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## Symposium:

Author-Meets-Critic: James Mahoney,  
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# Applying A New Approach to Knowing the Social World

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“[M]ainstream social science methods depend on the assumed truth of essentialism.” (Mahoney 2021, 5)

**T**he *Logic of Social Sciences* is a tour de force. The book and its author are advocating for revolution—a revolution in the social sciences. I admire the author greatly for writing it.

I am also rather overwhelmed by this book. The need to *un-learn* how we undertake research and think about

causality in the social sciences, in order to *learn* it all once more, is daunting. Indeed, the book sets out myriad tasks for us as potential teachers and practitioners of the kind of social sciences it promotes. At times I wondered if the book was more aspirational than applicable.

In this intervention, I consider what we must do to put into action the kind of social science that this book promotes. I consider the central arguments of the text

before turning to some of its implications when it comes to the practicalities of teaching the book in a graduate seminar. I consider, as well, what an application of this kind of work involves for research and publication. I find the book's content to be provocative and worthy of and—indeed—necessary for debate. Yet, I ultimately wonder whom the book's disciples will be—who will assume the difficult task of utilizing the approach in their work, blazing the trail for others to follow.

The premises of this book are twofold. First, to fully grasp the way the world works, we must let go of our essentialist biases. As social scientists we have been taught to view the things we care about (political parties, peace, the U.S. Congress, democracy) as entities that “possess inner essences” (Mahoney 2021, 1), which allow us to confer properties of action onto them and infer relationships of causality. This understanding of the world is incorrect. The events, entities, and activities we study do not exist independently of us. They are, instead, products of the “collective understandings among communities of individuals located in particular places and times” (Mahoney 2021, 2). To treat them as independent of our minds is to essentialize them erroneously and deny the (inter-)subjective nature through which we came to see them as important to begin with.

Second, in shedding or unlearning one approach to the social sciences, the book advocates for another: that of scientific constructivism. The scientific-constructivist approach is committed to the pursuit of scientific-based truths while taking into account the mind-dependent nature of the things we study. The book argues that we avoid essentialism by seeing what we research as belonging to categories that we actively construct in our minds and then (re-)calibrate in response to how our shared understanding evolves. To this end, the use of set-theoretic analysis is appropriate. It forces us to make our understanding of the things we study more transparent, since we must be explicit about the categories we create. It also involves defining the logic and importance of any given causal relationship, as well as the sequence of events connecting the causal event to the outcome of interest.

In all, to be better social scientists—that is, to accurately pursue causal truths about the world around us—we must re-think how we do social science. We must re-evaluate the ontological and epistemological orientations that have traditionally guided our work (at least amongst more positivist scholars). We must resist the temptation to view the world we wish to understand as being fully independent from how we perceive that world in our mind. “The reality as we experience it is

upheld by mostly unconscious collective understandings that strike us as brute facts about an objectively and independently existing reality” (Mahoney 2021, 18).

This overly brief and necessarily pared down rendering of the principal arguments will be intuitive to some. The book's message is elegant, convincing, and draws upon premises that will be familiar to all. Nevertheless, the book points us down an unfamiliar and potentially paradigm-shifting path—at least for those of us who do positivist work. And, while I feel strongly that all social scientists must read this book, I also question to whom this book is oriented. Who will follow Mahoney's lead and see and study the world as it really is?

In my case, I vacillated between vigorously nodding as I read the book's pages and feeling overwhelmed by my incapacity to escape my own essentialist biases. For example, the notion that the things we study as social scientists are dependent upon us for their existence is not always intuitive, although it can be. It is not a stretch to acknowledge that concepts like “peace” and “democracy” are constructed inter-subjectively. Peace means different things to different people (Firchow 2018), as does democracy. We struggle to offer universal definitions of both, because our understanding of each is deeply contextual.

Nevertheless, other entities—a political party or a piece of legislation or the US Congress—feel more tangible and therefore amenable to “objective” analysis. A law is a law. The 116<sup>th</sup> US Congress enacted 344 of them.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, no two political parties are the same. And the US Congress can be thought of, at any given time, as a legislative power, a group of lawmakers, or a polarized (or democratic or imperfect) institution. In other words, it can fit into multiple categories. Consequently, the US Congress—as with all things we study in the social sciences—is called, by Mahoney and others, a *human kind*, or an entity that lacks intrinsic properties and dispositions because it is ontologically dependent upon us for its existence. Human kinds are mind-dependent. (*Natural kinds*, by contrast, are ontologically prior to human beings and their cognitions. They are mind-independent (see e.g., 2021, 14-18.) Without human beings, the U.S. Congress, as a political entity, would not exist.

The social sciences, ultimately, embody the study of human kinds. The book asserts that a rigorous approach to studying human kinds demands that we acknowledge that the entities we care about are constructions. A law is only a law once we acknowledge that our understanding of it—e.g., laws shape human behaviors; laws are made to be broken; laws only protect the wealthy/white/male—is shaped heavily by our interaction with the world.

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1 (GovTrack n.d.)

The book is also, as the author tells us early on, “committed to science as a mode of discovering truths about the world” (Mahoney 2021, 2). This statement gave me pause. Can one advocate for constructivism, or the study of the mind-dependent nature of social science categories, and also believe that there are “truths” of any kind out in the world? I understand the book to mean that the pursuit of science is one of evaluating the approximate truths of our propositions. I understand, as well, that “approximate truths,” as used in the book, is not a new term. Nevertheless, the term “truth,” even when used to refer to *logical* truths, seems to edify or essentialize a set-theoretic relationship, even one that is semantically or contextually bound, in ways that seem to contradict the spirit of scientific constructivism.

Indeed, the book refers to truth-preserving methodologies with a skepticism that is based precisely on our inability to preserve truths. Social science modes of data analysis, it tells us, use “partial generalizations to reach uncertain conclusions” (Mahoney 2021, 69). Are we uncovering truths about the world or positing possible causal paths?

These (not so?) minor distinctions are salient for me as a potential teacher and practitioner of this kind of approach to our work. Indeed, key questions I ask upon reading *any* new methods text are: Can I teach this? How can I teach this? To answer these questions, I feel I need a deeper understanding of the implications of this book.

For example, the book is clear in its assertion that we need to re-think how we teach the social sciences. We need to teach students how to recognize the multiple layers of human kinds that help to constitute the (mind-dependent) phenomena we study. We need to rethink measurement and conceptualization so as not to fall trap to the property-possession assumption, or the belief that the instances of a category possess shared essential properties (Mahoney 2021, 323). *Unlearning* is the first step in understanding this new approach to the social sciences:

Letting go of essentialism involves letting go of both human intuitions and longstanding approaches to social research. (Mahoney 2021, 5)

So, how do we do this? As a starting point, we should assign this text and some accompanying bibliography either in a methods course or in a philosophy of science course for those graduate programs that have them. Even if we leave aside how to utilize scientific-constructivism in a research setting, this book will be valuable for putting into relief the mainstream approaches to knowledge accumulation in the social sciences. What epistemological and ontological assumptions underpin conventional causal work? Why are these assumptions problematic?

How does the scientific-constructivist approach render these assumptions obsolete? I can imagine taking a classic text and unpacking the essentialist assumptions that underpin its arguments. Students could then evaluate those arguments from a scientific-constructivist perspective. By juxtaposing conventional with scientific-constructivist models of causality, students could better understand and apply both to their own work.

Nevertheless, the skeptical, rather cynical, and completely exhausted professor in me still has doubts. For one, most professors will be as new to this approach as students. We will be just as susceptible to, if not *more* susceptible to, the essentialist bias(es) that we must unlearn to truly take the scientific-constructivist approach seriously. How do we thoughtfully address students’ questions about a new paradigm when most of us sit firmly in the current/dominant one?

Additionally, once we (teach our students to) unlearn, what happens to the wealth of knowledge already accumulated via other approaches? The book tells us that the most commonly used type of causality—the counterfactual model—relies on the assumption that “variables and units of analysis stand in an approximate one-to-one correspondence with entities in the natural world” (Mahoney 2021, 94). This assumption is not met, however, when we study human kinds. As such, the conventional approach to causality, as used by social scientists for decades, is inappropriate.

What do we do, then, with the extensive literature that relies on inappropriate causal logics to draw conclusions? Will we need to re-examine those causal relationships, or are we simply re-thinking how those relationships are uncovered? For example, should we re-consider the finding that democracies tend not to go to war with each other, because most studies utilize a counterfactual logic to draw the inference? Or are we simply re-stating the relationship to accommodate a set-theoretical logic (e.g., country dyads that are democracies are a subset of not war)? Ultimately, how does an alternative understanding of causality—one based on the logic of regularity, as promoted by this book—impact our existing knowledge of the world? Can we still stand on the shoulders of those social scientists who came before us?

(I am deliberately choosing to be hyperbolic here. But if I am asking these questions, won’t students also ask them? It seems worthwhile to take the arguments of this book to their logical conclusion.)

Finally, when it comes to teaching this approach, there is also a more normative question at stake. In many ways, this book advocates for going against conventional social science and adopting a different approach to studying the world. The author is swimming against a very strong current. In addition, then, to asking *how* and

*why* we teach this approach to social sciences, there is the very real question of *should* we be? As instructors for graduate programs, we help to shape the next generation of social scientists. They are a key target audience for “conversion” to this kind of logic, precisely because they are the future of the discipline. On the other hand, their initial position within the hierarchy of academia—at the very bottom of the pyramid—means that they already face serious structural and institutional hurdles to achieving the success necessary to assume their role as the next generation. I suspect they would be additionally hampered if they applied this logic to their burgeoning research agenda.

Indeed, the choice to publish using a scientific-constructivist approach, which would include adopting a particular model of causality while also justifying it using the logic proposed by this book, would seem to be risky for a lot of newer scholars. In addition to teaching this book, then, we must also consider the implications of it for our work as researchers. To be sure, the book focuses on how to apply this approach for case-study and small-N research. We learn what a scientific-constructivist approach to causality looks like. But my questions are a bit more practical: For example, how difficult might it be to publish scientific constructivist-based research in a major journal? Would journal editors know how to evaluate this kind of work? I can imagine, at least early on, that they might require an appendix with a more in-depth discussion of the

approach—but what might this look like? I also could imagine more stubborn or less innovative reviewers pushing the author to adopt a more conventional (read: essentialist) method to their research question instead of or even perhaps *in addition to* the scientific constructivist approach, to show how or if the findings are similar. How does one get around these potential hurdles?

Of course, set-theory and its use in the social sciences is not *new*. Many qualitative scholars use it implicitly, as the text notes and as many of us teach. Its explicit use, however, is rarer and, because of this, riskier for scholars.

A reasonable question to end this text, then, is for whom this book is ultimately written. Younger scholars are not yet fully socialized into the academy and therefore may be less constricted by the expectations and demands of mainstream social sciences and the essentialist biases that underpin these. On the other hand, the costs they assume in pursuing a less conventional path to research may be too high. Older scholars like myself, by contrast, may be too stuck in our ways or too overwhelmed by work and life to dig in and unlearn one approach to research in order to learn something new.

I raise these questions as someone who recognizes, values, and is ultimately humbled by the visionary nature of this text. The content is extraordinary. Mahoney offers us a potentially paradigm-shifting work. It merits our careful consideration. As a discipline I hope we are up to the task of taking its content seriously.

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# Did Mahoney Just Kill the “Comparative” in Comparative Historical Analysis?

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If one does a search for the word “comparative” in Mahoney’s book there are not many hits. There are references to methodologies that have comparative in the name, such as comparative historical, or qualitative comparative analysis, but nowhere in the book is a comparative methodology presented. So has Mahoney killed off comparative, or, with a nod to Mark Twain, are reports of its death exaggerated?

This of course demands an answer to a conceptual and research design question: What is comparative case

study methodology? Given current trends in causal influences and methods I think there is an answer to that question. But if one explores a great deal of current case study research only a small percentage of it implements a comparative case causal inference strategy. Mahoney’s book signals a change to within-case causal inference and process tracing to the disadvantage of comparative methods. Scholars need to read his book because it contains the methods they really need to know, exactly