

we have deduced an account of them from statements about the dispositions, beliefs, resources, and interrelations of individuals.¹⁰

Watkin's methodological individualism stipulates what *class* of phenomena is explanatory by arguing that social realities must be explained in terms of individual properties. In other words, it is a kind of explanatory reductionism. The underlying ontological assumption is that properties of individuals are real, while properties of societies are, at best, heuristic attributes of social theories.¹¹ I shall call this a *methodological individualism of subjects* (MI_s), because in the form that I want to deal with here, the issue will be how properties of individual *subjects*, especially their intentionality, explain higher level, social concepts.¹² Elster's methodological individualism is a refined and more plausible version of this sense, but, as I shall argue, this sense is not Marx's. Marx regarded similar individualisms as leading to inadequate explanations and ideological consequences because they treat the intentional properties of individuals as metaphysically existent rather than as problematic. For similar reasons, Elster's reconstruction is open to ideological consequences that Marx sought to avoid.

Third, there is what I shall call a *methodological individualism of actions or practices* (MI_a). I shall argue that this methodological individualism is fundamentally different than MI_s , although commonly confused with it. I also argue that this is the sense of methodological individualism one finds in both Marx and Max Weber. MI_a is concerned with the question of what the objects of explanation are like, an ontological question from which methodological consequences follow. The 'individualism' of MI_a involves constituting objects of explanation as the *acts* of individuals, and then showing how properties of both individual persons and society are reproduced by these actions under specific conditions. Explanations refer to the conditions that would be sufficient to explain an act. Unlike MI_s , MI_a can be a non-reductive and critical kind of methodological individualism. MI_a is non-reductive if some of the conditions of actions are irreducibly social, for example, the rules that constitute a language or culture. Thus MI_a does not involve the additional claim, distinctive of MI_s , that individual intentions can only be explained in terms of individual properties. Yet MI_a is not trivial, since it retains the demand of MI_s that social structures, functions, laws and the like have not been fully explained until one shows how they are reproduced by individual actors. This kind of demand is closely related to a notion that one finds in both Marx and Weber, namely, that from a normative perspective, social science is defined by the cognitive interests that individuals have in understanding conditions of action. MI_a thus involves the claim that the significant events for this cognitive interest are the acts – or, in Marxian

terms, the practices – of individuals, and that significant explanations are those that, at least in principle, show how capacities for rationality relate to social outcomes. To the extent that Marx's social science is normative in this 'critical' sense, he is a methodological individualist in the senses of MI_s and MI_a , but not MI_r .

METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM OF EVENTS

The most general and non-controversial methodological individualism is a methodological individualism of events (MI_e). As suggested, this methodological individualism is a regulative materialist metaphysics that refers laws, structures, functions, systems, languages, and other concepts to the reality of events in time and space. Most social scientists are methodological individualists in this sense, meaning that they regard explanations that refer to real but non-empirical entities (those that do not exist in time and space such as gods and ideal essences) as unscientific. The doctrine is a regulative ontology rather than an epistemology because there can be empiricist, realist, pragmatic, or critical accounts of how one conceptualises events. It is methodological only in the sense that it places a materialist side-constraint on what is to count as an explanation. Nonetheless, within these limits, it is relatively unrestricted of explanations since it commits one only to something like Kant's view of apperception: phenomena become intelligible insofar as one perceptually synthesises them as events in space and time. Particular notions of causality, mechanism, rule, and so on, are more specific elaborations of these events that in turn require more specific epistemological defences, but which nonetheless ultimately refer to events in time and space.

What do we gain by distinguishing this particular sense of methodological individualism? The distinction is important primarily because of the common (but mistaken) belief that the materialism of MI_e implies the epistemology of MI_r . Elster's assertion that methodological individualism is 'trivially true' is a case in point (Elster 1986a, pp. 66–7). Elster uses the common-sense materialism of MI_e to justify the more specific epistemology of MI_r , which he describes as 'the doctrine that all social phenomena – their structure and their change – are in principle explicable in ways that only involve individuals – their properties, their goals, their beliefs and their actions. Methodological individualism thus conceived is a form of reductionism. To go from social institutions and aggregate patterns of behavior to individuals is the same kind of operation as going from cells to molecules' (Elster 1985, p. 5).