

Introduction

Nathalie Bulle

Dear colleagues and friends

Firstly, I would like to thank Sorbonne University and its Doctoral School, Concepts et Language, as well as the CNRS laboratory, the Gemass, for the financial assistance they provided in the organization of this conference, and especially Michel Dubois, who will chair this morning session, for his constant support during the past three years it took to develop the project of publishing a Handbook on Methodological Individualism. So as not to repeat myself, I will say MI. This book, which has now been completed, has two volumes and features almost 60 chapters with contributions from all over the world.

I would like to extend my gratitude to everyone for your work towards this major project. The objective is to disseminate true, robust, and updated knowledge about MI - an approach that is both central to social sciences and paradoxically the most misunderstood. The excellence of the contributions should not be under-estimated. They will without a doubt help to - as I would like to put it - rehabilitate MI as a fundamental approach within the social sciences.

Indeed, these contributions demonstrate that MI should not be conflated with political or moral individualism. At a time when the term was not yet commonly used, the famous Austrian economist, Carl Menger, one of the founding figures, wrote in essence that political individualism has as little in common with the individualistic theoretical approach in economics as a gunpowder conspiracy has with theoretical chemistry - 'L'individualisme politique a autant à voir avec la méthodologie individualiste qu'une conspiration sur la poudre avec la chimie théorique'.

Moreover, Menger also dismissed the accusation of reductionism, or what was then commonly referred to as atomism, a term he always used with an exclamation point. In particular, micro-reductionism assumes that theories that deal with a given whole can be replaced by theories that deal with its parts, the parts being conceived with characteristics independent from their belonging to the whole. Menger explained in essence, as Max Weber would also later underscore, that an atom in physics is not an isolated element. Rather, it is an element of a theoretical system that defines what it is, how it functions, and how it interacts with other atoms.

Advocating for a better understanding of MI within our scientific community, in my view, would enable the social sciences to reassess their foundations. It could also put an end to futile debates attacking straw men, paving the way for meaningful discussions and further progress. The case of economics is somewhat distinct, yet here too, a deeper interpretation of MI is more likely to address the logical problems Olivier Favereau will discuss tomorrow.

Let me say that it is a great pleasure to welcome you here, to this venerable amphitheater within an even more venerable university. The historical development of this institution, linked to that of the University of Paris, is brilliantly elucidated by Emile Durkheim in his work, *The evolution of educational thought in France, 'L'évolution pédagogique en France'*. I reference Durkheim here because he explains this emergence using the very terms of MI. This gives me the opportunity to introduce MI quickly.

Indeed, Durkheim demonstrates how, at various points in the evolution of the education system, changes in macrosocial conditions impact the educational aspirations and needs of social actors, and how these actors react - dare I say rationally - to these changes. This rationality is, of course, situated, and mainly involves the actors' subjective understanding, as Wolf Feuerhahn will explain in a moment, along with Max Weber.

Thus, Durkheim shows how the University of Paris was born of the combination of the actions of all individuals and of none in particular, that is, as an unintentional effect par excellence. As you know, MI is particularly interested in such effects, as these offer enigmas to sociologists. Among these macrosocial conditions, Durkheim cites the effervescence of the 11th century, the multiplication of students, their geographic mobility even then, before Erasmus, and their concentration in school groups attached to churches or monasteries. He also notes the establishment of the Capetian monarchy in Paris at the beginning of the 12th century, which consecrated the *Ecole de Paris*, dependent on Notre Dame, as the main teaching institution. Durkheim further underscores the importance of the presence in Paris of a master of immense European renown: Abelard. The prestige of Paris in Europe and the influx of students led to the creation of schools in private homes and, as a consequence, it led to the relative emancipation of students and teachers from ecclesiastical control.

This relative emancipation was institutionalized through the formation of teachers' guilds. The Latin term *'Universitas'* did not originally denote a collective educational establishment, nor did it represent the universality of human teaching disciplines. Instead, it was borrowed from legal terminology and was synonymous with *'societas'*; the same was true for the word *'collegium.'* Therefore, Durkheim explains that the University did not begin as a center of study, but as a social group, the teacher's guild. In this regard, it emerged as an unintentional effect of

individual actions. I think that the most interesting part of Durkheim's reasoning is not there, because he rejects the idea that such an institution could emerge totally unintentionally. Could the University of Paris, which had such a profound influence on subsequent times and across all of Europe, be only the result of fleeting, local causes without any logical connection to the effect they produced? Durkheim's answer is no; there must be something else at play, a form of convergence of the individual aspirations capable of sustaining this emergence. But far from assuming a form of collective force that would compel individual actions, Durkheim posits that this connection operates between the individuals' aspirations and their joint effects, he attributes the emergence of the university to something that comes under the rational dimension of actions— that is, meaning. In this case, it is the concept of education, the meaning that actors could ascribe to it but surely without a clear conscience. Therefore, according to Durkheim, the emergence of the University of Paris was to some extent an - unintended phenomenon of rational actions but also, to another extent, it was the result of underlying rational intentions of the protagonists - 'meta-conscious,' as Raymond Boudon would have put it – in this case, a moral aspiration ascribed to intellectual education that led to the need to join teachings. This meta-conscious idea, as he explains, is a legacy of Christianity. According to this idea, the purpose of education is not to develop this or that particular skill, but to shape the mind as a whole. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to assert that Durkheim's analysis, which he delivered as a class taught at the Sorbonne at the dawn of the previous century - potentially even in this very location - focuses on the broad, abstract meaning that drives individual actions, and aligns with the individualistic method.

Now, I wish to dedicate this conference, in particular, to Raymond Boudon, who worked so much to develop and promote the understanding of MI. Additionally, I dedicate this conference to those who have left us before they could witness the completion of this collective work: Joseph Agassi, who kept his vibrancy even at 96, Ian Jarvie, who regretted not being able to join us today due to illness, and Robert Leroux, who left us abruptly. I also hold a special thought for my friend Sylvie Mesure, who authored a beautiful article on axiological rationality and Boudon's concept of dignity. For those who couldn't be present today, the lectures will be recorded and made available on the Gemass website.

I would also like to extend apologies on behalf of Francesco, who was unable to join us today due in part to the recent birth of his son.

Before I hand over to Wolf Feuerhahn, who will be speaking on a pivotal topic - Max Weber's understanding approach - I would like to draw your attention to his recent publication of a very

interesting book on Max Weber thought in social science methodology, "Qu'est-ce que les sciences de la culture?".

Thank you for your attention