

The Elimination of Rupture: Social Authority's Attempt to Transcend Binary Distinctions

-- Reading Coleman's "The Foundations of Social Theory"

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Abstract

As a representative work of Coleman's theory of rational action, "Foundations of Social Theory" contains Coleman's ideological intention of building a bridge between the macro and the micro, in which the theory of social authority, as an integral part of the theory of rational action, is also an attempt to construct the micro-macro dichotomy in the generation of its authority relationship and authority system. Therefore, based on the methodology and research framework of Coleman's rational action theory system, we select the authority idea of the book "The Foundations of Social Theory" as the object of exposition, and try to comprehensively discuss Coleman's social authority idea through analyzing its middle-level theory of social authority from the aspects of foundation of social authority theory, the granting of authority, the social performance of authority and the overall characteristics of Coleman's social authority thoughts. It seeks to reveal Coleman's attempt to transcend the binary distinction between micro and macro at the authority level.

Keywords

Social Authority; Authority Relationship; Authority System; Binary Distinction.

1. Introduction

As an important research topic in political science and sociology of law, the issue of authority is often used in the analysis of political phenomena and the study of judicial authority and scholars have carried out relevant research on it from different angles. For example, Engels discussed the theoretical logic of authority

development based on social order; Parsons defined the rationality of the concept of authority from an institutional perspective; Weber's high-level summary of the ideal type of authority, etc. These studies are of great significance in clarifying the logic of authority development, discussing the dialectical relationship between order and freedom, and further improving political life. However, the above studies are almost based on political authority, ignoring the phenomenon of authority that exists in many fields such as economy and culture. In order to solve this loophole, Coleman studies authority as a social phenomenon and creatively puts forward the theory of social authority.

2. Basic Construction of Social Authority Theory

Social authority theory is a middle-level theory constructed by Coleman, which is based on the conceptual scope, research purpose, research methodology and elemental composition, and is united with rational action theory as an integral part of it. The core of the theory is a sociological theory based on the assumption of rational human beings, taking actors, resources, interests and control as the elements of analysis, and explaining the phenomenon of social authority from the level of individual action.

2.1. Conceptual Category of Social Authority

What is authority? Different scholars have different opinions, Parsons takes the institutional perspective as a starting point and considers authority as a kind of institutionalized power, while Engels interprets authority from the level of social order, based on historical materialism and dialectical materialism. Coleman is different from the two. Coleman interprets authority from the standpoint of individualistic methodology and the phenomenon of dominance in society. He argues that authority represents the right to control the actions of others[1].

It means a legal relationship between domination and being dominated. It is a social authority rather than a single political authority in the traditional sense, which may be expressed as the ability of non-state social individuals, organizations or groups to dominate others.

2.2. Research Objectives and Methods

According to Coleman, any theory that takes individual action as the starting point for explaining systemic behavior should recount three relationships: the macro-to-micro transition, the purposeful action of individuals, and the micro-to-macro transition[1].

In particular, the macro to micro shift represents the influence or limitations of the social system on individual actors, such as the limitations imposed by social norms, whereas the purposeful actions of individuals represent the behaviors that occur within the system as a result of the maximization of the individual's interests, such as exchange behaviors; and the micro to macro shift refers to the way in which individual behaviors are combined to form the social system, such as the formation of authoritative and trusting systems[2]. These three can be summed up as the system's restrictions and influence on actors, actors' activities within the system, and the combination of actors' actions into system behavior[1].

From the above account, it is not difficult to see that in Coleman's viewpoint, he is opposed to the binary opposition between macro research and micro research, and he believes that the macro and micro can transform and influence each other, so he advocates the individualistic methodology and tries to take the micro individual action as the starting point and the macro social system action as the end point, endeavoring to achieve the linking chain between the micro and the macro[7]. That is, the behaviour of the system is explained in terms of the behaviour of different components of the system (e.g., individuals, groups, organisations, institutions) or the behaviour of the system is explained on the basis of actions below the system level[1].

The social authority theory actually belongs to the meso level and is an organic component of the middle-level social action theory. It is one of Coleman's paths to connect the micro and macro, trying to explain the phenomenon of social authority clearly. From the above overall analysis, it is not difficult to see the goals and research methods of this theory.

Its fundamental purpose is to link the macro and micro, trying to explain the authority relationship and the generation of the authority system through individual action, while the research methodology of its social authority theory follows the methodology of individualism, trying to explain the dominance phenomenon of the social environment rationally from the individual, through the study of how individual behavior gives rise to the idea of social system behavior.

2.3. Components

Coleman's theory of social authority is based on the level of individual social action to explain the phenomenon of social authority, and its theoretical starting point lies in the individual's purposeful action. In the book, Coleman simplifies the definition of individual purposeful action, he assumes the individual as a rational person, believes that the purpose of individual action is to pursue the maximization of interests, and limits the individual's action within the scope of rational action. The authority relationship and authority system, as a product evolved based on

individual rational action, the actors, resources, interests and control related to rational action naturally become the most basic concepts for understanding "authority".

In the theory of authority, actors are typically rational beings who follow the principle of maximizing personal interests. Resources are a collection of tangible items and intangible events such as events, expertise, and personal belongings controlled by actors, of which control, the central exchange in authority relationships and transactions in authority systems, is an intangible resource. Interests are needs and preferences, embedded in resources of all types, material, spiritual and social. Control implies domination and mastery, where the authority relationship presupposes that the dominant has control over certain events of the dominated. It is the organic composition of these four elements that gives rise to the formation of authority relations and systems of authority.

3. The Generation of Social Authority

How is authority generated? In traditional political science, the formation of political authority comes from nothing more than divine right, blood or force; Weber also reveals the sources of authority from tradition, legal theory, charm, etc[4], while Coleman is different. Coleman argues that authority represents "the right to control the actions of others", which in practice implies a legitimate relationship of domination and being dominated. That is, suppose there is a basic action with only two actors, A and B. At this point, when B transfers control of some of his resources or actions to A, A has the right to control some of B's resources or actions, and the authority is able to take place, the two forming an authoritative relationship. There are two prerequisites for this process to occur. First, the individual must first have legal control and transfer rights over resources or actions. Simply put, before the dominant can exercise authority, he must be given some kind of right. The possession of rights by the dominant is a condition for the existence of authority[1].

The second is that the individual is willing to transfer these rights to others, that is, voluntary transfer. To further realize these two premises, the former depends on social consensus, and the latter depends on the need for social exchange.

3.1. Social Consensus Promotes the Legalization of Rights

As Coleman says in the article:

"Individuals may or may not have the right to control their own actions. Only when an individual possesses this right and has the right to transfer this right can the actor voluntarily grant authority to others.[1]"

It follows from this that an important prerequisite for the emergence of authority is that the individual has the right to control and transfer resources or actions, but that, despite the acquisition of rights, they are not recognised as such. In essence, rights exist by social consensus, that is, they can only exist if there is unanimous agreement on whether they exist or not[1].

In addition, of course, the actor may use force or influence to compel others to recognise his rights. It follows that the key to an individual's legal right to control or transfer lies in his or her ability to have social recognition or sufficient power, specifically whether his or her rights are supported by law and social consensus. The legal counterpart, on the other hand, is the legal right, which refers to the fact that, within the law, an individual can use and dispose of certain objects and resources or control the consequences of certain events[1].

Social consensus corresponds to non-statutory rights, which refer to rights that are not specified in the law but that others subjectively agree with the actor. On the one hand, these two rights restrict the rights of actors through legal provisions; on the other hand, they determine whether actors have rights through social consensus. Both of them jointly promote the formation of legalized rights.

3.2. Social Exchange Promotes the Transfer of Rights

When an individual has a legitimate right to control a resource or event, as well as the right to transfer it, what motivates him to transfer this right to another person? Generally speaking, people can be divided into two categories based on their reasons for transferring control over certain actions.

The first category, actors who transfer control rights, believe that following authority is better for themselves than not having authority, so they unilaterally transfer control rights without any accompanying remuneration. The second category, the actors who cede control do not believe that obedience to authority is to their advantage, and they transfer control in exchange for a series of additional rewards[1].

Social exchanges play an important role in making these two types of situations possible. According to Coleman, actors in social action are typically "rational beings" who have certain resources, events or actions at their disposal and seek to maximise their personal interests. However, actors do not have complete control over the activities that satisfy their interests, and they find that some of the activities that profit them are under the control of other actors. In this structure, a person's pursuit of his own interests necessarily drives him to engage in some kind of transaction with other actors[1].

Social exchange arises from this. Social authority is actually the result of social exchange, in order to maximise their own interests, or in order to get some additional compensation, the actors will transfer their control over certain events to others, to be dominated by others, and the two will form the most basic authority relationship, and personal authority is thus generated. It should be noted that in the process of exchange of authority, the content of the actors and interests represented is not different from the meaning of other action systems, but the resources exchanged are unique.

Resources, as a collection of rights, can be used, divided and exchanged.[1] Here, resources represent the right to control and transfer one's own actions rather than tangible goods, and since actions cannot be divided up like other resources, such as personal goods and events, they can only be divided up and exchanged for intangible rights, such as the right to control and transfer one's own actions[6].

In summary, in Coleman's view, authority represents a dominant force that begins with the individual's need for social exchange and centres on legal rights, which are endowed with an inner core of legitimacy through law and social consensus.

4. Social Manifestations of Authority

As a kind of right to control others, when authority is introduced into social relations, the transfer of rights and control between actors forms a third kind of relationship, i.e., authority relationship.[4] With the emergence of agents, the simplest authority relationship between two parties gradually transforms into a threeparty or even multi-party relationship, and the accumulation of multiple complex authority relationships evolves into an authority system, and authority relationships and authority systems represent the social manifestations of authority at the micro-level and macro-level respectively.

4.1. Microscopic Manifestation of Authority - Authority Relationship

At the micro level, authority expresses social relations between individuals through authority relations. As Coleman states,

"If actor A has the right to control some action of B, there is an authority relationship between actors A and B.[1]"

It is easy to see that there are three basic conditions for its occurrence: firstly, there are the most basic actors, secondly, the individual actor has the right to control and transfer the

resources, and thirdly, the individual is willing to make the transfer. According to the content of transferred rights and the premise of transferred rights, Coleman distinguished authority relationships into simple and complex, common and separated authority relationships.

4.1.1. Simple and Complex Authority Relationships.

A major premise for the establishment of an authority relationship is that actors must have the right to control their own actions and the right to transfer. Depending on the content of rights transfer, authority relationships can be divided into simple authority relationships and complex authority relationships.

Specifically, according to the different ways of transferring control rights, there are two types of authority relationships. In the first authority relationship, the actor who accepts the control rights exercises authority. In the second authority relationship, the actor who exercises authority (deputy) and accepts the control rights (Dominator) is completed by two actors[1].

From this, it can be seen that there are two important indicators to distinguish simple and complex authority relationships, one is the number of actors, and the other is the number of rights transfers. A simple authority relationship often only involves two actors. It is a simple relationship that needs to be maintained by the two actors. In this relationship, the actor only transfers the control of his own actions to the other actor. The two actors are The simplest relationship between the dominant and the dominated. Complex authoritative relationships are complex relationships maintained by third parties, where the actor not only transfers control of the action, but also grants the right to transfer such control to the other party, creating a complex social relationship between the dominator, the deputy, and the dominated.

4.1.2. Common and Separate Authority Relationships

Based on the difference in the premise of transferring rights, or whether the interests of both actors are the same, Coleman argues that authority relationships can be subdivided into common authority relationships and separate authority relationships. Based on the principle of maximising interests, rational actors transfer rights and establish an authoritative relationship with others. However, the question of whether the interests of the dominant and the dominated can be fully aligned in this relationship is discussed by Coleman using a comparative analysis of the commune and the hierarchical organisation proposed by Weber.

He points to two situations in which actors transfer the right to control themselves, thus giving rise to two different types of authority structures. The first type is the commune and the trade union, and the second type is the sectional organisation and the agency relationship. In the first type of authority structure, the transfer of control presupposes that the exercise of authority benefits the dominated in the municipality, which is the common authority relationship. In the second type of authority structure, this presupposition does not exist and is therefore called a separated authority relationship[1].

In a common authority relationship, the rational actor transfers rights because of the exercise of authority, which will benefit him or her, when the interests of both the dominant and the dominated are aligned. On the other hand, in the separated authority relationship, the exercise of authority does not make the interests of the dominant and the dominated coincide completely, and there may even be a conflict, in which case the relationship between the two is similar to a market exchange relationship. The dominant person exercises authority only for his own benefit, and the dominated person obeys authority only to obtain partial compensation[7].

4.2. Macroscopic Manifestation of Authority – Authority System

Authority manifests itself as an authority relationship at the micro-social level, and as an authority system at the macro-level. The two are interrelated and somewhat different. On the one hand, the authority system is based on the transformation of the authority relationship, and

the transformation of the two actually reflects the bridge between micro and macro constructed by Coleman. On the other hand, there is a clear distinction between the two.

Authority relations arise from the transfer of control by an actor. The authority structure (system) may consist of one or several authority relations.[1] It can be seen that the authority system is at a higher level, having developed from the most primitive authority relations between two or three actors, and is a social structure that includes relations between multiple actors. It is based on and above authority relations. Coleman, in order to further explain the real problem, also starts from the classification of authority relations, and divides the authority structure into simple and complex, common and separate.

4.2.1. Simple and Complex Authority Structures

Generally speaking, a social system based on simple authority relations is a simple authority system, while a system based on complex authority relations is a complex authority system. Also, multiple simple authority relations can create a multi-level social system, such as the medieval fiefdom system, but this simple authority system has a big limitation. On the one hand, this system can only contain two hierarchical levels, the dominator and the dominated. On the other hand, the authority transferred from the dominated to the dominator can only be used, but not transferred. And it is this loophole that gave rise to the complex authority system.

In simple authority systems, the number of dominated persons who submit to each authority is generally quite large, making it difficult to adapt simple authority systems to the requirements of productive organization[1].

In a complex system of authority, the hierarchical division of the hierarchy includes at least three roles: the leader, the deputy and the dominated. While at the same time the system must contain three sets of relationships: "The dominated grants authority to the leader, the latter transfers authority to the deputy, and the deputy exercises authority over the dominated." [1] These three relationships are indispensable which are the basic elements that make up a complex system of authority.

However, when a third party comes along and the dominant is required to transfer authority to the deputy. Although this can enhance efficiency, it inevitably leads to the need to face the new problem of how to ensure that the deputy is actually empowered and that it is in the service of the dominant. Specifically: how to show that authority has been transferred to C, who may exercise it without taking ownership of it; and how to ensure that C exercises it in such a way as to promote B's interests and not for personal gain[1].

In this regard, Coleman creatively proposed the concept of modern legal actors, trying to replace individuals with positions. The dominant person with a position of authority grants rights and resources to the positions and avoids granting them to any individual. The natural person is merely the occupant of the positions[1].

In fact, the proposal of this idea is of great significance. When the authority structure is no longer composed of people, but composed of positions, it effectively avoids the problem of personal selfish desires. Position holders no longer have the right to use authority to seek personal gain. At this time, the complex authority system also tends to be structurally stable[5].

4.2.2. Common and Separate Authority Structures

Similar to the generation of simple and complex authority systems, common and separate authority systems are macro- behavioral systems based on common and separate authority relationships, respectively. The common authority system is similar to the simple authority system in that it consists of only two classes, the dominant and the dominated. Whereas the separated authority system is similar to the complex authority system in that it consists of at least three classes, the principal, the agent and the dominated. The main reason for this distinction is that it is difficult for a common authority system to move from a simple to a complex system when compared to a separated authority system.

Because in some common authority structures, authority is transferred directly to a particular leader, he invites trouble if he transfers authority to a deputy. Even within a state, the presence of a leader usually means that the people confer authority on an individual with extraordinary charisma, and therefore the people expect to be led directly by him and to obey his orders[1]. Of course, it is not possible to simply equate common authority systems with simple authority systems, and separated authority systems with complex authority systems, but specifically to divide them on the basis of the consistency of the premise of the transfer of authority by the main actors.

5. Conclusion

Coleman's social authority theory is an important part of his rational action theory, which takes social authority as the object of study, builds on the assumption of rational man, takes the exchange of rights as the core, explains the phenomenon of social authority from the perspective of the individual, and tries to connect the micro with the macro. It is a theory of the middle of society with the dual characteristics of economics and sociology. Specifically, it mainly presents three main features: Firstly, rationalisation, which is mainly manifested in the rational actions of the actors, who choose the most rational actions according to the principle of maximising interests and constantly adjust their actions according to the results of the system's operation, so that the authoritative system strives to achieve the social optimum. Secondly, the individuality of methodology. Consistent with the rational action theory, the social authority theory also starts from the individual to study the action of the authority system, which is a typical individualistic methodology. Thirdly, it is universality. The logical starting point of social authority theory is the individual, not the social system, and even the generation of social authority system is based on individual action, so the theoretical premise makes the authority theory can be adapted to each country, and has the characteristic of universality.

Under such a theoretical premise, individuals are embedded in structures and systems, and social norms are transformed to the macro level under specific conditions according to individual interest preferences, further influencing the actions of individuals, from which institutional frameworks and systems of authority emerge and further differentiate according to the characteristics of authority structures. Generally speaking, individuals under the assumption of rational human beings will rebel against the existence of social authority and social systems, but in Coleman's interpretation, he regards authority as a kind of dominant force that arises from the individual's need for social exchanges and is centered on legal rights, which breaks out of the framework of a single macro level of analysis, thus realizing the linkage between the micro and macro levels.

Coleman's theory also has some limitations. In Coleman's view, authority relationships arise from the drive of rational actors to maximise profit. Actors rationally transfer their control over certain events to others in the hope of making a profit or receiving additional compensation, thus catalysing the formation of authority relations and authority systems. The creation and maintenance of authority relations is based on the assumption of rationality, that is, that all people act through rational calculation. However, the emergence of authority relations is not the result of a mere calculation of rational interests. The formation of authority also involves irrational elements. Weber suggested that there are three types of authority, traditional authority, charismatic authority, and juridical authority, and it is clear that the formation of traditional and charismatic authority does not result from a rational calculation of interests. The calculation of rational interests is the reason for the existence of authority, but it is not the only reason. The formation of authoritative relationship is also affected by irrational factors, and in order for the authoritative relationship to be long-lasting, it is inevitable that it cannot be separated from such means as morality and ethics.

In conclusion, although Coleman's theory of social authority has certain loopholes, its attempted transcendence of the micro-macro dichotomy under the guidance of the framework of the theory of rational action, centred on rights and starting from the individual, is undoubtedly a huge step forward in constructing new theoretical perspectives and dimensions compared with the traditional theory of political authority. It is foreseeable that the dialogue with the theory of social authority constructed in the context of this integrated dichotomy will inevitably provide a useful reference for the improvement of authority.

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