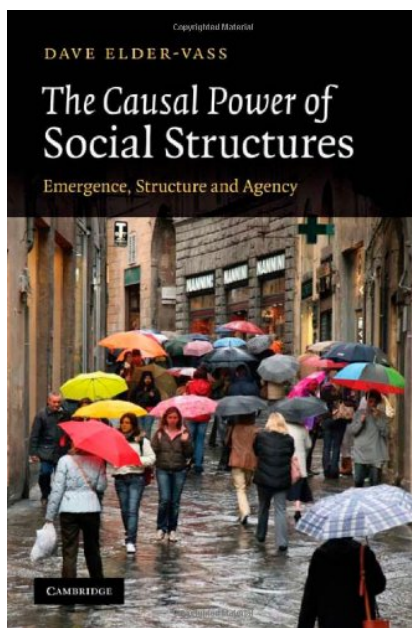




## The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency

Elder-Vass, Dave  
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This is a well-written book that describes the central question facing sociologists with admirable clarity: "Are they to be concerned with explaining social phenomena purely in terms of the contributions of individuals, or are there characteristically social forces that affect social phenomena?" (p. 3). I should start with full disclosure: This question is the same one I address in my 2005 book, also with Cambridge, called *Social emergence: Societies as complex systems* (see Sawyer 2005). And just as I do, Elder-Vass homes in on *emergence* as the best way to address the question. So I was delighted to be asked to review his book, and I welcome this contribution to sociological theory.

Elder-Vass's answer to the question is grounded in a distinctly British debate between structurationists (primarily Anthony Giddens) and "post-structurationists" including the critical realists Roy Bhaskar and Margaret Archer (Archer provided a back-cover endorsement for the book). His book is presented as an extension of previous writings by these critical realists (p. 4). Elder-Vass argues that an

entity has emergence if it has "a causal impact that is not just the sum of the impacts its parts would have if they were not organized into this kind of whole" (p. 5), and he calls his position the "relational" theory of emergence. In a nutshell, this is the claim that "Emergent powers only exist when the parts concerned are organised into the type of whole that has these powers and hence they are powers of the whole and not of the parts" (p. 6). His position is compatible with social mechanist accounts (e.g., Hedström 2005), although he does not engage with that literature. Social mechanists also argue that sociologists should "identify the entities that possess [emergent causal powers] and the mechanisms that produce them" (pp. 8-9). This book is meant to extend Archer's work by identifying these entities and mechanisms (in Chapters 6, 7, and 8).

After the introductory summary chapter, the book is organized into two main parts. Chapters 2 and 3 present a theory of emergence that is meant to apply to all levels of reality; it equally applies to the causal powers of molecules, cells, and social entities. Chapters 5 through 8 apply this theory to the social world, and Chapter 4 provides a bridge between the two parts. I agree with Elder-Vass in his introduction when he states that a reader pretty much has to read the whole book, from front to back, to make sense of it (p. 9).

Although the book is well written and it identifies the core issues, ultimately it does not satisfy its goal of arguing that social structures have causal power, in a way that is different from methodological individualist accounts. Elder-Vass does not adequately clarify how his position differs from the methodological individualists. His main point is that complex structures possess causal power because their causal effects would not exist if those parts were not organized into that complex structure (e.g., p. 17). But that is what methodological individualists also believe; rational choice theorists and social mechanists - who are

uniformly methodological individualists - also accept this definition of an emergent property, and they conclude it means that the higher level entity has no autonomous causal power.

Elder-Vass realizes that his account is dangerously similar to that of reductionists like Jaegwon Kim (p. 24), but then he claims that *explanatory* reduction (which he advocates) does not entail *eliminative* reduction: "any explanation that depends upon *both* the properties of its parts *and* upon the characteristic way that they are related ... is in effect an explanation in terms of the higher-level entity" (p. 26). But this is exactly how methodological individualists and social mechanists develop social explanations, and they argue that there is no autonomous causal power associated with the higher level entity. Ultimately, the book does not provide an argument against the methodological individualist or reductionist positions.

The solution would be for Elder-Vass to engage more directly with the reductionists. This book does not devote much energy to the presentation of Kim's position, his rejection of emergentism, and why he argues that the higher level cannot have autonomous causal powers (e.g., Kim 1999). Other philosophers have similarly critiqued higher-level causation with arguments about "causal overdetermination" or "causal dualism" (Loar 1992; Sober 1999) and they are not mentioned here. Elder-Vass likewise should engage more substantially with the arguments of the methodological individualists and the social mechanists, and more carefully distinguish his own position from theirs.



## References

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