

## Recombining micro/macro: The grammar of theoretical innovation<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper analyses the grammar underlying debates in sociological theory, using the debate surrounding the distinction between 'micro' and 'macro' as its case. Although - and indeed because - few authors have attempted explicit definition of the distinction, a number of different distinctions have been subsumed under these labels and research has been shaped by packages of assumptions that have gone largely unexamined in their contradictory nature. The paper disaggregates the different distinctions that have been associated with the terms 'micro' and 'macro' and situates the successful strategies of the past decades in the grammar of oppositions that makes them possible and innovative. *Gap-bridging* has been the attempt to bring together aspects of the distinction that have been construed as direct opposites; *recombination* has been the attempt to release certain aspects of the distinction from their association with one side of the divide. Disaggregating the distinction can help us isolate specific theoretical problems for further work, including work that asks how aspects emphasised by different theoretical approaches vary empirically.

### Keywords

Micro-sociology, macro-sociology, history of sociology, interaction, social structure

This paper analyses the grammar that underlies the debates surrounding the distinction between 'micro' and 'macro' in different traditions in sociology. Although and indeed because few authors have attempted an explicit definition of the distinction, a number of different distinctions have been subsumed under the labels of 'micro' and 'macro'.

Research has been shaped by packages of assumptions that went largely unexamined in their contradictory nature. This has lent a certain focus to research but it has left other areas neglected.

The terms 'micro' and 'macro' have played a powerful role in the history of sociology since the early 1960s. The terms themselves have gone somewhat out of fashion today, especially in the eyes of those that adhere to one of the approaches that have built their reputation partly based on the claim to have resolved the 'problem' of 'micro' and 'macro'. But reflection on the distinction, its uses and its meanings continues to be important. It is important as assumptions about the distinction continue to shape research today. It is important to help us read the wealth of empirical research, which the discipline has accumulated in the past decades, across theoretical schools and across empirical subfields. It is important to help us build productively on this research and to complement it in future work. Reflection on the meanings of the distinction also serves as a case to consider the patterns underlying theoretical debates in the social sciences more broadly.

The paper disaggregates the different distinctions that have been associated with the terms 'micro' and 'macro.' This allows us to identify more clearly the blind spots this particular bundling of aspects of social life has led to in social research. It also allows us to situate some of the most interesting theorizing and research of the past three decades in the

grammar of oppositions that makes them possible and innovative. The strategy of *gap-bridging* has sought to bring together aspects of the distinction that have been construed as direct opposites. The strategy of *recombination* has released aspects of the distinction from their association with one side of the divide. Research in the gap-bridging and the recombination traditions has successfully filled gaps left by the way the camps have been originally construed.

Considering the history of the distinction and the range of tensions that have been inscribed into it, should make us wary of treating any one of these approaches as conclusive solutions to ‘the problem’ of ‘micro’ and ‘macro’. These cases underscore Andrew Abbott’s argument that innovation in academic work always depends first on a form of selective exclusion and then on acts of reimportation (Abbott, 2001). In this perspective, we can assume that the claims to innovation of any particular approach will be over-stated; they are, however, also real contributions if we follow Abbott’s recent suggestion that rather than the accumulation of knowledge, what is valuable in the social and human sciences is a form of care that nothing gets neglected and left out for too long (Abbott, 2007). Because of the way schools and polemics organize research, these forms of re-emphasis will really lead to research and questions that were not possible before. The identification of the clustering through the framings of a muddled theoretical debate can help us make sense of past moves and anticipate which later moves may address new gaps.

If we do not read the existing projects of gap-bridging and recombination as conclusive solutions to the problems raised by the distinction, additional strategies are possible. The grammar revealed by disaggregation can be used to situate other strategies of gap-bridging

and recombination and generate new ones. Disaggregating the distinction can also help us isolate specific theoretical problems for further work, including work that asks how aspects emphasised by different theoretical approaches vary empirically.

### **Disaggregating the categories**

The debate about ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ began when, in the early 1960s, micro-sociologists constituted themselves in response to the implicit macro-focus of the dominant schools in post-war sociology in the United State (see Ritzer, 1985, 1988). After that, the distinction has been used to organise syllabi and conferences; scholars have used the labels to describe their own work and that of others. Even today some job advertisements specify a preference for a micro- or a macro-sociologist.

Since the 1980s, in a second wave of the debate, scholars have shifted their attention to bridging the gap between micro- and macro-sociologies and have tried to produce linkages and synthesis (Alexander et al., 1987; Collins, 1998; Fuchs, 1989; Hilbert, 1990; Huber, 1991; Knorr-Cetina, 2007; Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel, 1981; Mouzelis, 1992, 1998; Ritzer, 1981; Wiley, 1988).

When the terms ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ were originally charged with meaning, scholars rarely attempted a definition of ‘the micro’ and ‘the macro’. Few scholars saw micro and macro as two legitimate categories that had to be defined (see Ritzer, 1985). As a distinction among different approaches the distinction was performed –to some extent polemically- in different research questions and research strategies, rather than specified theoretically.

Because scholars in each of the camps wanted to subsume the entire social world within their approach, the distinction was not defined as a distinction between empirical phenomena either.

Even in the second wave of the debate as scholars tried to overcome the division between the two camps, there was no agreement over what the distinction should be taken to mean. Neil Smelser counted seven different definitions in one edited volume alone (Smelser, 1987). Moreover, authors have rarely engaged each other directly on what they take the distinction to mean. Observers - scholars in their role as text-book authors and teachers, for example - found themselves describing the two camps *post facto*, each with a rather contingent bundle of foci and assumptions.

The way phenomena and approaches have been clustered in these two categories has shaped research for a number of decades, even if and indeed especially as there are a number of quite different distinctions implied in the distinction. The consequences are hard to avoid for anyone who studies or teaches the history of the discipline. They continue to echo today amongst those who carry forward these traditions and among those who react against the division among these approaches. An important step for confronting this heritage is to make conscious what has been assumed by the distinction and distinguish between different implied meanings.

Based on an analysis of the foundational volumes of the debate and an analysis of both first- and second-order accounts, Table 1 presents a list of explicit and implied meanings of the distinction. It is important to emphasize that in the form presented here, of course, no particular author would explicitly subscribe to any one side. Some of the contradictions in

the distinction become too obvious when meanings are assembled. The list thus does not do justice to the subtlety of any one individual position. However, I would argue that in absence of agreed-upon terms, the list reveals something about the grammar of the aggregate debate.

However much proponents of any one particular approach might feel that if only their own contribution to the debate was truly understood and accepted the problem would disappear, in reality we are faced with these clusters. The table below helps trace the effect of the debate as an aggregate object on research as a whole. These oppositions have shaped research and reactions to it precisely in their contradictory form. The list is not necessarily exhaustive and the reader may want to add others based on his or her own reading and experience of debates.

----- Table 1: Meanings of ‘Micro’ and ‘Macro’ -----

<b>Micro</b>	<b>Macro</b>
Individualist	Collectivist
Individual	Society
Agency	Structure
Interactions	Structure
Small units	Large units
Empirical unit	Emergent unit
What is observable	Invisible forces
Parts	Whole
Cognizable through individual data points	Cognizable through aggregates
Local	Level of society, world
Geographical proximity	Linked by technology
Everyday	Singular, historic, having large impact
Singular	Aggregate
No impact on larger world	Large-scale impact
To study with direct observation	To study with documents, numbers
Actors do so freely	Constraining actors, structure

Free	Determined
Between actors	Between impersonal forces
Face-to-face	Mediated
Controllable	Controlling
Meaning	Power, money
Subjectivity	Objective position
Identity	Objective position
Practice	System
Short time-span	Long time-span
Lifeworld	System
The family, the office	The state, capitalism, the market
Subjective interpretation	Ideology, culture
Conversation analysis	Discourse analysis
Positivist	Realist
Focus on meanings	Focus on structure
Concrete	Abstract
Particular	General

Roughly speaking, one side of this table focuses on everyday interactions, meanings negotiated between individuals, relatively freely, in concrete social settings. The other focuses on large-scale social or symbolic structures determining all members of society and on the role of power and money. As Jeffrey Alexander and Bernhard Giesen have pointed out, these debates have often been overlaid with ideological battles about freedom, agency and power (Alexander and Giesen, 1987) and sometimes also with debates about how to best be sympathetic with ‘ordinary people’ or ‘the oppressed’. In this, the debate has some parallels to the debate about culture in anthropology where the notion of culture as a system has been resisted in the name of local or subjective interpretation and agency (see Clifford and Marcus, 1986). There have also been links with highly-charged discussions about the relationship of observable reality to ‘truth’.

Commentators from various perspectives have noted problems with the distinction between 'micro' and 'macro' in the past decades. Let us review some of these noted problems based on the table above. Firstly, we will note that some aspects of social phenomena find themselves on both sides of the distinction at once. We can see, for example, that the unique can be opposed to 'macro' terms like aggregates and averages and thus find itself on the micro side; but it can also be opposed to micro terms like the regular and everyday and thus find itself on the macro side. In another example, as Jeffrey Alexander has pointed out, meaning can be both subjective and spontaneous and therefore find itself on the micro side yet also shared, collective and constraining and thus be on the macro side (Alexander, 1987; see also Ritzer, 1981).

Secondly, this way of drawing the distinction brings some things together that might not necessarily or not always go together. We should, for example, not assume -as that cluster of meanings invites us to assume- that interactions are always unfolding in physical co-presence. We should also not assume a link between the kind of unit of analysis that is studied and the potential to generalise – contrary to some critiques of micro-sociological approaches, research on states is not necessarily more generalizable than research on interactions.

The cluster also obscures the possible distinction between aggregates and sociological objects (see also Wiley, 1988). Aggregate categories (for example, under-5-year olds in Minnesota) are purely the result of an analytical operation. There is (or at least there should be) no claim that the category has any social reality of its own, and it could never be proven 'false'. Sociological objects - such as social groups but also actor-networks, organizations,



fields, states, the gendered order, a racial formation, or a national culture - are also constructed as units of observation and analysis by the sociologist - but they are claimed to be constituted by social relationships; that is, they are neither entirely constructed by the (academic) observer, not entirely objectively given (see Bourdieu, 1990b).

Some things grouped together on one side seem to contradict each other outright. On the micro side, for example, we find both a focus on intersubjectively negotiated meanings and a focus on directly observable phenomena. On the macro side we find both the historic and the general and abstract.

These clusters also separate some things that we might not want to separate without further investigation. On the one hand, there is the distance between what might be called direct opposites such as 'individual' and 'society' or 'agency' and 'structure', but there are also other aspects that are opposed to each other prematurely. An example that has been prominent in subsequent discussion and that we shall return to below is the separation of everyday life from power.

### **Gap-bridging**

The theoretical agenda in the last thirty years has been influenced immensely by scholars who focused on the distance between aspects implied in the distinction between 'micro' and 'macro' that might be construed as direct opposites such as the opposition between individual and society, subjective identity and objective social positions and, most prominently, agency and structure.

This self-proclaimed strategy of *gap-bridging* responds to the implicit meanings of the distinction amongst camps and it is against this background that it has been innovative. Gap-bridging enables sociologists to correct one-sided accounts that had outlived their usefulness. With regard to the problem of structure and agency, for example, gap-bridging enabled scholars to attack clearly the most asociological conceptions of agency while avoiding the extremes of an account of structure not linked to observations of people doing things at all.

In their projects of gap-bridging, scholars have created concepts that allow us to see things we could not otherwise have seen. Gap-bridging allows for new analysis of how structure enables agency, positioning ethnomethodology in a new way, as evidenced in the work of Anthony Giddens (1986). It also allows for a new analysis of how agency reproduces structure, linking structuralism with phenomenology in a new way in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1987, 1990). The concept of *habitus* as developed by Bourdieu (1990c) has been useful to show how what people do is shaped by structure and how structure is reproduced through what is 'inside' people.

In another intellectual project whose merit can be seen in the context of gap-bridging, it has also been fruitful to interrogate the gap between what might be seen as 'small' units of analysis and what might be seen as 'large' units of analysis. Although this is not necessarily the best way to think about this, traditionally interactions have sometimes been conceived as 'small' units of analysis and states or the world system as 'large' units of analysis. More recent approaches have focused on units of analysis that might be termed 'medium-sized' while at the same time shifting their focus from entities as such to the in-between and links

between entities. The impact of, for example, the new institutionalism, the study of fields (of organizations) (Bourdieu, 1996; Fligstein, 2001; Martin, 2003; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991), networks (Boorman and White, 1976; Granovetter, 1973; Watts, 2003; White, 2002; White et al., 1976) or actor-networks (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2005) has partly been shaped by this type of gap left by micro and macro approaches.

### **Recombination**

The clusters implied by the distinction between ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ are problematic not only because of the distance they create between terms that might be construed as direct opposites but also because they separate issues and approaches from each other because of their contingent association with ‘the other side’. This has created blind spots for empirical research. Much theoretical innovation in recent decades can be understood based on this analysis as the result of a strategy of recombination.

*Recombination* is the attempt to release aspects of the distinction between ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ from their association with one side of the divide and travel the road less travelled. Let me discuss three examples, two because they have been especially consequential in research and a third because it has been especially important theoretically: first the bringing together of power and the micro, second the bringing together of markets and intersubjectively negotiated meanings and thirdly the bringing together of observable interactions with large-scale impact.

a) The way the camps of micro and macro had initially been constructed tended to separate power and everyday life. While Marxism was associated with a focus on large-scale dynamics of class and exploitation without paying close attention to interactions, early micro-sociology has sometimes focused on everyday interactions at the expense of writing about power (for a very strong formulation of this critique see Gouldner, 1970; Williams, 1986). Since the late 1970s, scholars in a variety of substantive areas of inquiry have reacted to this division by looking at power in phenomena traditionally associated with the 'micro'. Some associated with micro-sociology have put the dimension of power more into the foreground of their work (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Collins, 2004); feminists in general have done much work in this direction (Friedan, 1963; Fraser, 1989; Smith, 1988); Michel Foucault has very explicitly focused on the concept of micro-power (Foucault, 1977, 1982); some traditions of ethnography have also long focused on power in phenomena traditionally associated with the 'micro' (Willis, 1977).

b) The clusters of meanings associated with the distinction between 'micro' and 'macro' have also implied a separation of the market from intersubjectively negotiated meanings. This opposition is not just a problem limiting the discipline of economics; it has a long tradition within sociology itself - we find this, for example, also in the work of Jürgen Habermas (1987). Habermas opposes the (micro) lifeworld of communicative understandings with the (macro) systems of politics and markets, which are mediated by power and money and supposedly free of interpretations (see the critique in Fraser, 1989; McCarthy, 1985). Much of recent economic sociology, a growing field within the

discipline, has been built on the move to bring the market and meaning together again (Zelizer, 1983), and the market and interactions (e.g. Zaloom 2006).

c) The way the division between ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ approaches has been constructed in post-war sociology has led to a separation of the observable situation from large-scale impact. Early micro-sociology was interested specifically in so-called everyday interactions, but interactions or observable social situations are not necessarily everyday or of small-scale consequences. As Nicos Mouzelis has pointed out, an interaction can have large-scale effects (Mouzelis, 1992, 1998). Consider a meeting between the Allied heads of state towards the end of the Second World War; the consequences may be felt by a large number of people over a considerable amount of time. Ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts thus have also begun to study interactions with large-scale impact with their tools such as the Watergate hearings (Molotch and Boden, 1985) or the meetings around President Kennedy’s decisions regarding the Cuban Missile Crisis (Gibson, 2011), and have examined interactions in formal organizations (Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Heritage, 2005; see also Garfinkel, 1956). Similarly, ethnomethodologists and actor-network theorists have valued close observation without accepting the limits traditionally imposed on micro-analysis and paying close attention to how different situations are linked through objects and technology (e.g. Latour 1987); building up, for example, to a theory of globalisation from the ‘micro’ (e.g. Knorr-Cetina, 2007).

### **The limits of conclusive solutions**

These projects have filled gaps in research and attention that arose based on the form the split between ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ has taken and they have provided new concepts that allowed us to see aspects of social order we did not previously see. In a specific historical context of intellectual production, they have bent the stick the other way in a fruitful way. There is still much to gain by exploring the strengths of gap-bridging and recombination in research.

At times proponents of specific versions of gap-bridging and recombination treat their approaches as the conclusive solutions to the ‘problem’ of ‘micro’ and ‘macro’.

Considering what we have said about the history of the distinction and the history of the problems and tensions that have been inscribed into it should make us wary of these claims. There are costs associated with accepting them. As others have argued, there is a risk of conflation or of flattening of analytical terrain (Alexander, 1995; Archer, 1988; Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994; Mouzelis, 1998). A particular danger concerns ruling out possibilities for empirical variation on theoretical grounds.

Let me explain this danger with a number of examples chosen for the strength of their contributions to the debate rather than their limitations:

a) The concept of *habitus* as developed by Bourdieu (1990c) has been useful to show how what people do is shaped by structure and how structure is reproduced through what is ‘inside’ people. There is a danger, however, in accepting the claim that it has “solved” the problem of structure and agency: We could then no longer ask whether in a given situation structure works more from the outside (through “dire economic necessity”, for example, or through the violence of a gun) or whether it works more through the taken-for-granted

assumptions of the habitus. We could also no longer ask how reflexivity, which presumes a relative distance between structure and agency varies across dispositions and situations (see also McCall, 1992; Mouzelis, 2007; Krause and Kowalski, forthcoming)).

b) The concept of field has drawn our attention to the mediating logic of relationships on a meso-scale (Fligstein, 2001; Fligstein and McAdam, 2011). It would be a mistake, however, to use the concept of field as though it provided an alternative coherent approach in between micro and macro, a third option or a ‘compromise’ or ‘balanced’ position that again could capture all of social reality. If social practice can be shown to be ordered on the level of the field that does not mean that interpersonal, interactional or organizational dynamics may not also matter. Studies that have focused on fields, including Pierre Bourdieu’s, have often not paid that much attention to the analysis of situational dynamics, organizational dynamics or labor conflicts (Mouzelis, 2007); that does not in itself mean that the possibility of such dynamics has been ‘overcome’ on a theoretical level.<sup>2</sup>

c) Attempts to ‘overcome’ the debate about ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ within ethnomethodology (Collins, 1988; Hilbert, 1990) and actor-network theory (e.g. Latour et al. 2012) have changed our understanding of ‘concrete observable settings’ (Duster, 1981) *and* of supposedly macro phenomena like history or power, by showing the latter within the former. Radical distrust of concepts such as class, society, the economy or the state has yielded much careful empirical work and many critical empirical insights. However, work in these traditions often displays a distaste for phenomena such as collectively shared meanings or dynamics of contestation on the level of an organisation or a field of organisations that is in itself not always subjected to empirical examination. The

commitment to concrete observable social settings has remained linked here to a rather narrow and to some extent arbitrary definition of what it is that can be observed. It is not clear, for example, why an orientation towards a group of relevant others across different concrete social settings, as hypothesised by field theory, could not be observable in a specific social settings.<sup>3</sup>

Some 'micro'-focused traditions have argued that objects such as, for example, the market or the state, do not exist. There is of course a danger of reification when we speak of 'the economy' or 'the state' and sociologists often fall back on these notions too easily, assuming their existence or their internal homogeneity. However, to say that they do not exist seems to be a misunderstanding of what it means for social objects to exist. What sceptics might mean to say is that the economy and the state do not exist or exercise power independently of people's knowledge of them, that these objects are not a thing, are not all-powerful and determining, are not just, coherent or unitary and can't be assumed to exist just prior to empirical investigation.

Macro-focused traditions within Marxism and functionalism in turn suggest that somehow the 'micro' is less real. Again, this seems based on a misunderstanding of what it means for a social object to exist. What sceptics might mean to say is that interactions are not entirely autonomous, not free and not just; that they are not entirely apparent to the insider; that they are not all there is to know about the whole of social life and that nothing that happens in any one interaction will change the nature of the capitalist system.

### **The opening for more strategies**



On the basis that not any one approach has conclusively resolved the tensions that are expressed through the clusters described above, different strategies for engaging with the heritage of the micro and macro distinction remain possible and possibly useful.

The grammar revealed by disaggregation can be used to situate other possibilities for gap-bridging and recombination and use these strategies for innovation in specific fields of research. Disaggregating the distinction can help us isolate specific theoretical problems for further work. It is, for example, very important to distinguish between the problem of aggregation and the problem of sociological objects.

Isolating specific theoretical problems for further work includes work that asks how aspects emphasised by different theoretical approaches vary empirically. The question can then become, for example, how reflexivity varies across time and social context (e.g. Elias, 1994), and how external structures like economic compulsion or violence vary in importance in relationship to internalised structures.

We can also ask about the history of relationships that extend over a large number of concrete social settings, which we might call relationships on a 'meso' scale, such as markets and fields, and we can interrogate whether or not the logics of relationships on the 'micro', the 'meso' and the 'macro' scale translate into each other and what friction arises between them in different geographical and historical settings. This has been most developed on the foundations of systems theory, which has developed a historical account of the differentiation of micro systems of interaction and functional subsystems (Kieserling, 1999; Luhmann, 1987) and has asked about friction, for example between organisations and subsystems (Kneer, 2001; Nassehi, 2002, 2004; Tacke, 2001). There are efforts in different

traditions that lead to similar question. Craig Calhoun, for example, has proposed a historicized reading of Bourdieu's field theory of Bourdieu, that asks how fields have become important and if a given area is fielded (Bourdieu, 1996; Calhoun, 1995). In the critical realist tradition, Dave Elder-Vass has asked about the relative reach of norm circles (e.g. Archer and Elder-Vass, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

While the debate about 'micro' and 'macro' in the 1980s and 1990s has brought leading scholars together for reflection across theoretical traditions and fields of research, the debate has been hindered by a lack of clarity about what the distinction should be taken to mean. This paper has analysed the grammar underlying the different meanings implied in the distinction between 'micro' and 'macro' in sociology and has reviewed strategies for dealing with its heritage. Disaggregating the categories of micro and macro allows us to distinguish different meanings of the distinction. This allows us to identify blind spots of research and it allows us to situate innovative strategies within the grammar that makes them possible and innovative. Gap-bridging and recombination, the approaches that have been dominant in the past decades, have filled gaps in research and attention that arose based on the form the split between 'micro' and 'macro' has taken and they have provided new concepts that have allowed us to see aspects of social order we did not previously see. In a specific historical context, they have bent the stick the other way in a fruitful way. If we do not read these projects of gap-bridging and recombination as conclusive solutions to the problems raised by the distinction, additional strategies are possible. Disaggregating

the distinction can help us isolate specific theoretical problems for further work, including work that asks how aspects emphasised by different theoretical approaches vary empirically.

The debate about ‘micro’ and ‘macro’, precisely with its confusions, is not an exception among theoretical debates in the social sciences. Other theoretical oppositions shape careers, projects and research agendas; other oppositions can be affectively quite charged, and especially when they come to play a role in the formation of schools and traditions can be performed in a pattern whereby the friends of one’s enemies becomes one’s enemies. In the absence of a clear definition, or rather in the absence of a definition that is agreed across or even within theoretical camps and that is able to coherently organise all research practices, oppositions have shaped research agendas in largely implicit ways.

This means that this exercise of disaggregating camps and looking beyond specific statements towards the grammar of debates could be fruitfully repeated for other debates and other disciplines. For the case of sociology, one could explore the division between mainstream and critical sociology (see Calhoun and Duster, 2005; Calhoun and VanAntwerpen, 2007), between qualitative and quantitative sociology and between theoretical and empirical sociology. It is reasonable to expect that these oppositions, which bundle a number of distinctions together in contingent and possibly contradictory ways, will also have led to a certain focusing of research accompanied by the neglect of other areas. This would mean that reflection on the grammar associated with these oppositions could be useful to identify theoretical positions and avenues for research that are analytically possible but not currently in use.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> For a parallel point on how network theory has neglected action and interaction, see Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994).

<sup>3</sup> In a recent contribution, Latour and co-authors engage the distinction between micro and macro. They most vehemently attack the distinction as a distinction among social objects, but in their argument engage mostly with the distinction between parts and whole and the notion of macro as an aggregate.

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