

Sociology 915
Reading Interrogations #7. Causal Primacy
October 21, 2004

1. Matt Desmond

When is it appropriate to ask what causes are ‘more important’ than others and when is this distinction unhelpful? Although Levine, Sober, and Wright suggest that “it would be wise, therefore, to shift discussion away from causal primacy to causal importance” (p. 175), they do not go as far as to claim that asking ‘causal importance’ research questions is a faulty endeavor from the get go. Take the debate between Marxists and non-Marxist feminists: the former argues for the causal primacy of class and the latter ‘gender-based mechanisms’ to explain the oppression of women. Levine, Sober, and Wright return to this debate at the end of their article and assert that the causal importance of class or gender mechanisms is only a salient claim in context-specific circumstances and making a case for the overarching primacy of one or the other is a faulty endeavor. However, could we not push farther and say that distinguishing between ‘most important causes’ even in specific instances, is a false distinction? I am thinking here especially in light of the booming literature on intersectionalities. If I wanted to understand the causes of urban segregation, it seems silly begin my process by looking for a ‘most important cause,’ as how could I conclude my analysis by claiming that race is more important than class when both phenomenon are joined at the explanatory hip? **[Of course it could be the case that there is no meaning, in a given context, to the claim that one cause is more important than others. Our point is that this may be a reasonable question to ask for some problems. Even in the case of something as complicated as race and class determinants of current racial segregation of cities, the following could be the case: that while the historical origins of these patterns was shaped by a dynamic interaction between these two processes, so that one cannot say one was more important than another, it could be the case that at the present time, in the absence of class differences (with the currently level of existing racial mechanisms) the segregation would rapidly erode, whereas in the absence of racial mechanisms (but with the current level of class differences still present), the segregation would persist. This would give a subsnative meaning to the idea that class has become a more important segregation-reproducer than race, even if it was not a more important historical determinant.]**

Although I can think of instances where knowing a ‘most important’ cause would serve helpful—the main explanans behind the Rwandan genocide or a stock market crash, for example—even in these cases, primal causes will either overstate the case and bracket important factors out of the analysis or make weak claims about causal importance. This is why after asserting that “casual primacy claims, if correct, should be recast as quantitative asymmetry claims,” Levine, Sober, and Wright quickly remind us, “It is therefore unlikely, in most explanatory contexts, that causal primacy claims can be sustained with precision” (p. 173). It seems to me that what follows is that ‘most important’ causal claims would also have a difficult time with precision. Different claims about causal importance can significantly fluctuate across data sets, which illuminates the futility of searching for the ‘most important cause.’ In *Growing*

Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps (1994), Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur demonstrate this point in case of measuring educational outcomes for children from single-parent homes. When they analyzed the affects of poverty on the dependent variable, analyses from data set A found that poverty is a powerful cause while results from data set B found that it is a weak cause. **[I don't see why the instability of measured effects implies a fundamental problem here – this may just imply a profound problem of measuring the relevant causes in such problems. If coefficients are wildly unstable, then we shouldn't believe any of the coefficients. But this does not mean that it makes no sense to say one cause is more important than another; it just means that we do not have the adequate data to answer the question.]**

Countless other examples abound, and taking this into consideration, along with the fundamental idea put forth by intersectionality scholars asserting that one can't analyze race without taking into account class without taking into account gender, etc., why not vie for a more holistic research program that concludes with a narrative of important causes (not everything under the sun, but also not one prime cause) instead of concluding that important causes are still important? My initial question could thus be restated stronger: Is going looking for 'most important cause' a fruitless endeavor? **[If one can identify four important causes and marginalize a host of minor causes – which is what you suggest by acknowledging that one need not give weight to “everything under the sun” – then you are already in the business of identifying some causes that are more important than others. It may be that the best we can do is identify a set of causes that is more important than causes outside of that set, but this still implies a capacity to differentiate among causal power.**

One other thing: I personally think that the language of “interaction” is more precise than “intersectionality”. Basically the problem here can be expressed as follows: if the world were additive – in which causes X, Y and Z affect outcome Q independently of each other, each giving a little push to the variation in the relevant outcome – then we can give a precise meaning to relative quantitative importance. If the causal process is entirely interactive – the outcome only occurs when X, Y and Z all jointly have certain values – then we can't. In many real world contexts there are both additive and interactive effects – and these reflect different kinds of mechanisms in play – and thus we are somewhere in between a process in which all of the variation in the effects are the result of interaction-processes and a world in which none are.]

2. Wayne Au

Bridging back over the last several weeks, I would like to raise the following questions:

1) **If a macro-level system or phenomena operates in a *qualitatively* different way than any of its individual parts, then wouldn't explaining that phenomena require a macro-level mechanism?****[The fact that macro-phenomena operate different from “any individual part” does not establish that *explaining* the macro-phenomenon requires a macro-mechanism. Water operates different from any of its part – Hydrogen and Oxygen each “operate differently” from water. And yet it is the case that water is fully explained by Hydrogen**

and Oxygen and their forms of interaction] Or at least not be reduceable to any one micro-mechanism – or any subset/collections of micro-mechanisms within the macro-level? This would not be to deny an inherent relationship between the micro parts and the macro structures (which is an assumption we may have been operating on in our discussions), but the issue is whether or not the specific causal mechanism we are studying can be deterministically reduced to the micro. Given Erik's arguments made last week about "final explanation" – this would fit, since essentially if we are going to arrive a point in research/explanation where going "deeper" will not necessarily help us understand a particular mechanism, we've simultaneously decided a point where on one level we are accepting a macro-mechanism (simply because we theoretically could keep opening deeper and deeper levels of black boxes in search of increasingly micro-level explanations). As soon as we decide to stop opening black boxes, we've established a macro-explanation relative to other micro-level explanations that could still exist.

2) Similarly, in dealing with causal primacy, if we take into account last week's readings which relied so heavily on methodological individualism of weaker or stronger formulation, **doesn't methodological individualism ultimately assert that micro-level mechanisms (individual level) have causal primacy in relation to macro-level mechanisms/phenomena? [I think this is a different issue from the causal-weight/importance problem. The causal importance problem occurs when there are multiple causes of some phenomenon none of which is reducible to another --these are distinct causes – and one wants to know which is "most important". In the micro-mechanism problem, this wouldn't make sense. Thus, for example, if a sociologist were to argue that social class background affects educational attainment, and the micro-mechanism through which this occurs is the effect of background on educational aspirations, then it would not make sense to say: which is more important, background of aspirations – since aspirations are the mechanism through which background has its impact on attainment. It would make sense, however, to ask whether background or school quality was more important, since both of these could have their effects on attainment through aspirations. To be able to pose the question of causal primacy, therefore, you have to have a specified model in which you indicate the mechanisms (or causal pathways – depending upon how you think about this) of the contending causes so that you know which are "competing" for relative importance.]**

3) The fruit basket example that Wright, Levine, and Sober use to assert that "limits" are not necessarily "more fundamental" than "selections", seems to me to be a bit misleading. In fact, in a way it proves the point of some structural Marxists: that different people get the chance to have more selections/be more selective in their choices relative to class privilege, and personal preference, then, is somewhat negligible because some people are given little or no choice while others are given plenty of choice. Isn't the issue that some get to pick from a fruit basket with all 25 types of fruit and others only get to choose among the pears? This is putting aside the possibility that the individual preference for a pear may be based on class or geographically situated experiences. **[There is nothing at all wrong with the simple observation that one person has a bigger choice-set than another. The difficulty arises when you go from that correct observation to the explanatory claim that the choice set is "more important" than other causal processes in explaining the actual outcome. It could certainly be more important in explaining something, but in then illustration it is problematic to attach greater causal weight to the choice-set than to the selection processes. These are different**

kinds of causes, they figure in different sorts of explanations, but one is not generically “more important” than another.]

4) Is there a particular reason (historical, philosophical, or otherwise) why there appears to be absolutely no *explicit* use of dialectics to explain causal relationships/causal primacy, even amongst Marxist scholars? I’ve seen dialects lurking around behind critical realism and specific to this week’s reading in relation to dynamic asymmetry, but it seems noticeably absent. My own understanding of dialectics would lead me to explain causal primacy conditionally and relationally: conditionally in that, under given conditions, one side of a contradiction is dominant/primary in relation to the other. Conditions can change as such that this relationship can “switch”, and the side that was dominant/primary can then operate as non-primary. In application to thinking about the issue of capitalist structures (limits) in relation to individual agents (selectors), there are times in history when individual choice and action have made tremendous impacts in relation to the structure (e.g. Civil rights/Black Power movements), however there have also been times when capitalist structure has imposed very severe limits on the power and effect of individual action/choice to the effect of demeaning the overall power and effect of that individual. **[Once you nail down the idea of “dialectics” as a set of real causal mechanisms, then, it seems to me it is really just a set of claims about causal interactions and nonlinearities. This would need quite a bit more elaboration to be clear, but the notion of “contradiction” probably means something like (a) that the unintended effects of action undermine the intended goals of the action, or (b) some social institution has multiple, inconsistent, conditions for its reproduction, (c) the long term effects of mechanisms of reproduction of a given structure of social relations undermine the long-term stability of those relations. The problem with invoking “dialectics” in these contexts is that it is generally quite vague and unclear precisely what mechanisms are being specified.]**

3. Fabian Pfeffer

Wright, Levine and Sober point out the difficulties and ultimately improbability of maintaining causal primacy claims. The latter can only take the form of quantitative asymmetry claims. If qualitative asymmetries allow assessing the relative importance of causes it is only because they can be reduced to quantitative asymmetries. Accepting this and also acknowledging that it is in most cases impossible to actually “calculate” quantitative asymmetries (by either observing the distribution of the causes in the population or specifying the functional form of the causal mechanism) I wonder what the practical implication of this is. Does this ultimately lead to ‘causal pluralism’ and somehow parallel Sørensen’s critique of additive models from last week? **[The causal pluralism accusation is strongest when the causes are a laundry list with no thought to the mechanisms by which they generate their supposed effects. This is characteristic of additive models, since typically they have a black-box character to them – each “causes” lends a “push” to the outcome. But I don’t think it is necessarily the case that every instance where there are multiple causes of some phenomenon one has to assemble them in this manner.]** Let me try to clarify my point with a simple real-world example: An accident at night involves a bike without lights and a fast-driving car. In a trial, the question

of guilt will correspond to the question of causal primacy. What was causally more important: the fact that she didn't have her lights on (as the car driver would claim), or the fact that he drove too fast (as the bicyclist would claim)? Following Wright's et al. one would need to assess the distribution of causes in the population, i.e. look at the number of accidents involving driving without lights and number of accidents involving fast-driving in comparison to the total number of accidents. In this case it might well be possible to assess the concrete figures, let's suppose 20% for the first, 40% for the second case. The decision will therefore be: Partial liability, 1/3 on her side, 2/3 on his side. So in this special case, causal primacy can be established on the basis of concrete quantitative asymmetries. But - and that is how I understand Wright's et al. conclusion - even in this case (and more importantly in cases where the primacy claim cannot be established that clearly) causal primacy does not mean the disregard of other causal factors. We have to maintain a 'causal pluralism' that admits the joined influence of several causes; each one of which may be necessary but not sufficient. In our example, this is also the argument for partial liability. In sum, the efforts for establishing causal primacy are not only mostly unsuccessful but even mislead. The struggle between different advocates of specific causes should be replaced by the joint effort to sort out the *group of important causes* from the group of less important causes. **[There is, I think, no fundamental difference between partitioning a bunch of contributing causes into a set of more important and a set of less important than asking which among the set of more important is the most important. Of course, the answer may be that there is no "most important" cause because there are multiple necessary conditions for the outcome to occur. But I don't see a logical difference between these tasks.]** Yet, this seems as unlikely as the case where the bicyclist and the car driver come to state in court that they jointly caused the accident. **[Part of the problem in the case you cite – and in many others one can easily concoct – centers on the character of the thing being explained rather than proposed causes. There are a couple of issues in play here, in particular**

- 1. Are you explaining a specific event or a general type of event?**
- 2. Does the thing being explained come in degrees or is it all or nothing – it either happens or doesn't happen?**

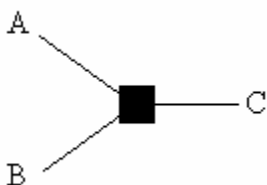
Now, the task of explaining a specific accident is different from explaining the probabilities of a type of accident occurring. And the task of explaining an on/off event may be different from explaining something that varies in intensity (like earnings or wealth). In the case of an individual accident, it is probably impossible to sort out whether for that accident the speeding car or the bike without lights was "more important". As you indicated for the type of event one might be able to give a distribution of the number of accidents that involve both of these conditions, only one or the other, or neither. But this wouldn't necessarily tell you much since you also need to know what percentage of the time people ride without lights and don't have accidents, etc. Anyway, probably one could make some claims about these probabilities.]

4. Mark Cooper

In terms the form of contextual asymmetry that the authors call interactive asymmetry, I am interested in an alternative formulation of interactive causation from that discussed in the

reading. The given example contrasts “fundamental causes” from “precipitating events.” I imagine a condition where there are two explanans (A&B) that are neither fundamental nor merely precipitating. In isolation from the other neither explanans would generate the explanandum (C,) nor would any alternative explanans necessary generate the explanandum.

[Does this just mean that these are each necessary but insufficient causes, but jointly sufficient? Under the description you have given I would describe these as of “equal” importance in the sense of both being equally necessary to the outcome. I don’t see where there is any asymmetry.] Does this example qualify as a case of causal asymmetry, or is it merely a more basic question as to the structure of causation? I suspect that it may not qualify under the criteria given on 129. If not, does this mean that the identification of explanans in causal asymmetries is somehow less important than revealing mechanisms?



The chapter notes that it may be difficult to conceptualize exactly when an explanans possesses a singular form and when it exists either as a bundle of aggregate units. (135) The authors’ suggestion that certain causes may be grouped in non-arbitrary ways seems to have its limitations though. While various types of alcohol cause drunkenness, a condition that seems to be a “natural kind,” (presumably in that they generate the same neuro-physical responses) it is conceivable that people behave differently, for social reasons, on one kind of alcohol than on another. If this is the case, it is unclear when the assembly of “natural kinds” is to take place. How can a kind of explanans reductionism be avoided without improperly assuming the coherence of the selected causal property? **[This is obviously a very tricky business – identifying precisely what constitutes a specific cause as opposed to a family of causal types. In your example there seems to be two kinds of causes operating – social norms and alcohol as a chemical – and there appears to be an interaction, so that behavioral effects are the result of the way norms shape either the way people biologically absorb alcohol (which would be one type of mechanism) or the way they behaviorally respond to the same biological state. The relative “importance” of norms and alcohol in this case would probably depend upon a fine-grained account of what precisely is being explained. What explains variations of behavior for a given quantity of booze? Norms are probably more important for this than any property of the alcohol itself. What explains why regardless of type of alcohol, drinking above a certain amount impairs driving? Probably not mainly norms but the physiological effects of the chemical.]**

5. Gocken Koscuner

Causal Primacy: Questions

- 1) The authors suggest that to validate claims about quantitative asymmetries, one must either establish the relative importance of different causes within an empirical distribution of causes or else devise a strategy for comparing the potencies of causes (p. 173). It seems to me that one criterion used in statistics to establish the relative importance of different causes is to assess the amount of variance explained by different variables (R^2). **Does the argument raised about distribution-dependent causal primacy and causal potency suggest that even though one particular variable may explain 60% of the variance that variable may not be primal due to distribution and potency issues? [I think that as long as the relative R^2 is understood as only indicating causal strength/importance relative to the distributional properties of both the independent and dependent variable, then there is nothing wrong with using this as a criterion for relative importance. Of course, the association is basically just an association – not a causal relation – unless you also specify the mechanisms involved. But if the “variables” are mechanism-based, and if there are good reasons to think that the causal process is additive, then a simple R^2 criterion might be OK. But note that if there are interactions, then linking R^2 to specific causal-variables becomes problematic.]**
- 2) The reading deals with meanings two kinds of asymmetry: quantitative and qualitative and their interconnection. The authors argue that sustainable causal primacy claims amount to assertions of one or another kind of quantitative asymmetry; claims for causal primacy that appeal to qualitative asymmetries either reduce to quantitative asymmetry claims or else are confused in ways that elude successful reconstruction (p 129). **What is the interconnection between quantitative and qualitative asymmetries? How are claims for causal primacy that appeal to qualitative asymmetries confused? [I think that they are confused – as far as I can tell – because the idea of “more” in “more important” is a quantitative evaluation, and therefore it must be the case that in some sense the apparent qualitative asymmetry is a quantitative one in disguise (if, that is, the causal primacy claim is to make sense). Qualitative asymmetries are things like saying that one cause imposes limits and another selects outcomes from within those limits. There is nothing wrong with the characterization of the relationship between the two causal processes. But in what sense are limits-causes necessarily “more important” than selection-causes? I think that specifying this in detail would have to make some kind of quantitative judgement.]**
- 3) While talking about dynamic and structural systematic causes the authors point out to a dynamic asymmetry between class and gender (p. 171). **The dynamic asymmetry between gender and class was not very clear to me, could we elaborate on this in class? [I am not sure that I really believe this any more, but the argument was this: the theory of class relations argues that there are properties of class relations that have the consequence of pushing the development of class structures along particular paths of development. That is: class relations → systematic dynamics of change. Theories of gender relations do not propose – at least at this point in the development of such theory – that gender relations systematically generate tendencies towards particular forms of change. Gender relations have all sorts of**

consequences, and these give gender great explanatory power, and of course contingently these figure in explanations of social change; but – the argument goes – there is nothing inherent in gender mechanisms as such to propel social change in any given direction. *If the claim that such internal dynamics are present in class relations (or more narrowly: in capitalist class relations), then we have a dynamic asymmetry between class and gender. The dynamic of class relations continually disrupt whatever reciprocal causal relations exist between class and gender. But as I said, I am not sure that I am as convinced of this as I once was.*]

6. Ana Cristina Collares.

For this week's interrogation, I would like to have a clarification about some parts of the text "Causal Asymmetries".

1) In previous texts, we discussed that reducing an explanation to the individual level is an operation at the level of the *explanation* of certain phenomena. In order to have a better explanation of something, we go to the individual level to find out about mechanisms. In the piece "causal asymmetries", it is stated that cause and explanation can be used interchangeably. If most of the explanations have to have causal nature, does it imply that every causal explanation is an explanation about mechanisms, and moreover, that every causal explanation have to take into account the micro level of analysis? **[Every causal explanation – I would argue -- must involve mechanisms. X causes Y means X brings out Y, and the explication of what that means must invoke mechanisms. One of the issues we struggled with last week was whether or not this necessarily meant that all mechanisms had to be "micro" – this is where we were talking about "final explanations." I am not sure if we need to resolve that here.]**

2) In the explanation about *Distribution-dependent Causal Primacy*, the fact that smoking is a more important frequency-dependent cause of lung cancer than exposure to plutonium means that it affects a higher portion of the population, being, therefore, a more prominent cause in terms of frequency. In this case, the *explananda* is the causes of the distribution of lung cancer in the population. But one has arrived to the conclusion that smoking contributes to the distribution of cancer through the process of seeing a correlation between exposure to smoking and the distribution of lung cancer. **[True, but the research also tries to eliminate the possibility that this is a spurious correlation through a variety of strategies: associated animal research experimentally exposes rats to various components of smoke to see if it is carcinogenic; statistical research on people tries to eliminate various potential correlates of smoking that might themselves be causes of cancer, etc. But, in the end, it is really only when the mechanism by which smoking leads to cancer is identified that one can be really confident that it is a real cause, not just a correlate.]**

Can't we say that it is extremely important, before getting to this conclusion, to go deeper in the mechanisms through which smoking causes lung cancer, even though this is not the main point we are trying to explain? **[You are absolutely right: one can affirm the importance of a cause**

before one knows the mechanisms at work – it is just that there is a greater probability that one is wrong in the claim.] For instance, have we not to look for counterfactuals and other situations, and ask ourselves first if the people who got cancer would have it even *if they were non-smokers*? Or yet, why a percentage of people who were exposed to smoking did not get cancer? These and other questions are also of great importance to understand the lung cancer distribution in a population. So, how can we say that smoking is an explanation that has primacy? Are we not exchanging here correlations by mechanisms (i.e. focusing in correlations instead of mechanisms)? **[The primacy claim that I made in the chapter is about its importance relative to plutonium. It was not an absolute primacy claim. For example, there is no claim that smoking is more important than genetic disposition. Since only 15% or so of heavy smokers get cancer, it could be the case that genetic disposition is the main determinant of cancer among smokers (but this may not be the case, of course – it could be how deeply people inhale or something like that).]**

3) In the example of the basket of fruit (p. 149), what is more important according to the authors is to explain how the actor chose a pear instead of other fruit, which is an explanation at the level of individual action. But the fact that the actor might have chosen a fruit outside of the basket is also a very important factor, because, then, the basket becomes a significant limit or constraint to the action that must be investigated. This conclusion leads to the one about Marxists, according to which what they want to account for when they try to explain limits for action are the “excluded” possibilities, and not the effective ones. **[I think that this shows is that claims about relative importance of a cause/explanation are very sensitive to precisely what one is trying to explain, and thus one cannot defend some sort of diffuse primacy, but only primacy with respect to some well-defined object of explanation.]** Are we going back to a Popperian-type explanation whereby we can never explain what is going on, but it is very useful to understand *why certain things did not happen*? **[Does Popper say that – that we can explain exclusions but not actual events? I thought Popper simply said that we can disconfirm a proposition but never prove it – the refutationist position. That is not the same as saying you can explain why certain thing don’t happen. But maybe somewhere else Popper makes that claim.]**

7. Dan Warshawsky

This week’s reading is a logical follow up to last week’s discussions on mechanisms. If an explanation consists of causal mechanisms, we need to analyze the importance and potency of each mechanism. Additionally, what types of contingencies and reservations must we confront as we identify mechanisms in our explanations?

In Andrew Levine, Elliot Sober, and Erik Wright’s “Causal Asymmetries,” the authors describe how various quantitative and qualitative asymmetries should be utilized in sociological inquiry.

We shall argue that sustainable causal primacy claims amount to assertions of one or another kind of quantitative asymmetry; claims for causal primacy that appeal to qualitative asymmetry; claims for casual primacy that appeal to qualitative asymmetries either reduce to quantitative asymmetry claims or else are confused in ways that elude successful reconstruction. (129)

More specifically, the authors grapple with distribution-dependent causal primacy and casual potency. The former being more concerned with the importance of a cause versus the latter's being more focused on the power of the cause. Additionally, they detail the four qualitative asymmetries (contextual asymmetry, functional asymmetry, temporal asymmetry, and dynamic asymmetry) along the two main dimensions [systemic versus contingent and synchronic (several causes simultaneously) versus diachronic (temporal ordering of causes)].

These asymmetries are thoroughly analyzed in a clear and concise manner. The most important lingering question for me is the distinction between causal 'importance' and causal 'power.' Is causal 'importance' a more important methodological issue than causal 'power?' (distribution-dependent causal primacy versus causal potency)

I don't think there is anyone in the classroom that can deny the relevance of this question. The authors acknowledge the difficulty of approaching a 'consensus' as to the 'important' or 'potent' cause, and they are right to grapple with it. There is the chance that one could 'fall off the epistemological cliff' and claim that choosing which is more important or more potent is impossible. I do not argue with that position; rather, I think it is necessary to take a position as to which is probably the most 'important' or 'potent' cause. Attaching your own personal doubts about your assurances about its certainty as the most 'important' and 'cause' is critical as well. Thus, I believe that researchers should take a position as to 'importance' and 'potency' while acknowledging the epistemological problems of subjectivity and positionality. I'm not sure if this is a critical realist perspective or not, but I think it is workable within the current academic framework. (This discussion is ultimately about the role of relativity).

The authors' discussion of Marxism as it relates to causal asymmetries highlights some of the more interesting working problems. Some have used Marxism as an 'all-important' and 'all-potent' tool to study society. Levine, Sober, and Wright are quick to point out that this is a cataclysmic mistake in methodology and scholarship. Marxist analysis is good at showing capitalist inequalities especially as they relate to class, but it does not take the place of gender or race critical analysis.

Societies are understood to contain a variety of irreducibly distinct causal mechanisms. While there are asymmetries among causes, including asymmetries that justify causal primacy claims, there is no principle that warrants the conclusion that class considerations always comprise the primary determinants of social phenomena." (174)

My only question regarding the authors' discussion of Marxism as it relates to causal 'importance' and 'potency' is the distinction between the abstract and actual empirical analyses.

Although we agree that Marxist analyses of class should not be viewed as supreme in terms of distribution-dependent causal primacy or causal potency, how easy is it to position Marxist analysis side by side with other modes of critical scholarship? For example, how easy is it to study income inequality using a Marxist analysis, while also incorporating critical gender and race studies, among others? Is the purpose of Marxist analysis to include these other lenses, or is it to study class well? **[I would not describe gender and race simply as “lenses” – that is, as ways of looking at things. Gender and race are concepts that attempt to identify real mechanisms in the world that generate real effects. To the extent that these mechanisms interact with class in various ways, the Marxism will (or at least: should) have something to say about them. Marxism is a theory about class mechanisms and how these work in the world, and one of the way class mechanisms work is through their interactions with nonclass mechanisms of various sorts, so this is something Marxists should study and try to understand. But Marxism does not have anything specifically *Marxist* to say about gender mechanisms as such, in my judgment.]**

Thus, I have two main questions this week. First, what is the role of relativity, if at all, with concepts of distribution-dependent causal primacy and causal potency? **[What do you mean by “relativity”? I’m not sure I understand the question.]** Secondly, even though we have acknowledged that causal pervasiveness of class, not global primacy should be emphasized when doing Marxist analysis, how embedded with other critical critiques (e.g. gender and race) does Marxist scholarship need to be?

8. Brett Burkhardt

What role can counterfactuals play in assessing the importance of a cause in a historical sequence?

In discussing temporal asymmetry, Levine, Sober, and Wright deny claims that earlier causes in a chain of events are necessarily more important than later causes. It is quite possible, they note, that these later causes have more causal potency than earlier causes. Whether an earlier cause has causal primacy in an explanation can be answered by investigating specific causes in particular cases (or types of cases?), not simply by noting the temporal ordering of events.

Levine, Sober, and Wright state that by considering counterfactual trajectories of events, we can avoid the temptation to assign early causes causal primacy. If counterfactuals can help us avoid this temptation, can they also help us assess the importance of a cause in a historical sequence of events? **[One use of counterfactual is to investigate path-dependency in historical explanations. Where there is strong path dependency, then the causes which determine the path-taken have considerable impact on subsequent processes (this is precisely what path-dependency means. Counterfactuals can be helpful in refuting path-dependency claims. Jimmy Carter, for example, claimed in an interview that he felt the American Revolution was unnecessary and probably not as important as Americans like to**

think in terms of explaining American society, economy and democracy today. He argued that if George III had been more reasonable, the colonists would not have revolted, we would have stayed a British Colony, and then gradually in the first few decades of the 19th century would have become effectively independent and rather like the country we became. He stressed that Australia and Canada are not really dramatically different from the US, and the differences that exist are not because they did not have a revolution. The counterfactual helps to make an argument about nonpathdependency in this case]

I think this would depend on how we set up our counterfactual situation. We could take a historical-comparative approach and compare one case with both analogous cases and near-analogous cases. In the former, all relevant causes are present and outcome X occurs; in the latter all relevant causes are present except the cause in question, and outcome X does not occur. In this way we can determine whether the cause is really necessary for a particular outcome X. This might be termed an inductive approach to a counterfactual because the basis of comparison is other empirical cases. **[The fact that it is empirical does not make it “inductive”: presumably you set up the comparisons in the spirit of a simulated experiment or quasi-experiment, and this implies that you are testing hypotheses about causes by marshalling evidence in favor of one or another. That is more of a deductive strategy.]** This may be stretching the proper usage of the term counterfactual though. **[Counterfactuals can be historical and empirical – as in the example of Australia and Canada used by Carter. Of course, if you have an explicit formalized model of a process you can concoct purely theoretical counterfactuals by manipulating parameters in the model.]**

If by counterfactual we mean simply an imagined alternative situation which is not based on other cases, then we have less of a basis for assessing the importance of a cause in a historical sequence. We could create this counterfactual: “X₂ was present and led to X₃; however, if, instead of X₂ being present, Y₂ was present, then X₃ would not have occurred.” What could this assumption be based on if not similar empirical cases (as mentioned earlier)? It might be possible to assume preferences or beliefs of actors, on which the outcome of the counterfactual would depend. But I think this approach provides less certainty in assessing the importance of a cause than we can achieve when comparing similar empirical cases.

9. Elizabeth Holzer

I'd like to pick up on the critique of Orloff and Skocpol and explore a bit further the implications of this discussion for structural theories.

Orloff and Skocpol (1984) challenge the structural Marxist explanation of the emergence of the welfare state with empirical evidence of from the British and US cases (er, and Canada too according to Levine et al.—clearly they read the article more carefully than I did). I recall the argument as follows: Great Britain developed social insurance policies—key elements of welfare

state—before the US. But Britain did not have (1) a steadily more developed labor movement; or (2) a more industrialized economy. Therefore neither (1) a more developed labor movement nor (2) a more industrialized economy **caused Britain to develop social insurance.** **[The more precise statement is: explains why Britain developed the welfare state *earlier* than the US. The explanandum is not, I think, explaining the creation welfare state, but rather explaining the specific timing of the development of the welfare state.]** (The details of the rest are a bit fuzzy for me, but I'll look it up before I come to class if this sounds a bit off.) The US and Britain did differ in institutional characteristics of the state: Britain's civil service, which pushed for the creation of social insurance, was professionalized rather than given to patronage politics like the US version. It was professionalized because it developed before the state was fully democratized (early democratization brought on patronage politics). Ergo, institutional-historical characteristics of the state are the causal factors in explaining variation in the **[timing of the]** emergence of social insurance in the Britain and the US. Social insurance policies are key elements of the early welfare state, therefore these causal factors explain variation in the emergence of the early welfare state.

Levine et al. say that this empirical evidence cannot properly be used to test the accuracy of the structural Marxist theory. They generalize their argument as follows:

“whenever one makes an argument about structural limits on some social process, it will be true that the more fine-grained the form of variation is that one is trying to explain within the process, the more likely it is that relatively contingent factors will play an important explanatory role” (Levine et al. p.151, fn. 30).

This to me implies that structural explanations only need to pass the empirical test when the evidence that is used in the test is *broad* variation. If structural explanations don't need to stand against the same empirical evidence as institutional explanations like Orloff and Skocpol's (I don't think Orloff and Skocpol intended to give considerable causal weight to *contingent* factors—theirs is an institutionalist explanation), this implies that we can't adjudicate between institutional explanations and structural explanations. **[A couple of comments: 1) Skocpol & Orloff emphasize the importance of Civil War pensions in generating the hyper-patronage corrupt US state which delayed the emergence of professionalized bureaucracy, and in this sense the argument hinges on a contingent event – the Civil war. 2) One can compare structural and institutional explanations so long as they are trying to explain the same things, which sometimes they are. But often apparent disagreements really reflect shifts in the explanandum. Explaining the specific sequence of timing of the emergence of a welfare state in a number of countries is different from explaining why the welfare state eventually was constructed in all of them.]** What's the deal?

An unrelated little question (from p.129, fn 2): if a researcher rejects the claim that class has causal primacy how can he be classified as a “Marxist” researcher (and why would he want to be)? **[All that I am suggested be rejected is universal class primacy claims, not class primacy for particular explanatory problems. Of course it is arbitrary, ultimately, where one wants to draw the legitimate boundaries for the use of the term “Marxist”. In some views one must accept strong historical materialism – which comes close to a pretty universal primacy argument – to justify an analysis as “Marxist.” I prefer a looser**

designation, centering on a menu of concepts, a broad normative and critical stance (anticapitalist, socialist egalitarianism), and a claim about causal importance, but not primacy, of class for understanding capitalism and the possibilities of socialism.]

10. Eva Williams

Main Question:

Q: Does the difficulty with causal primacy ultimately stem from a macro level point of analysis? In other words, does the issue clear up or go away the closer we get to the individual unit of analysis? If we stay at a more macro level, must one speak in terms of ranges of causes contingent on variations in environment and conditions? **[I am not sure about this, but I think the causal primacy issue is just as much of a problem when we move to the micro-level. There can still be many causal mechanisms operating at the micro-level in some process, and the outcomes can be complicated results of the interactions of these causes thus making it difficult to assign relative weights to them.]**

Dynamic-systemic Causes vs. Contingent Causes

[This week, in order to make sense of these constructs I'll try to relate this to my own field.]

Does a change in environment (precipitating event) lead to a decline in cognitive functioning of older adults? Alternatively, a decline in cognitive functioning, could also be understood as necessitating (for many) the need for a change in environment. Clearly there are neuro-physiological explanations for the cognitive decline of some older people. In some cases, for example the cognitive decline is caused by factors such as nutrition, hydration, and/or blood pressure and, once treated in a more supportive setting or with routine in-home support is effectively reversed. On the other hand, some forms of cognitive decline, those associated with Alzheimer's related dementia seem to be hastened by any change in familiar surroundings. This is thought to be related to a more permanent loss in short term memory that does not impact on long standing routines within a familiar setting. Since a change in environment alone does not explain a decline in cognitive functioning, this would therefore lead to the conclusion that a functional asymmetry exists.

Cognitive decline → improved healthcare → return to baseline

OR

Cognitive decline → Change in environment → Cognitive decline

So which would be primary in explaining the cause of the cognitive decline? **[I think this is basically the distribution-based quantitative primacy issue. In a population of people with cognitive decline, some are suffering from Alzheimers and some from (say) poor nutrition.**

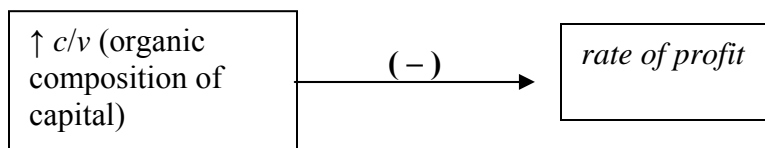
The question, “which of these is more important in explaining cognitive decline?” means “within the empirical distribution of causes, which type of cause occurs more frequently.”]

The underlying neuro-physiological mechanisms would be seem to be understood as primary and they are either helped by a change in environment or worsened by the introduction of strange surroundings. **[I assume that the neuro-psychological mechanisms are quite different when the cognitive decline reflects Alzheimers rather than poor nutrition. What we have – I imagine – are a range of neurological mechanisms which interact with the environment in different ways. What this might mean is that for some forms of cognitive decline, the environment is primary in the sense that variation in environment explains variation in the neuropsychological mechanisms, whereas for other forms of decline the environment is of only marginal importance (eg in Jacob-Crotzfelt disease).]** I feel like this takes us once again to the issue of methodological individualism and the issue of mechanisms. If I try to think about cognitive decline in a broad way, I ignore the variations in etiology. Only when we specify what type or specific neuro-physiological form of cognitive decline is underway for the individual, can we understand the relationship between surroundings and an improvement or worsening effect of these changes. Does this hold true for other questions?

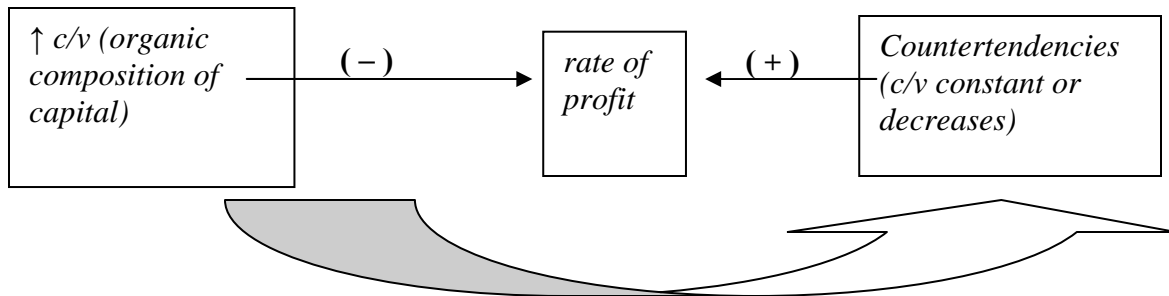
11 Matías D. Scaglione

Tendencies, counter-tendencies and dynamic asymmetry

Wright, Levine and Sober (WLS) illustrate their distinction of “dynamic-systemic causes” and “contingent causes” through an account of Marx’s “law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall” (dynamic-systemic cause) and Marx’s “prophesy” that the popular masses would overthrow capitalism before it reached its natural systemic collapse (contingent cause) (WLS, 166-7). In his account of the tendency of the general rate of profit to fall (TRPF) Marx also identified *countertendencies*, which “cross and annul the effect of the general law” (Capital III, Ch. 15). **Although Marx believed that the TRPF would eventually prevail. [This part of Marx’s claim is crucial, for it means that “countertendencies” are not tendencies in the same sense as the primary tendency. There is some sense in which they are inherently weaker or more contingent, or they occur with lower probabilities, or something like that.]** I think it is worth including the countertendencies in WLS’s epistemology in order to assess its capacity to address such kind of explanation. WLS explanation of Marx’s law of the TRPF could be *very roughly* summarized as follows:



However, I think that Marx’s law of the TRPF could be better although *very roughly* summarized in the following diagram.



Marx identifies six “most general” countertendencies (“increasing intensity of exploitation”, “depression of wages below the value of labour-power”, “cheapening of elements of constant capital”, “relative over-population”, “foreign trade”, and “the increase of stock capital”). The big arrow represents Marx’s thesis that “the same influences which produce a tendency in the general rate of profit to fall, also call forth counter-effects, which hamper, retard, and partly paralyse this fall” (Capital III, Ch. 15).

Although this is not the place to discuss the TRPF thoroughly, I would like to know if it is possible to introduce explanations with *tendencies and countertendencies* in WLS’s epistemology, particularly if we assume that the countertendencies *can* “deactivate” the underlying mechanic tendency endogenously. **[I have no problem with a system of causes in which some processes are seen as counteracting or neutralizing others. The interesting thing in Marx’s case is that he insists – as the quote suggests – that these countertendencies only “hamper, retard and partly paralyze this fall”. They cannot completely paralyze the fall or permanently reverse the fall. What is at stake is the long term speed of decline, but not the basic trajectory of decline. This implies that the countertendencies are inherently weaker. This is a kind of causal important claim: the causes linked to the tendency are more potent than the causes linked to the countertendencies. Why this is so is not especially clear, I think.]**

12 Matt Dimick

Could we discuss some of the issues associated with causal primacy and temporal asymmetry? I am not sure what the ultimate verdict was regarding claims for causal primacy arising from temporally asymmetric causes. Levine, Sober, and Wright (LSW) say, “In some historical explanations it may be plausible to assign causal primacy to causes that can be identified as ‘origins’ of some subsequent trajectory” (p. 162). Such an explanation is plausible in explaining the origins of “limitation-cause” type (as distinct from “selection-cause” type) institutions where one is trying to explain the exclusion of certain possible historical trajectories. Another plausible case is when one is trying to explain “getting on the path” in certain path-dependent historical trajectories, particularly (in the extreme case) where “there is a single path to some result” (p. 162). But LSW also state that “temporal asymmetry arguments, even when they refer to singular causal chains, *do not* imply that the *origins* of trajectories are more important than the causes that follow them” (p. 163, emphasis added). This sounds like “origins”-type explanations have at least a kind of primacy only when one is not concerned with the causes that follow the origins of the trajectory (e.g, excluded possibilities or just “getting on the path” explanations). Whenever

one needs to invoke additional causes to explain more contemporary, particular outcomes, then a causal primacy claim is not justified. **[This illustrates, I think, the general rule I have been advocating, that causal primacy claims always require quite precise specification of the explanandum. If, in an historical trajectory, “one is not concerned with the causes that follow the origins of the trajectory” than doesn't this just mean that the explanandum is the origins of the trajectory? If that is the explanandum, than origins explanations are necessarily “primary”, because that is what one is explaining. Am I missing something here?]**

I was also unsure about the conclusion because the subsequent (in the LSW chapter) “revolution occurrence” examples didn't seem to implicate the kind of “singular causal chains” I thought were implicated. In the revolution examples, are all five examples “singular causal chains” because in each scenario the revolutionary outcome is certain (all end up with probability 1) not because each cause leading up to the revolution is related to a prior cause? **[The revolution actually happens and we are trying to explain it. In a trivial sense the revolution occurred with probability 1, because it occurred. But the probability could have been close to zero immediately before the revolution and it was only because of a wild concatenation of improbable contingencies that the revolution actually occurred. This doesn't seem likely empirically, but it could be the case. The causal primacy issue in these cases attempts to identify the processes that increase the likelihood that the event, which actually did occur, would occur.]** The examples then show that the temporal ordering may not matter for which cause was actually more important or stronger. The “decisive” causes could come later or sooner (or none may be decisive). When I think of a causal chain I think of, inter alia, a case of $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$, with each cause being necessary and sufficient for the next. If I understand the issues correctly, however, to the extent that A has any kind of primacy even in this case, it would be by virtue of its potency and not its temporal ordering (as the discussion on pp. 161-62 I believe demonstrates). **[In a completely deterministic sequence in which it is literally the case that $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$, then the problems we discuss I think fall away. In historical explanations, however, there are contingencies that occur and which can block or neutralize outcomes. This is why I asked the question, how do certain causes at Time 1 affect the probability of a revolution at, say, T5. It is the events or structural changes that raise this probability the most that can be taken to be the most important causes. These could be entirely accidental, contingent proximate causes, or they could be deeper structural ones.]**

13. Matt Nichter

1. On page 133, WL&S bracket the issue of explanatory primacy in favor of a focus on causal primacy. What is the relationship between explanatory primacy and causal primacy? **[Since I now identify explanation with causal explanation, I am not sure what the difference would be....]**

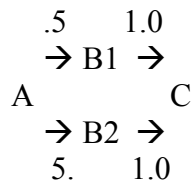
2. I agree with the judgment that the debate between ‘state-centered’ and Marxist theories of welfare state development has suffered from ambiguity in the specification of explananda. However, WL&S seem to jump from the claim that a) there is no general answer to the question ‘are limits or selections more causally important?’ to the claim that b) no sense can be made of

the notion that limits are more causally important than selections when both types of causes are operative (unless the primacy claim is recast as a quantitative causal primacy claim). What exactly is the argument for b)? Is it simply that qualitatively different causes are incommensurable unless quantifiable? **[I think the problem is with the word “more”: to say something is more than something else is a quantitative judgement, at least in an ordinal sense – something is above and something else below. The underlying quantitative dimension could, of course, be something like moral salience – one could say this cause is more important morally than that cause. But if it is more important explanatorily, then doesn’t this mean that in some sense or other it has a bigger impact, makes a bigger difference, or something like that?]**

3. In the following two scenarios, is there any sense to the idea that ‘deep’ cause A has (qualitative) causal primacy over proximate cause(s) B in bringing about C?

Scenario 1:

A occurs; A is necessary for both B1 and for B2; A is sufficient for (B1 or B2).
 B1 and B2 are each sufficient for C; (B1 or B2) is necessary for C.

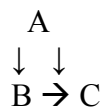


[numbers are probabilities that event to left of arrow will cause event to right of arrow]

This is a slight variation on the case discussed on p. 161 footnote 44, with the twist that there are multiple possible intermediate steps. The intuition is that the more B-type routes from A to C, the less “important” the particular route taken; a causal explanation that cites the specific B route taken is likely to suffer from misplaced concreteness. I suspect WL&S would argue that I am confusing causal and explanatory primacy. **[In this example A is still the necessary and sufficient condition for C even though it accomplishes this through two possible routes. Since those routes themselves are fully determined by A, then it seems to me that A would have primacy.]**

Scenario 2:

A occurs; A is sufficient for B.
 B causes C when caused by A, but not otherwise



In this scenario, unlike Brenner's argument (which I agree is best understood as a claim about distribution-dependent primacy), it is not obvious that the "arrows could be switched without indicating any changes in how these causes work," since A causes B but not vice versa. **[This is a nicely awkward case: it would be good to have an example. Since in this case you can have B but no C, but you can never have A but no C, it seems that A has clear primacy.]**

4. Finally, I'm not entirely convinced that the World War I –type cases are best elucidated in terms of the relative causal potencies of the background conditions and "trigger." If the background conditions are highly potent but the trigger happened to be an event with a very high potency (perhaps even higher than the background condition), my intuition is that the background conditions still constitute the "more important" cause. Given the high potency of the background conditions and the multiplicity of possible triggers, the unusually high potency of the actual trigger is just irrelevant overkill. If I leave the gas on in my house for a month, whether I light a cigarette or a bonfire in my kitchen, it seems that leaving the gas on was in some sense a more important cause of my house burning down as a result. (Again I suspect that WL&S would say this is to confuse explanatory and causal primacy.) **[Good clarification: if the background conditions raised the probability of war to 80% and then some very potent trigger occurs that, counterfactually, would have raised a prior probability of 10% to 100% (and thus has, so to speak 90% potency), it still seems strange to say that the trigger is "more important" given that the background condition was already in place. Still, in your bonfire example: the bonfire would have burned the house down even in the absence of the gas, but the gas would not have burned the house down in the absence of fire – and some contingent event (like a window breaking and letting out the gas) could have diffused the "potent cause".]**

The account WL&S give of background conditions and triggers depends on our ability to assign causal potency values to a background condition with respect to a final (explanandum) event, even when that background condition *cannot* bring about that final event without the occurrence of a suitable trigger. How are such assignments made without knowledge of all the possible triggers, their respective probabilities of occurring given the background condition, and their causal potencies with respect to the final event given the background condition? **[I think the weights assigned to triggers and background conditions must also have to do with the probabilities of the triggers occurs. If triggers are very rare then this would lower the probability impact of the background condition. The claim that background conditions raise the probability of war from 10% to 90% must mean that there is a pretty good chance of a trigger occurring, for otherwise the probability wouldn't be 90%.]**

Martín Santos

Evaluating the causal potency of different causes explaining (the conditional probability of) processual-relational phenomena

Levine, Sober and Wright make the case that it is really hard, in fact almost impossible, to argue *in general* the causal primacy of a factor (for instance, class over gender) based on *qualitative asymmetries* (contextual, functional, temporal and dynamic). They do acknowledge, however, the possibility of assessing causal primacy claims based on *quantitative asymmetries* (distribution-dependent, causal potency), provided that, a proper way of making comparable the units in which causes are calibrated, has been found.

I contend that *sometimes*, even in the case of *quantitative asymmetries*, is almost impossible to assess the *causal primacy* of competing causes. I will present, as an example, the debate about the existence and pervasiveness of racism in some Latin American countries. There is a general agreement about the complexity of the “racial” categories by which people classify themselves and classify others. Thus, it is a well known fact that in Latin America (the same) people can be perceived (and treated) as “blancos” (whites) in some contexts, as “mestizos” or “cholos” (categories referring to “mixed people”) in other occasions, and even as “indios” (rural origin) in some other contexts. These categories have positive and negative (despective) meanings depending, again, on the context at play. To determine if there is racism, a notion of “race” should exist in these societies. Research shows that the above mentioned “racial categories” are constructed based upon a complex set of criteria that interact with each other in different ways depending on the context: the skin color, physical characteristics more or less associated with the “European” type, the level of education of the person discriminating and the person being an object of discrimination, the command of the language (Spanish) and the ability to produce complex discourses, the amount of money the person has, among others. Researchers supporting the existence of racism state that it doesn’t matter if the notion of “race” has been constructed based upon this complexity. As long as “racism” expresses an ideology assuming the superiority of some “races” over other inferior “races, racism exist. Those (I include myself in this group) stating that in Latin America we do NOT have “racism”, but a complex *hybrid discriminatory pattern*, argue that within this complex pattern, race is only sporadically the primary factor for this discrimination to take place; rather, we argue that the level of education, power and prestige the person has, is the crucial determinant of his/her *socio-cultural* color, and hence, of his/her *probabilities* of being discriminated or of discriminating other people. **[That was a terrific explication of the core issues in the construction of the cultural meanings of discriminatory attributions. I will hold comments until I’ve read further.]**

What factor does have more causal potency in explaining discriminatory practices in Latin America? Race or education? Race or class? How to assess this? I consider that some issues make even harder to provide a “definite” answer to this question:

- a) “Shift in the explananda”. In fact, “racism-defenders” scholars want to explain the existence of “racism” (as they understand the phenomena). “Complex discriminatory patterns” advocates, want to explain *this pattern*, not racism.
- b) But the let’s assume that even the latter accept the possibility of “racism” (discrimination based on “race”). The issue is that “race” (as the set of biological characteristics socially assigned to people in society) is profoundly intertwined with education, money, language, type of work performed, etc. The discussion on the differential causal potency of causes assumes that is possible to “disentangle” and distinguish one cause from another one. The historical particularity of Latin American societies (unlike the USA, South Africa or

European societies) is that such a separation of “causal” factors is extremely difficult when talking about “race” and “racism”. Then, is it possible to adjudicate between different explanations (racism vs “complex discriminatory pattern”) that posit different causal weight in factors difficult to separate from each other? Any suggestions?

[I have a couple of thoughts on this complex set of issues:

1. The issue you are raising is not quite one about causal primacy in the straightforward sense, but about what might be termed something like “cultural primacy”. That is, what you are describing are cultural-complexes – complexes of meaning systems – within which there are a variety of interacting components, and what you are trying to do is establish how the parts of this complex fit together to make the whole, how the meaning-complex works. This is very similar to an approach to the problem of analyzing ideologies proposed by Chantal Mouffe in her analysis of Gramsci. She argues that different class ideologies differ in how the elements of ideology are “articulated” to each other, and that what makes bourgeois ideology “hegemonic” is the fact that it has successfully absorbed certain anticapitalist elements and “rearticulated” them within a new “matrix of ideology”. The meaning of each element comes from this overall matrix (i.e. the total set of “articulations”) and thus the meaning of the apparent anticapitalist element is changed by its insertion. An example would be the ideological element “democracy” which is profoundly (potentially) anticapitalist in its deeper meaning and was historically rooted in popular struggles against elites, ruling classes. When democracy gets absorbed into bourgeois ideology it is transformed and assumes new meanings. What does this have to do with your argument about racism? The ideological configuration of bourgeois ideology contains many elements – freedom, democracy, private property, individualism, the market, the rule of law, etc. The actual meaning system that matters – the meanings that shape behavior, choices, strategies of actors -- comes from the interconnections among these elements rather than from any one of them. Mouffe then argues that this configuration can still be described as having a class logic because the principle of articulation is class based. This justifies calling one configuration “bourgeois ideology” and another “working class ideology”. The class logic, however, is not identified with any specific element, but with the principle that articulates them.

This could be carried over to your case: A “racial ideology” is one in which the articulation principle of the various elements of an ideology can be understood as having a racial-logic, a basis in race-grounded interests. Race could be an element of a nonracial ideology so long as the articulating principle wasn’t itself racial. “Racism” then might be defined as an ideology in which race is the articulating principles in the configuration, not simply an element.

2. Another way of framing the problem you are addressing is that the process of constructing discriminatory cultural forms is deeply interactive rather than additive. In interactive models it is generally impossible to sort out relative importance.]