I mean that I am unaware that the social-theoretical understanding of building companies as defined by the law has ever been discussed in relation to the scandal, but the background legal assumption that enabled the disaster was clearly that building companies were entities on own and of their own kind, unidentifiable with individuals (such as their owners or share holders) and their interactions.

Disciplinary politics

It is, at the same time, hard to believe that enthusiasm for corporate capitalism or the desire to advocate the impunity of their managers and officials could motivate the vehemence of anti-individualist polemics in the social sciences. More likely, many social scientists may be motivated by their desires to change the society for better or they may consider it ethically proper to promote theories that in their views can help the disadvantaged sections of society. They may wrongly believe that by promoting social holism they are indeed acting in accordance with such intentions. There is, however, another kind of political explanation of the vehemence of the anti-individualist polemic in the social sciences, that pertains to disciplinary politics and not to political issues in society at large. To some social scientists, individualism may seem to endanger the very possibility of the social sciences (economics excluded because it operates mostly on individualist assumptions), because in their view it entails the reduction of social sciences to psychology. Speaking in general, the argument that seems to disturb many social scientists is that if actions of social entities result from the actions of individuals, and if actions of individuals are ultimately caused by their decisions and psychology, then the social sciences should be reducible to psychology. In that case, the social sciences, it may seem, would lose the very purpose for their existence. Udehn (2001: 3) describes this concern explicitly:

Many social scientists, especially sociologists, have, no doubt, rejected methodological individualism, because they believed that it implies psychologism, or the reduction of sociology to psychology. If so, methodological individualism would rob sociologists of their discipline. For all these reasons, the debate between methodological individualists and their critics has been more confused than usual in social science and philosophy.

Quite appropriately, Udehn (2001:3) himself qualified this motivation as ‘crass.’ One should also note that the background concern about the reduction of the social sciences on psychology is baseless on two levels. First, it is not clear how such reduction could be possible. Social phenomena do not result only from what individuals think but also from unintended consequences of their actions—and unintended consequences are not mental properties, so they could not be described or explained by psychology. (See for instance Di Iorio, 2013: 27) Second, the idea that individualism could entail such reduction could only be based on the misunderstanding of the individualist position and especially the individualist emphasis on interactions. By definition, ‘interactions’ have to include what individuals do and not merely what they think—so they cannot be exclusively mental, nor fully described in psychological terms. Third, even if such reduction of sociology to psychology were possible, this would not deprive sociologists of their discipline. Consider the case of chemistry. Chemical

phenomena ultimately result from the interaction between physical particles and physics explains the behavior of these particles. This, however, does not mean that chemistry is not a legitimate science. Laws of chemistry result from the physical behavior of particles, but that does not mean that there are no laws of chemistry.

All this admitted, Udehn may nevertheless be right in his view that fears from the reduction of the social sciences to psychology in many cases motivate anti-individualist polemics. A comparison with the historical humanities may be taken to confirm his view. The dilemma about the nature of social items such as states, armies, cultures or battles is certainly very important for historians as well. However, the disciplinary possibility of history does not depend on the outcome of the polemic against individualism, and historians are much less worried about the problem. In the early decades of the twentieth century holist tendencies were dominant in German-speaking historical scholarship (though much less outside Germany).¹³ In modern English-speaking historiography or the philosophy of history the debate between individualism and holism is not nearly so often addressed as in the social sciences. As Tucker (2004: 212) pointed out, historians generally accept that ontological individualism is true, and assume that methodological individualism (the way they understand it) is false. For practicing historians the decisive argument against (what they mean by) methodological individualism, as described by Følrand (2017: 140), is that it is often impossible to identify all individuals who made up social entities in history because the necessary information is not to be found in archives. For instance, it is a methodological constraint that the existing archives do not enable us to identify all soldiers of Napoleon's *Grande Armée*, but as regards ontology, that does not mean that the *Grande Armée* was anything more, over and above individuals and their interactions. Obviously, this is a perspective of practicing historians, who are predominantly interested in what they can prove through archival work. Now, it seems reasonable to assume that social scientists and scholars in the historical humanities are equally prone to subscribe to theoretical positions that support social change for better and tend to favor the disadvantaged sections of society. There is no reason to think that one group has different or stronger political commitments than another. This would then suggest that the vehemence of anti-individualist polemic among social scientists does not derive from such wider social commitments. The remaining explanation would be that it derives from disciplinary politics and concerns about the integrity of the social sciences—the kind of concerns that historians simply do not have. This impression is further strengthened by the fact that the historians' reason for the rejection of methodological individualism—that through archival

¹³ This particularly pertains to so-called historicist tradition. For surveys of German historicism see Iggers (1969), Beiser (2011); for the role of individualism-holism debate within historicist theories see Mitrović (2015).

work one often cannot identify all members of a social entity—never gets mentioned by the social scientists who write against methodological individualism (at least in the literature I have surveyed). The fact that the individuals and the interactions that make up social phenomena often cannot be identified is not a relevant argument for social scientists because it is not sufficient in order to claim that social entities have causal capacities that derive from something else and not from the psychologies of the participating individuals. It cannot be used in order to defend the possibility of the social sciences, such as sociology, as a field independent of other fields of research.

Conclusion

There is something profoundly wrong with the idea that positions in the social sciences can be defended or dismissed on the basis of their political consequences and not on the basis of their theoretical validity, arguments and evidence. One would expect social scientists to be motivated by the pursuit of truth—and yet, we have seen that political arguments commonly play a role in the polemics against individualism, and possibly even motivate them. In an environment motivated by genuine search for truth a researcher who is motivated by political inclinations would be ashamed to admit it, let alone present them as relevant in arguing his or her position. The fact that political arguments, that should not have been used in the first place, are based on invalid assumptions, makes things even worse. The claims that identify individualism in the social sciences with libertarian political views or neo-liberal economics have never been properly justified, and it hard to see how they could be because a credible logical link is simply not to be found. Such claims have been repeatedly made, and the lack of credible arguments to support them suggests that they are part and parcel of a wider phenomenon—the fact that virtually any claim may pass reviewers and be published in leading journals if it is said to support arguments against ontological or methodological, individualism. When a well-reputed philosophy journal publishes a baseless insinuation that associates individualism with racist political views, such editorial practice belongs to the same phenomenon as the publication of a non sequitur ‘refutation’ of individualism based on false claims about elementary trigonometry. In principle, anything goes when it comes to such ‘refutations’ of individualism. Disciplinary politics in the social sciences thus enables and allows for the systematic publication of material that would be quite unusual in most other fields.

The suggestion that concerns about the integrity of the social sciences and fears from their reduction to psychology motivate many social scientists in their opposition to individualism needs to be taken seriously. This suggestion is particularly devastating, insofar as it may be taken to suggest that many social scientists parade wider social concerns in order to dismiss the views that they actually regard as a threat to their discipline—that they are ready to sacrifice

their intellectual integrity in order to defend the integrity of the discipline. The credibility of Udehn's claim that 'many social scientists, especially sociologists' reject individualism because they fear the reduction of their disciplines to psychology is further confirmed by the fact that the debate between individualism and holism in the philosophy of history has none of the vitriolic tone characteristic of the philosophy of the social sciences. In their work, historians deal with social items as much as social scientists, but they hardly worry about the reduction of the historical humanities to psychology. In fact, the reduction of social sciences to psychology is improbable because of the argument about unintended consequences—but even if it were possible, it is not clear that it would be particularly devastating for the social sciences since it would merely mean that they depend on psychology the way chemistry depends on physics. (In fact, much less, because of the arguments about unintended consequences and interactions that I mentioned above.) All this admitted, the belief that if social sciences are going to be legitimate sciences, then social entities must be entities of their own special kind, '*sui generis*,' has been with the social sciences at least since the time Emil Durkheim.¹⁴ If Udehn is right, then for many social scientists the very idea of social science is inseparable from the holist understanding of society—and when they attack individualism they are ferociously defending the credibility of the field they work in, the way they understand it. The belief that social items are *sui generis* seems to be a firmly ingrained fundamental disciplinary assumption—so firmly ingrained that questioning it could cause the vitriolic reactions that we have seen. How and why such a belief came about, and how and why it has been sustained, is a question that should be addressed by historians of the social sciences. It is not a topic for this paper.

¹⁴ The classic formulation is in Durkheim (1982 [1895]: 39). See also Udehn (2001: 35, 181)

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