The micro-macro issue has been debated a good deal in recent years, largely on the metatheoretical plane (see Ritzer, 1985; Fuchs, 1988). I contend, though, that the reason for working on the micro-macro relation is to make a contribution to substantive theory, to advance our power to explain the phenomena of the social universe. Here I would like to clear away a few misconceptions in this path, and to demonstrate concretely that one can advance explanatory theories by building micro-macro connections.

(1) MICRO-SOCIOLOGY IS HUMAN-SIZED, NOT INFINITESIMAL

It is a mistake to regard the micro-macro program as merely the theme “the smaller the better.” I have argued, following the precedent of various micro-reductionists (Blumer, Homans, the ethnomethodologists) that we ought to translate macro sociological phenomena as much as possible into the micro realities of which they are composed. (Notice, however, that I say “translation,” not all-out reduction; for there are irreducible macro features in the spatial, temporal, and numerical arrangements among micro-situations: Collins, 1988: 394–5.) It is not an argument against micro-translation to propose counter-examples in the physical sciences, for instance to point out that the structure of biological organisms is no more real than the molecular level of the DNA. The aim of micro-translation is not to pursue everything to the smallest possible level, as if we were to take social institutions apart into social interactions, those into human bodies, those in turn into cells, proteins, atomic elements and sub-atomic participles. If one follows that path, it is easy to conclude that everything at all levels is a cognitive construction; that they are all equally real, or equally unreal; and that there is no point in trying to reduce or translate any level into any other.

But these different levels do not all stand on the same epistemological plane. It is true that sub-atomic entities/processes are social constructions; so are DNA molecules. Sociologists of science (Knorr-Cetina, 1981; Pickering, 1984; Krone, 1987) show empirically how such things are inferred, not directly observed; but it is human beings with their laboratory equipment who are doing the inferring. This sociology of science itself is empirical; it is not a form of philosophical idealism. What are privileged are the observations that the sociologist makes: in this case, the scientists interacting with each other and manipulating the human-sized material world around them.

The claims of micro-sociology are claims for the explanatory importance of this human-size world. It is not a project of awarding metaphysical grades; after all, philosophers have made out a case for attributing some kind of reality to almost everything, concrete and abstract, physical, imaginary, or even contradictory. Nothingness is ontological both in Sartre and in Madhyamika Buddhism; and I see no ultimate objection to attributing as much reality-status as Meinong’s Golden Mountain to the Parsonian value-system or the nation-state. But the aim here is to build an explanatory sociology. Idealizations, illusions and ideologies can play a part, but mainly as things to be explained, not as the ultimate explanations. I am making a practical claim that micro-sociology—the principles of how people interact as human bodies in sight, sound and smell of each other—is the solidest part of what we know about the social world, and that we understand the larger and more long-term patterns when we see how they are composed of such micro-situations.

(2) EVENTS VS. STRUCTURES, MICRO OR MACRO

Another source of confusions comes from a lack of clarity about what would count as an example of a micro influence on macro. Typically some such case is given as when a world leader makes a decision in a major crisis: John F. Kennedy negotiating with Khruschev over the Cuban missiles with the
fate of the world in the balance. To leave it at this, however, is to make it seem that micro-sociology is a matter of story-telling, the interjection of inexplicable little contingencies into the patterns of world history. It also becomes something like a Great Man theory of history. Not so long ago, travelers of more than moderate political sophistication would return from China, extolling Mao Tse-tung and expounding on what he had done to transform an entire society; or perhaps pointing to the Gang of Four as turning aside the path of the revolution.

I do not want to debate the point that an individual decision can sometimes have ramifying consequences over a large social organization. But consider: it is not just any individual who can make such decisions; they must be in a certain place in the structure. And it cannot be just any structure; only certain kinds of government organization, i.e. those with extreme centralization of political, military, economic and cultural channels, can be ones in which the great hero-leaders (or villain-leaders) can come into being. The twists and turns of the Chinese revolution are a structural phenomenon; it is the Chinese structure that created the charismatic figure whom we glorify or vilify as “Mao Tse-tung” or any of the other cast of characters. In this case, a sociological vision of Chinese society as networks of situational interlinkages of a certain sort (highly focussed upon one individual at the center of all networks; no autonomous networks which could pattern a regular succession in top offices) enables us to see why there is always a charismatic leader or villain. That same ritualized focus of attention reifies the person at its center, making him or her into a gigantic sacred object of whom the society seems a projection. Seeing how this is produced sociologically is part of what I mean by micro-macro translation as a project of seeing through social illusions.

One still might want to argue for the contingent nature of the decision itself, hence for crucial micro-turning-points in macro history. But notice how we cross frames of analysis when we do this. On the one hand, there is a particular event; on the other hand, we are saying that a whole structure is determined by that event. An event, of course, is something that happens only once, in a brief time. Structure is repetition; it is the pattern of the same kinds of events happening over and over again, involving many different people spread out across different places. The social world is made up of events, surrounded temporally and spatially by other events. It is just that some of these “events” seem banal to us—people doing the same thing over and over again, soldiers leaning on their guns, store-keepers sitting at the till—so that we ignore that they have the same reality status as the more dramatic events on which we like to focus attention.

In this perspective, to claim that a crucial decision determines a structure is to claim that some events are highly idiosyncratic, but that their consequences ramify very widely and affect the whole pattern of the repetitive events we call structure. I will cite another Chinese example, where the theoretical pattern is especially clear. It is sometimes argued that a turning point in world history happened around 1430 A.D.; the Emperor of the Ming Dynasty, possessing an enormous ocean-going navy, recalled his great Admiral Chêng Ho after his fleets had crossed the Indian ocean and reached the east coast of Africa. Instead of going on to circumnavigate the continent, the Chinese disbanded their navy and pulled back into a conservative, defensive position. Think of all that was foregone, the argument goes: 70 years before Vasco de Gama had come around the other direction, what would have happened if the Chinese had “discovered” Europe? China could have been the great overseas imperial power; trade could have opened up China to commercial and industrial development; the whole shape of modern history might have been reversed.

But this is thinking in terms of particular events, not structures and the sociological principles that determine them. Suppose the Ming emperor had not called back his admiral. Does it automatically follow that Europe would have become a colony of China, or that a Chinese world-empire would have supplanted the Spanish or English? The answer depends on the principles of geopolitics. If, as the evidence suggests (Collins, 1981; Kennedy, 1987) empires can be built only over given distances, depending upon the amount of military opposition, the resources on each side, and the expense of logistics, I would say it was never in the cards that the Chinese could have established an empire in Europe in the 15th century. In fact, it appears to have been geopolitical strains which caused the Chinese Emperor to pull
back his expensive fleet when he did; large-scale expeditions to the coast of Africa were already straining the limits of expense-cum-profitability of this strategy. So the Emperor’s decision is not necessarily so much of an isolated event as one might imagine; rather than reifying the personality of the Emperor, one could say that decision was part of a larger flow of micro-events, all patterned together by macro.constraints.

(3) THE MACRO-TO-MICRO CONNECTION IS VALUABLE TOO

It might seem that the previous examples undermine the thrust of my overall argument in favor of micro sociology. Am I not showing that what appears to be micro is really determined by the macro structure? In fact, I am willing to see things that way too. The point of making the micro-macro connection is to see how things operate, using the full resources of sociological theory. In order to do this, it is necessary to break down some artificial distinctions; in the preceding, to get over the notion that “events” somehow exist in a different realm than “structures”. The micro-macro translation shows that everything macro is composed out of micro. Conversely, anything micro is part of the composition of macro; it exists in a macro context, which consists precisely in its ramifications to and from other micro-situational events spread out in space and time.

For that reason, it is possible to pursue the micro-macro connection fruitfully in either direction. Later in this paper, I will take up what is usually seen as the big challenge: to show how micro affects macro, in a theoretically generalizing way, not by ad hoc and particularizing examples (like the cases of Chairman Mao and Admiral Cheng which I have tried to puncture in the previous paragraphs). But first I would like to stress the value of understanding the micro, as an end in its own right.

Most of the things that sociologists think are important to explain are macro: why does revolution or economic development happen, what is the shape of organizations or communities, what proportion of the populace gets what (or gets deprived) in the realm of power, wealth, status and so on. All of these are typically seen as patterns, affecting many people and continuing over long periods of time. Against this, the analysis of things which happen in a small space and over periods of a few minutes on down to fractions of a second, tends to seem trivial. Its only justification would be if it can be shown that some crucial events at this micro level ramify over into the macro patterns. But that leads to the “great men” and the “great moments of history” kind of viewpoint that I have tried to suggest is unjustified. What justification is there, then, in the sociologically more radical claim, that the endless flow of micro-situations is itself worth looking at? Bear in mind, this overwhelmingly consists of micro-situations which are banal and repetitive—the full mundanity that the ethnomethodologists have stressed.

The most important attraction is: This is where we live. Our lives are micro. Whatever human experience is, high points, low points and every other existential dimension, it happens to us in micro-situations. Now try to bring in the full force of the fact that we can theorize what happens to us in micro-situations. Some of that theory is micro-situational; some of it has to do with where one is located in regard to links that make up the macro structure. But the latter is not simply a matter of saying “this person is a member of a certain social class, ethnic group, organizational position, social movement, etc.”—instead, think of all those rough categories as mere approximations, as designations for patterns of linkages among social situations. In other words, use the micro-translation of macro structures to get through to the reality of how social structure is impinging upon the individual. “Class,” “organization,” “gender” and all the rest are crude heuristic concepts; none of them affects anyone directly, but only insofar as these are kinds of interaction networks, shaping cognitions, emotions and motivations from moment to moment.

There is a sociological payoff here. If you want to understand what happens to you, to the people around you—why you think and feel the way you do, why things happen to you in your daily life—sociological theory gives us the best answers. Not psychology; infra-individual processes do not capture as much of what is essential as micro-sociological processes. And since interactions are linked together in chains, the character of the chain somewhat farther away from where you stand (perhaps after having blown up at
your kids, or sharing a laugh in a corridor, or feeling a surge of ambition to get some project finished) is part of the explanation of what happens here and now. If you wish, there is a potential clinical sociology here, potentially more powerful than any clinical psychology. And apart from the therapy, apart even from trespassing into Freud’s explorations, there is the intellectual satisfaction of explaining whatever is most immediate. A micro/macro sociologist never has to be bored.

(4) LOCAL RIPPLES—IT ISN’T NECESSARILY ALL CONNECTED

Since I have argued that all macro is composed of micro, and that all micro is surrounded by other micro which thereby makes up its macro context, I might seem to be claiming that there is a perfect symmetry between the two levels. The picture suggests itself of a huge ocean, in which the character of every drop is produced by the pattern of all the other drops, and a ripple any place is propagated everywhere. This is the vision of Indra’s net in Hua-yen Buddhist philosophy: the universe is like a mesh of jewels, each reflecting every other jewel. But although there might be some advantages for explanatory theory if this were so, I believe it is not.

The macro-social world, like everything else in sociology, consists of human beings interacting; what is macro is their patterns across time and space. There is nothing mysterious about this; it is demographic; it is ecological. It is material, both in the philosophical sense that “matter” is that which has a space-time location, and in the classical Marxian sense that it is the disposition of physical objects; “property” is the way people in situations repeatedly appropriate places in the landscape, buildings, machinery, weapons, scientific instruments, pieces of paper, and so on. And it is material in a sense shared by Freud and Durkheim: human bodies, pulsing with emotions, coming into tighter or looser contact. And of course it is also mental—I don’t want to get off into ontological disputes again, except to claim that whatever human minds are, they are embodied, situationally located in this ecology of places and encounters. It is because of this that we can have a sociology of mind, and a social construction of reality (as well as a social construction of emotion).

We can take a slice of the micro of whatever size we like. It might be a territory the size of the United States; it might even have the exact contours of national boundaries. But there is no reason to regard this as a natural unit of analysis, and to expect that every micro event within this line will ramify into every other event, while no micro events outside the line ever cross over within it. Macro connections are where you find them. Some of the ripples in the ocean are small and local; some of them are huge, and propagate a long distance. One of the reasons why I regard as illusory the older sociological focus upon the nation-state as if it were “the society,” is that ultra-macro influences propagate much more widely than the state; as we will see, influences on domestic politics seem to flow heavily inwards from the larger geopolitical arena. And from the other direction, the “nation-state” concept overstates how much uniformity of pattern there is inside those physical lines; there are plenty of local organizations, dissident class situations, places that propagate their separate constructions of reality within most such territories.

Any macro structure is composed of micro situations; but any particular micro situation is not necessarily linked to all other places and times where interactions take place. Some do propagate, in varying degrees. I have argued that local situations produce emotional energy and recycle it up or down; and that situations produce and recirculate ideas, especially those highly-loaded symbols which are sacred objects for group members. Some emotions and ideas can ripple widely through social networks; certain patterns of these ripples constitute what we call social movements, climates of opinion, feelings of legitimacy or of business confidence. A micro-macro theory should tell us the conditions under which they ripple more widely or narrowly, with what intensity and what effects.

By the same token, not everything carries over very widely at all. Some kinds of processes are relatively micro, locally restricted. I will venture a homely example: at a recent conference, there were a dozen roundtable discussions in a rather large bare room. Although it was quiet to begin with, voices echoed off the walls; soon at every table people were raising their voices to be heard, with the result that the room grew steadily louder until it was hard to hear what was going
(5) CONSTRAINTS OF MICRO THEORY ON MACRO THEORY

It is time now to take up the main challenge. What, precisely, does micro sociology contribute to macro sociology? As Fuchs (1988) puts the question: what can conversational turn-taking possibly have to do with the world system?

Notice first that the real problem is on the level of general, analytical principles, not concrete descriptions. The latter is too easy. It can always be shown, if you have sufficient patience, that any social phenomena whatsoever, no matter how macro, is made up empirically of micro encounters of people spread out across time and space. To speak of a “world system” or anything else is just a gloss, a verbal category we use for convenience in summarizing such patterns. When historians want to dispute the applicability of a concept, they do it by moving the level of evidence downwards in a more micro direction, toward the actual human actions that can be documented. But this is not the path that I wish to follow here. To speak in defense of macro conceptions: they may be glosses, summaries of details, but practically speaking we cannot do without them. The task of an explanatory science is to formulate principles wherever we can; if there are principles which explain the general patterns found in a world system, a state, a social movement, a long-term organization, then such principles have a validity in their own right.

The micro-macro challenge, then, is to show there is a connection between micro theory and macro theory. I have already stated in general what form that connection will take: macro structures are not entirely reducible to micro processes, since there are irreducible macro variables, the numerical distribution of human situational encounters across time and material space. I have also conceded the pragmatic usefulness of proceeding on the macro level alone, formulating whatever heuristic explanatory principles of macro structures are possible. What I must show, then, is that whatever macro principles may exist, are constrained to take that form because of micro explanatory principles. Not every hypothetical macro-explanatory theory is possible; only those which connect to micro-theoretical mechanisms by which macro patterns are produced and sustained.

Establishing the micro-theory connection is
Thus a strategy for building macro theory. I want to stress its pragmatic aspect because of an asymmetry between theories on the micro and macro level. Micro theories are generally much more analytical, more concerned to formulate general principles, than macro theories. It is sometimes questioned (e.g. by my colleague Jonathan Turner) whether there is much macro theory at all, couched on the level of generic processes. A great deal of macro sociology is quasi-historicist. It discusses particular historical cases, invokes comparisons among them, considers various alternative modes of explanation. What makes a particular work of macro-historical sociology stand out from the crowd of particularizing descriptions, however, is the extent to which it incorporates some generalizing model. For instance, Barrington Moore’s *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* has been influential far beyond studies of agricultural politics in a half-dozen early modern states, because it contains a quasi-explicit model of political dynamics in general; and this model has received further analytical development by Skocpol and others. On the other hand, without some theoretical implications, macro-sociology is just another description of events in 18th century Romania.

It is currently fashionable to be particularizing and historicist. A certain version of academic ideology claims that this is the only thing one can be, that no general theory is possible. I think this position is self-undermining, since even its advocates acquire intellectual stature for themselves by rising above the plane of particulars towards more general significance. But it is characteristic that this particularism is so prominent in macro-historical studies, where indeed it is difficult to attain a clear analytical vision, and tempting to drop back into more defensible posture of “I’m just talking about what happened in a few places anyhow.” All the more reason, then, to push the micro-macro theory connection, as an aid to getting macro’s act together, as theory.

The challenge then: what connection is there between conversational turn-taking and the world system? The terms are not of similar theoretical explicitness. Turn-taking (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974) is formulated on the general analytical level, whereas Wallerstein presents the world system in a more historicist mode. But there are more generalizing components which can be extracted. Wallerstein and colleagues (Res. Working Group, 1979; for more general summary, see Collins, 1988:93–8) formulate the underlying dynamics of the capitalist world system as cyclical phases of expansion and contraction, driven ultimately by market over-supply and under-supply. Market models are not very difficult to micro-translate; for a market is precisely a set of exchanges among real people in real transactional situations. The macro contours of a market are nothing but the irreducible macro variables: the sheer numbers of exchanges of various kinds, which present each individual in an exchange situation with a set of constrained choices, some more profitable, some less. It is not surprising that proponents of sociological exchange theory (Homans and his lineage) have pushed the primacy of micro theory.1

Where Wallersteian world system theory gets its sociological punch is situating a world capitalist market in a geopolitical setting. The economic and the geopolitical reciprocally feed each other: expansion of markets is carried out by geopolitical strength, whereas downturn in the profitability of world markets results in geopolitical showdowns among the core states, and to periodic shifts in military (and economic) hegemony. I will concentrate here on the geopolitics, since this is an area in which some more general theory has been stated (Collins, 1981; 1988:135–7). The basic questions of geopolitics concern which states will dominate or be dominated; under what conditions do they expand or contract; what territories will they hold? There are also ancillary questions about the outbreak and intensity of wars, and their consequences (which include the rise and fall in the legitimacy of domestic political factions: see Collins, 1986:145–66)

**Geopolitical principles.** One of the main geopolitical principles is that economic/demographic resources of contending states determine military domination, and that such resource advantages or disadvantages cumulate over time.2 Another principle is geoposi-

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1 Indeed pushed it too far sometimes, ignoring the necessity of building some theory in the realm of irreducible macro-variables connecting micro processes.

2 It is this principle that is implied in Wallerstein’s connection between economic and geopolitical hegemony in the world system. Wallerstein adds a special dynamic for how world markets generate some of the economic...
tional: the physical configuration of states in space (the number of accessible enemies in each direction, especially the difference between “marchland” positions with enemies in few directions, vs. middle positions surrounded on all sides) also determines the pattern of long-term expansion and contraction of territorial power. These principles are rather easy to micro-translate, since they are basically aggregation effects of micro-organization, together with an emphasis on one of the irreducible macro-variables, the sheer expanse of physical space (in this case, the number of directions an organization must act in).

I want to focus on another geopolitical principle, since it makes an especially good connection to micro theory. This is the principle of overextension: when states attempt to maintain military control too far away from their home resource base, they are liable to catastrophic defeats: battlefield events which set the whole process in reverse, but at high speed. There are two proposed mechanisms by which this occurs, both of which fill in the meaning of “too far from home base.” One of these is logistics strain (Stinchcombe, 1968:218–30; Collins, 1988:136; Kennedy, 1987): the problem of keeping an organization supplied at a distance increases as the costs of transporting and administering supplies takes up an increasing proportion of total resources; at some point, there is too little left for actual fighting, and local forces on the other side, closer to their home resource base will win. The other version (Collins, 1981) brings in cultural/emotional resources as well as economic ones: I call this the “no-intervening-heartland rule,” which says that a state can maintain an empire over adjacent ethnic territories, but comes under strain when it tries to control ethnically identified groups a further layer away.

The point that I want to concentrate on here is: why does defeat on distant frontiers have such a disintegrating effect? Why does an empire tend to expand slowly but to roll backwards rapidly from a crisis point? The answer comes from micro-theory, and it connects with the controversial turn-taking process.

**Turn-taking and Social Solidarity.** To take the connection from the micro side first: the turning-taking model of conversation is essentially about social solidarity. What Sacks et al. pointed out is that human beings attempt to maintain a rhythm of interaction, such that one person talks at a time, conversationalists try to minimize overlaps, while they also try to avoid gaps between one person stopping and the other beginning to talk. This pattern is not merely cultural; i.e. it is very widespread across cultures/language groups (Deirdre Boden, personal communication), and may be regarded as a universal structure of sociability among human beings. Turn-taking is also more than merely cognitive; as Sacks et al. point out, conversationalists must monitor the rhythm of other people speaking so that they can come in on cue; this is much more important than being able to understand what the other person is talking about. The point is also strongly made by Sudnow (1979; summarized in Collins, 1988:327–9), in the analogy between talking and performing music. I would theorize this pattern by saying that turn-taking is very Durkheimian. It is an interaction ritual characterized by mutual focus of attention, which builds up its own local “collective conscience” and its own constraints. These constraints are manifested, in typical Durkheimian fashion, when they are violated: the embarrassing pause when participants let the rhythm lapse, the frustration and heightened efforts to get the floor when turns extensively overlap.

The theory of the conversational turn-taking mechanism is thus part of a broader micro theory, about how solidarity is produced, and broken down, in microinteractions. Now let us push this line of theory upwards on the micro-macro continuum, and ask how organizations are held together. Analytically, there are several components to this; any permanent organization will include material property, material incentives and resources; typically some element of coercive control will be present too (at least to back up the distribution of material property). The key to property and coercive power is always social organization; it is the group that can exercise control over any individual, and individuals dominate an organization only by getting the members of a group to exercise control over each other.

In a highly coercive organization (such as an army, or the police power at the core of a
state) this consists of what I call an “enforcement coalition.” This is a particular kind of interpersonal structure in which individuals are ready to use coercion upon each other; in which no single individual wishes to be left out of the dominant coalition and hence subject to its force. Of course power in a coercive coalition can shift. People can struggle over power; but they do this by trying to weaken one focus of the enforcement coalition and organize another in its place. And enforcement coalitions can break apart, grow bigger or smaller, or disintegrate entirely. All of this is done as a process of micro-macro coordination.

More exactly, the extent of the enforcement coalition is a matter of how much coordination (how far in the macro dimensions of time and space) there is among different micro-situations. Concretely, it is how much that individual soldiers, policemen, politicians, or subjects of the state, feel constrained to maintain a focus upon a coercive coalition involving a certain number of these other people. This is not typically a matter of conscious calculation. Soldiers do not usually say to themselves: “I had better obey this officer’s orders, since the rest of the army will back him up if I don’t.” In fact, when conscious calculations of this sort begin to take place on a wide scale, it means that the enforcement coalition is already becoming rather shallow, moving away from the unthinking obedience which is that reified sense of macro organization existing impervious to individual challenge. Just as in a smoothly-flowing conversation, the participants do not calculate what to say next, but feel themselves caught up in a train of rhythmic alternation, in a smoothly-flowing enforcement coalition the members feel their focus of attention implicitly includes the chains which link their immediate interactants with persons unseen. This is more than an analogy: I am suggesting that a coercive organization has the tightly coordinated rhythm of turn-taking (expanded from the verbal to the non-verbal rhythm of acts), with everyone coming in on the beat, no blank spaces, no overlaps/struggles to get the floor—and that this turn-taking rhythm extends in a seamless web right across the macro space, generating a resonance which is felt at any particular situation as an unevadable structure of power. Military Organization and Disorganization. This can best be demonstrated by comparing the conditions in which a coercive organization holds together, with the conditions under which it breaks down. The conditions are not far to seek: for this is exactly what happens on a battlefield, and distinguishes between victory and defeat. A battle essentially is a struggle among competing organizations; each is attempting to make the other side break down, while keeping itself intact. (Evidence and further detail are presented in Collins, 1988a.) Thus violence itself is secondary. As long as organization is maintained, violence is not very effective. For human beings are not very capable in action under conditions of extreme danger and fear (another micro principle with macro effects); they are usually quite ineffective in using their weapons, and do relatively little damage to each other as long as opposing organizations remain coherent. It is when an army breaks ranks, when it no longer operates as a mutually supporting coalition, that it takes severe casualties. First organizational breakdown, then physical loss: that is the typical sequence.

Battlefield tactics consist of efforts to cause opposing social organization to break apart: by concentrating violence on a particular place, hoping thereby to induce a ripple of disorganization that will flow outwards; or by maneuver, attempting to make opposing forces disorganized by the sheer process of geographical movement from one place to another, under conditions of enforced speed, uncertainty, and their emotional effects. Here emotions are micro/macro flows: the mood of an army is not a metaphor, but a palpable process whereby a smooth rhythmic condition, a turn-taking of all the elements of violence, threat, and support are kept in synch, or break apart into little pockets of troops whose social reality has now become a terrifying negative, the felt absence of their own organization in macro space.3

There is even a macro-flow of emotions across the lines of conflict. At the moment when one army breaks apart into panic retreat

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3 There is also danger for the attacking force, and those who initiate maneuvers; their own movement has the possibility of straining their own coordination and opening themselves to disorganization. In reality, both armies in combat are breaking down simultaneously, below the level of peace-time discipline that makes them powerful enforcement coalitions; victory goes to the organization which breaks down the least while its opponent is breaking apart.
and organizational chaos, it is quite common for the victorious army to go into what I call a “forward panic,” an attack on the now-helpless morass of individualized enemy soldiers. It is this process that produces the typical disparity in casualties between winning and losing sides: the losers take most of their casualties after they have lost, when they are no longer capable of defending themselves. This too is a strong instance of micro-macro connection: the murderous surge of a victorious army is itself a kind of huge interaction ritual. Quite literally, the micro-participants in the battle line are caught up in a situation in which their local activity is intensely coordinated with that of their fellows, up and down the line, possibly into the considerable distance. The complementary focus of their attention is upon their defeated enemies, again against the backdrop of macro-space, but in this case isolated from supporting help in the distance. The victorious battlefield opens up as a zone where social pressure has suddenly collapsed on the other side; there is safety in driving forward, and a kind of ritual compulsion at one’s back and flanks to manifest violent control outwards, to make the enforcement coalition supreme in a place where it had been opposed. The enemy is a negative sacred object in the Durkheimian sense; his destruction, when it becomes organizationally safe to do so, is a structural extension of the scapegoating rituals more typically found within a domestic hierarchy of power.

I have made the connection from the theory of processes on the very small micro-level—turn-taking mechanisms and face-to-face interaction rituals more broadly—to a theory of the middle levels of the micro/macro continuum—in this case, military organizations spreading out across a battlefield. Extensions to still larger macro levels are not hard to add. What Luttwak (1987) calls “theatre level” and “grand strategy” levels of military power involve coordination which is still more macro among meso-level events. A single battle does not necessarily lose a war; nor, for that matter, does the disintegration of a battalion, or a company, necessarily lose the battle. But each smaller micro-level occasion of disorganization is a threat; successful military defense consists in isolating pockets of disorganization so that they do not spread, bringing down the whole. On the other hand, successful offensive strategy consists in keeping the momentum of local advantage so that recovery cannot be made elsewhere on the macro plane; it means physically propagating one defeat into another and another, until the whole structure falls apart.

Geopolitical principles (as listed above) formulated on the most macro level, are about what kinds of distributions (i.e. aggregations) of material and organizational resources are available to be thrown into meso battlefield situations; and what kinds of geopositional configurations affect how these resources can be sent across space to become real factors in violent combat. But these macro distributions and configurations are moost, unless they can become activated in real combat situations; on that level, they must be transformed into the solidarity of an army, keeping itself together while the opposing organization breaks down. This is the point at which the micro palpably meets the macro (the overall distribution of resources and positions). The social organization, as locally enacted, is the touchstone; it provides the dynamics, for which all the rest is but input. When Napoleon said that in war, the moral is to the material as a factor of 3 to 1, it is this kind of relationship to which he referred.

Now we should be able to understand, in theoretical terms, why it is that geopolitical overextension tends to bring rapid disintegration of state power. A military defeat is not merely a local event, unless much social effort is put into keeping it localized. The army is an enforcement coalition, and the core of any state’s power. The more successful a state in subduing territory, the more the presence of its enforcement coalition tends to percolate throughout the political networks that are connected to it. Victorious generals, the beneficiaries of the ritual focus of attention which is constituted by the network structure of an intact army, tend to be irresistible centers of domestic power as well. Thus an empire which has conquered far and wide has necessarily built up a macro-focus of attention which makes great claims. It constrains the symbolic realm, projecting a sense of a huge, irresistible organization, generating its own legitimacy on a virtually metaphysical scale.

But this is organizational hybris. In reality, the very big, far-flung empire is especially vulnerable, because of the distribution of resources towards distant frontiers. Military resources are also political costs; the networks
at home, in the core of the government and in the organized sectors which are asked to transfer their resources to bear the military burden, are drawn together as a ready-made source of opposition should the military machine falter. Thus a distant defeat has the potential for disaster. Since it typically comes in a situation in which logistics, the movement of resources across space has become a problem, it occurs at a time when the far-flung organizational network of the army is itself hanging by threads. Bad defeats tend to break up the army organizationally, far and wide; the collapse of military power in turn tends to upset the focus of power within the domestic state core, setting off a power struggle among opposing enforcement coalitions. These processes can ramify back upon each other; when large-scale networks lose their smooth coordination among their parts, there tends to be a cumulating process of fragmentation and internecine conflict.4

Conclusion: Micro/Macro Theory Building

I could go on in this vein. There is a good deal more to be done in the realm of constructing a micro/macro theory of geopolitics, and its ramifications into the patterns of political power generally. My point here is simpler: micro theory constrains the content of macro theory. And more: analytical macro theory concerns how local micro-processes affect other local micro-processes, across various macro configurations and aggregations.

This is not the only front on which the argument can be made. I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere (Collins, 1988:450–91) that the structure of formal organizations is determined by micro contingencies. Organizational research has produced a series of generalizations on the meso-level: unit productions tend to have flat hierarchical structures and the fusion of formal with informal channels; mass production-and-assembly organizations tend to have complex multidivisional structures with long chains of command; etc. These relationships between tasks/technologies/environments, on one hand, and the shape for the organizational structure on the other, are mediated by the micro-processes of control and group solidarity. Thus coercive interactions result in sharp micro-divisions among order-givers and order-takers, which constrain what kinds of tasks can be carried out and what sorts of network structures can be built; flexible coordination in situations of uncertainty involves yet another kind of interaction rituals, and results in a different kind of organizational structure. Organizational hierarchy is itself a macro coordination of micro activities; hence the nature of theory about organizational hierarchy is constrained by the nature of theory of what happens on the micro level.

Organizations are meso-structures, occupying the middle ranges of the micro-macro continuum.5 But the theory of organizations provides a theoretical link upwards to still larger structures. For most of the principles of organizational theory apply to any organizational networks, whether or not there are formal organizational boundaries around or within them. A complex of organizations is itself a “super-organization,” and its structure and dynamics can be explained by organizational principles. (See for example my analyses of capitalism and of socialism as super-organizations, subject to Perrow’s theory of complexity/linearity and tight/loose coupling, in Collins, 1988:484–9). Since principles of organizational structure are constrained by principles of micro theory, that means that micro principles constrain social structures on up to any degree of macro extension whatsoever.

I would conclude that sociologists’ opposition to theorizing the micro/macro connection seems to be due mainly to meta-theoretical commitments, rather than to actual problems in explanatory theories. When the substantive work is actually done, it moves closer to a

4 I have couched this in the most extreme form: the actual collapse of an empire because of defeats upon foreign frontiers. There are numerous examples in the history of the Chinese dynasties and many other empires, such as the collapse of Napoleon’s power just after its height, upon the failure of his overextended campaign into Russia in 1812 (for evidence, see Collins, 1981). It is more useful for theory-building to see that this process is subject to variations: how much overextension, how much resource strain, how much domestic opposition and conflict, hence how severe the political repercussions of defeats. There are plenty of milder cases: one in vivid memory is the successive delegitimation of the political parties in office in the U.S. during the Vietnam war.

5 This is approximately the same location in conceptual space as social movements, another place where theories of micro/macro connection are being substantively constructed. See for example Oliver and Marwell (1988).
micro/macro connection, not farther away from it. Jon Turner, for example, has argued in the past that micro and macro theorizing are best pursued independently of each other. Nevertheless, as Turner (1988) lays out his models of a comprehensive micro theory of interaction, the connection to macro theory begins to come into view. Thus Turner not only has a micro theory of social motivation and of social interaction, but these flow into a theory of social structuring: the way in which micro processes repeat themselves over time and thus constitute social structure. Granted, this is local social structure; but it is at least part way up the micro/macro continuum from the immediate interactional situation.

Still further, I would suggest that Turner’s micro theory puts constraints on what should be the case at a considerably more macro level. Turner’s model (1988:200–209) centers on the dynamics of anxiety. Basic motivational processes flow through a need for sense of group inclusion (which in turn drives and is recursively driven by self-conceptions in a variety of Goffmanian interactional processes), and through a need for a sense of ontological security (which in turn flows to and from the use of reality-constructing techniques as spelled out in social phenomenology). The feedback loops in Turner’s model imply that individuals are most motivated to put energy into interaction rituals, framing, accounting and other social/cognitive processes, when they have high levels of anxiety; when they have lower anxiety, they accept a less energized (and more flaccid) routine.

Here then is a micro/macro connection. If we assume Turner’s theory is correct, anxiety is going to be higher, both in the group-inclusion and in the ontological-security processes, when there is a good deal of conflict or incongruence in the pattern of someone’s daily interactions. That is the result of macro-patterns (more precisely, the impingement on an individual’s experience of some local sector of a macro pattern). On the other hand, locally stable sectors of macro structures will have less anxious, more ontologically secure persons within them; and this in turn generates less social motivation to put energy into enacting and controlling such structures. These kinds of passive local structures, then, are going to be fragile, vulnerable to being influenced by more high-energy centers of attention elsewhere in the macro structure, if the latter happen to impinge on them. In more familiar language, this is why traditional communities are subject to disruption by contact with more dynamic and conflictual social structures, until the traditional structure is itself mobilized into something that is only quasi-traditional and actually crypto-modern.

To draw another macro consequence of Turner’s micro theory: if we assume that there is more conflict in the centers of power structures (i.e. there is more maneuvering over power at the top), then members of the upper classes are going to have more anxiety than members of the middle or lower classes. This anxiety is channeled into energy for ritualizing and frame-making, which presumably should keep up a pressure for social change at the top. The upper classes are thus structurally constrained not to sit on their laurels. If they do so, they reduce their anxiety levels, but also their social motivation to put energy into ritualizing and reality-con structing; and this in turn makes them vulnerable to any group which is able to get in striking distance which has a experienced a higher level of conflict and hence of anxiety. Turner’s micro theory thus implies a macro pattern, concerning where within the stratification structure the dynamics of change will be located.

Micro/macro theory is not just an opportunity for metatheoretical debate. More importantly, it is also a path for building substantive theory, for connecting different arenas of sociological research. And that means seeing things about the world that we did not see before.

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