

Proper Economics? Yannick Slade-Caffarel's Introduction to Social Positioning Theory

Yannick Slade-Caffarel. *Cambridge Social Ontology: An Introduction to Social Positioning Theory*. London: Routledge [Economics As Social Theory series], 2024. Pbk, 104 pages. ISBN 978-0-367-62802-4. £32.47¹

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Whatever one's personal opinion about its standing, the Cambridge Realist Workshop has done a great deal over the years to change the terms of debate regarding philosophy and methodology of economics. Its first official meeting was held in October 1990. In his introduction to *Social Ontology and Modern Economics*, Stephen Pratten reproduces part of the invitation letter circulated at the time (in a less digital world) by Tony Lawson:

All that is presupposed is a commitment to the view that there exists a knowable (under some description) social reality and that economics should primarily address such matters as identifying and understanding real world economic structures, mechanisms, processes and events etc. This commitment, though minimal does entail acknowledging that the nature of economic reality bears upon both the types of theories we can legitimately entertain as well as the methods of theory assessment that can be rationally supported. In philosophical jargon it is a presupposition of the realist programme that questions of ontology are in some sense prior to, and bear upon, questions of epistemology and methodology as well as substantive economic research. (quoted Pratten 2015: 2).

Economics, of course, has changed a great deal over the last thirty-five years or so, but much of this change has been diversification with limited impact on the fundamental problems with how mainstream economics has been conducted since the marginal revolution. A statement like this though provokes argument the terms of which are still not settled. Some will say that specific theory lacks adequacy, others will argue that dominant analytical statistical methods are flawed, still others will argue that policy targets are not focused on what matters or should matter and others still will express some combination of all of these... Debate, furthermore, has turned on many things: schools of thought (this one not that one), markers as dividing lines (mainstream is, is not,

¹ Available: <https://www.routledge.com/Cambridge-Social-Ontology-An-Introduction-to-Social-Positioning-Theory/Slade-Caffarel/p/book/9780367628024>

and should be, heterodox is, is not and should be, etc.), methodology (this frame not that frame) and pluralism (big tents, small tents, your tent, my tent, our tent, no tents)...²

However, throughout, the insight has persisted that how the world “is” (and how we make and remake the world in one way or another as part of how the world “is”) matters. But, somewhat ironically, it has done so, often, as something of an inconvenient fact, not least because it eventually leads to the need to justify the use of models and careers in economics still depend in large part on willingness to go along with this use of models – and some do so more enthusiastically than others and with more of a sense that this use has something to offer.

What can be said today without too much controversy is that economics is something of a mess. It is a glorious mess if one adopts a caricature of Dani Rodrik’s argument (there are many competing models and thus a model for every occasion and this is progress of sorts). It is a ridiculous mess (a triumph of the novelty of the absurd) if one looks to the Freakonomics phenomenon and the ability to data-scrape, extract patterns and infer economic incentives in literally every situation. It is a mess in the process of sorting itself out if one subscribes to the position that the adoption of complex adaptive systems theory (and agent-based modelling etc.), evolutionary game theory, information-theoretic economics and the “new” this and that are works in progress that will eventually and decisively transform the discipline. And it is a smoke and mirrors mess if one comes to the conclusion that the mindset, presuppositions and internalisation of the standard conceptual toolbox and underlying choice of methods remain largely unaffected by the froth of “change”.³

Still, the notion “that economics should primarily address such matters as identifying and understanding real world economic structures, mechanisms, processes and events” retains its enduring appeal and it is good every now and then to be reminded of where this insight might lead. The implication here is that eventually “all roads lead to ontology”, albeit no road terminates at ontology.⁴ This brings us to Yannick Slade-Caffarel’s *Cambridge Social Ontology*.⁵

The book grew out of Slade-Caffarel’s PhD thesis, supervised by Stephen Pratten, one of the main editors of *Cambridge Journal of Economics* and a longtime participant in the Realist Workshop and member of the Cambridge Social Ontology Group (CSOG).⁶ The Realist Workshop has commonly been associated with critical realism, albeit several of the early realist economists were already working on similar ideas and found themselves adopting its language and concepts and the Workshop has never been merely a forum for critical realism.⁷ CSOG, meanwhile, grew out of

² For an indicative range see, Armstrong (2020); Davis and Dolfsma (2015); Fullbrook (2008, 2016); Hodgson (2019); Jo, Chester and D’Ippoliti (2018); Jo and Todorova (2015); Lee and Cronin (2016); Lee and Lavoie (2013); Mearman, Berger, and Guizzo (2019); Stilwell, Primrose, and Thornton (2022).

³ See, for example, Fine and Milonakis (2009); Keen (2021); Rodrik (2015).

⁴ For other and related issues see the interviews Davis and Morgan (2018); Ghosh and Morgan (2022); Keen and Morgan (2021); Nelson and Morgan (2020).

⁵ See also Slade-Caffarel (2019, 2020, 2022a, 2022b).

⁶ Visit: <https://www.csog.econ.cam.ac.uk/>

⁷ For a range of works typically associated with critical realism in economics (with, in some cases, critique) see, for example, Downward (2003); Fleetwood (1999); Fullbrook (2009); Lawson (1997, 2003, 2015); Lawson, Latsis, and Martins (2007); Lewis (2004); Syll (2016, 2023).

discussions between some of the organisers and long-term participants at the Realist Workshop and became a regular meeting from October 2002 held in order to pursue underlying themes with some degree of continuity that the growing diversity and success of the Workshop (as a host for visiting discussants) did not allow. Eventually this led to the development of a novel approach to theorisation of social ontology – and this is Social Positioning Theory (SPT). SPT is an attempt to provide a comprehensive account of the nature of phenomena that depend on us (i.e. are socially constituted). As with any significant innovation in relation to the discipline it raises the question, is this doing economics?

To be clear, the intent in developing SPT is broader than economics alone – the intent, to reiterate, is to lay the basic building blocks of constitution that may inform how economics, but not only economics, is pursued. Perhaps you are already starting to think you can see no value in this – perhaps you're thinking there's enough economics to be getting on with and this is a distraction you can do without. But if one thinks historically, surely the idea that classical mechanics might be a fruitful way to approach the working of an economy seemed odd before its concepts saturated economic discourse – I mention this only to suggest that the unfamiliar can become familiar, can become part of the very architecture of how we think, and not to make a specific point about adequacy. In any case, in what follows I briefly summarise and then comment on Slade-Caffarel's book. This is not difficult to do, the book is only 104 pages long, including index, and if one omits endnotes, it is just 55 pages and this includes the preface. As such, it is about the same length as Steven Lukes' *Power: A Radical View*, a book whose brevity did not prevent it becoming a classic text.⁸

Social Positioning made simple

Over the years there has been no definitive statement of Social Positioning Theory. Instead it has found its way into print (digital existence) in a fairly piecemeal fashion and as a work in progress. Perhaps its clearest recent articulation is to be found in Tony Lawson's *The Nature of Social Reality* and in his recent paper in *Cambridge Journal of Economics*.⁹ Slade-Caffarel, meanwhile, sets himself the task of setting out “the basics” in as simple and systematic a way as possible. In order to achieve this he approaches the theory in a number of steps that clarify the theory's underlying rationale while also breaking the theory down into its conceptual parts. This writing strategy is quite a subtle rhetorical manoeuvre insofar as it looks to close down possible lines of misunderstanding and forestall critique. It also mainly places the theory in dialogue with the reader as a more or less plausible way to theorise how the social world is, and there is very little attempt to situate or justify the theory in regard of wider literature and longstanding debates – hence the brevity of the book (it is tightly focused).¹⁰ This notwithstanding, the first chapter is a short recounting of the

⁸ See Lukes (1974).

⁹ See Lawson (2019; 2022a; 2022b); Lawson and Morgan (2021a, 2021b); Morgan (2020).

¹⁰ To be clear, there are extensive endnotes and these mainly contain long supporting quotes from Lawson's work, but also some discussion of further literature and issues, mainly focused on Roy Bhaskar, John Searle and those who discuss Searle. For wider discussion of work of those associated with CSOG and for literature see, for example, Faulkner, Pratten and Runde (2017); Lawson, C. (2017); Lewis and Runde (2024); Martins (2014, 2022); Mussell (2024); Pratten (2015); Ragkousis (2023, 2024).

establishment of the Realist Workshop and formation of CSOG which also comments on critical realism and historical interchanges with John Searle's Berkeley Social Ontology Group.¹¹

The first thing to note before I briefly reprise the Chapters is that SPT attaches its own specific meanings to some commonly circulating terms and it is important not to confuse the meaning intended and the received meaning one might associate with these terms. The book-proper begins with Chapter Two, titled "Totalities and their components". According to Slade-Caffarel a totality is a system of components i.e. is comprised of parts. There are many totalities and higher level ones are formed from lower level ones. It is crucial at this stage to grasp that while components are parts, they are not, *as components* the same as those parts in isolation or prior to them *becoming* components or prior to the existence of the totality. It is through organizational structure that a totality comes into existence and by definition components can only take on the attributes of components as part of that totality and through its organization. The previous is quite an abstract way to begin but what Slade-Caffarel is doing here is foregrounding the theory in terms of the claim that a failure to keep this insight in mind leads to endless confusions between properties of components *as components* and the properties of whatever it is that eventually becomes, through organization, a component in its organizational position. Put slightly differently, organization matters to both totalities and components. As readers are no doubt aware this kind of argument is typically phrased in terms of emergence (some X has features that are irreducible to the parts from which it arises), but as Slade-Caffarel notes, the concept of emergence merely highlights that there is something new to be described and explained and in SPT it is the features of organization that are the focal point of these tasks. Totalities and their components have "ways of working" that arise in and are achieved through organization.

While the concepts of totalities and components are not specific to social constitution, in Chapter Three titled "Social totalities and the nature of human communities" Slade-Caffarel moves on to specify them for "the social".¹² He identifies the "community" as the most basic social totality. By community, however, he does not mean some amorphous grouping on the basis of, imagined and possibly fictitious, identification or designation. Community is more of a placeholder term intended to cover a wide range of organized phenomena many of which we would not think of as communities in the ordinary language sense. Slade-Caffarel quotes from Lawson, communities are:

those social totalities that include human individuals, more specifically at least two individuals, among the elements relationally organized to form components.

¹¹ He states, "the relationship between the Cambridge group and critical realism has not substantially shifted. Cambridge social ontology has always been a distinct project that has shared concerns and philosophical language with other projects that have come under the banner of critical realism" (Slade-Caffarel 2024: 9). However, "shared" is rather parsimonious and is silent as to whether the history of the realist project would have been significantly different (and with it the thinking of CSOG) had critical realism never come into being and Roy Bhaskar in particular hadn't written a word.

¹² The social refers to those phenomena whose existence depends necessarily on us, but this could allow both for some kinds of phenomena that can in some instances be brought into being without human agency (fire) and for those who once brought into being can continue to exist without any further human agency. Slade-Caffarel states that the latter of these should be considered social but not the former. As such, "core" social refers to those phenomena whose every instance depends necessarily on us for coming into being (presumably concepts as concepts etc. insofar as there is a mental constituent) and for its continuing existence, while the mere social does not require us for its continuing existence (produced artefacts of one kind or another etc.?). This account serves a purpose – it clarifies what is meant – but it seems unsatisfying for the definition to turn on "every instance" – if human fire is not "social" is arson a social phenomenon?

Human communities, so conceived, include families, neighbourhoods, schools, sports teams, corporations, rock bands, research groups, political parties, nations, international organizations and so on. (Lawson 2022: 6-7, quoted in Slade-Caffarel 2024: 44)¹³

These are not necessarily phenomena we are used to thinking of as “totalities” any more than they immediately evoke the word “community” but it is important to understand that the terms are just convenient ways of referring to distinguishable nameable organized phenomena. The terms are not, however, intended to indicate something separate, self-contained, static or complete. Moreover, whatever one thinks of the appropriation of the term community, the idea is that these phenomena share some commonality of constitution, even if this is not immediately obvious. In any case, besides communities there are other social totalities that are either (often) more generalised across other distinguishable “communities”, such as language and communication systems, or are more concrete, such as artefacts, which while material are still organized and social.

Having introduced the idea of organization, totality, social totality and community, and artefact Slade-Caffarel turns in Chapter Four, titled “Social positions and community organising structure”, to constitution. As the title suggests, in the theory “social positions are the organising structure of social totalities” and it is from these the theory gets its name (Slade-Caffarel 2024: 53). A social totality, a community, is an organisation of social positions, constituted through relations between positions and these relations take the form of deontic powers in the form of packets of rights and obligations that belong to positions in relation to other positions.¹⁴ Position A confers the power to (the right to) do X and Position B confers the matching power to (the obligation to) do Y in consideration of Position A and so on in regard of Position C, D, E to the n. Again, the use of terminology – in this case right and obligation – may appear odd at first, since right and obligation are often associated with a sense of circumscribed regulatory, legal or ethical conduct rather than how it is meant here, which is simply as relationally matched powers to do things held in virtue of positions and which achieves things. What powers there are makes sense in terms of the social totality, the multitude of positions and their relations. The complexity of organisation is thereafter an empirical matter, as is how given powers are acquired by a position, what powers exist, how they are exercised, whether they are approved of, and the success and degree of continuity with which they are exercised, as well as the consequences of the complex interaction of positions in social totalities. Schematic though this rendering seems, the social reality that the theory is intended to describe is one in continual process. However, as Slade-Caffarel makes clear, for that reality to exist at all requires not just entities who possess certain individual mental and physical

¹³ This leads to a statement that follows from the definition of the social, given “all social phenomena depend necessarily on us to come into being and that we are all born into communities, all social phenomena must be constituted in a manner that is community relative” (Slade-Caffarel 2024: 45). This claim occupies a position somewhere between logical consequence and tautology.

¹⁴ Note, readers may be familiar with the idea of deontic power from John Searle’s work. For Searle, power is a capacity or ability that manifests in events but need not be exercised or may not be evident (if offset) even when exercised. Deontic power refers to rights and obligation to be or do, and these typically consist of reasons for acting. See, for example, (Searle 2010: 145-147). There is a long history in philosophy regarding whether reasons are causes. See, for example, Donald Davidson’s classic 1963 paper ‘Actions, Reasons and Causes’, contests the position attributed to Ludwig Wittgenstein that reasons cannot be causes. Roy Bhaskar provides an early critical realist argument for reasons as causes in *The Possibility of naturalism*. See, Bhaskar (1979: 102-118).

capacities, but entities able to organize socially, and while this may be obvious it further requires that occupants of positions are willing to trust that relationality will in the ordinary course of things hold (rights *will* in fact be matched by obligations), and that they are prepared to go along with ways of doing things – all of which SPT places some emphasis on.

Finally, in Chapter Five, titled “Social Positioning and the formation of community components” Slade-Caffarel turns to the significance of the occupation of a position by whoever or whatever it is that comes to occupy that position. Recall that in Chapter One he sets out to argue that organization matters to both totalities and components and that components can only take on the attributes of components (become “components”) as part of that totality and through its organization. By extension, in a social totality, a component is not simply whoever or whatever occupies the position but rather by occupying the position becomes a relationally organized part of the social totality. They are by virtue of occupying the position in some sense different than they are when not occupying the position. Furthermore, artefacts can also be positioned and while it doesn’t make sense to talk of rights and obligations of inanimate objects, according to the theory it does make sense to talk of functions allotted to positions occupied by artefacts and to rights and obligations humans exercise in virtue of the positions they occupy in relation to those functions. Importantly though, the functions, rights and obligations belong to the position and not in isolation to whoever or whatever occupies it. So any given artefact or person can find itself or themselves allocated to various positions at various times and in which they are “formed” as a component. If we refer to the human person only, they can find themselves switching from position to position and as they do so they have a state of being, and are acting as a component of, the relevant social totality (community). The ways of acting belong to the positions and their relations with regard to the social totality rather than the individual in isolation.¹⁵

And that’s it. Or at least that is “the basics” as set out by Slade-Caffarel. All of this takes us to the last few pages of the main text, around page 77 and here in a final few pages he provides a couple of brief examples of applications. The issue of gender identity, for example, can be reposed in terms of gender positions, to which children are assigned but within which they may not settle. Since gender positions are social their number is not fixed and nor is assignment, irrespective of whatever else one thinks about determinations of biological sex. Along different lines, SPT can be used to make sense of the modern corporation. Through various innovations a corporation can come to occupy a position previously reserved for human persons, the legal person, and thus acquire the rights and obligations of that position. What both of these examples bring to the fore is that in application the basic building blocks of SPT can be recombined to accommodate to difference and novelty inherent to a changing social reality. More fundamentally, both examples underscore remarks Slade-Caffarel chooses to conclude the book with:

Many of the problems that beset social theory stem, I believe, at least in part, from conflating positioned items with the components to which they give rise and, as such, mistakenly interpreting certain properties or capacities as essential to particular items when, in fact, these properties exist in virtue of relational properties. (Slade-Caffarel 2024: 83).

¹⁵ There is more to this insofar as the argument is made that the various position occupants bottom out in a material human person. Clearly this leads to various lines of dispute regarding what does it mean to talk of a human person who is born into a society and can never not be occupying a position even if it is arguable whether they are a fully realised person when an infant.

Conclusion, SPT and proper economics...

Cambridge Social Ontology is what it says it is, “an introduction”. It provides a quick and concise summary of Social Positioning Theory. You can get through it in an afternoon. It is also mainly easy to read, although Slade-Caffarel adopts in places Tony Lawson’s idiosyncratic sentence construction (think Yoda on Mescaline). The book also uses variations of phrases such as “the conception defended in Cambridge” (e.g. pp. 30, 44 and 44) that inadvertently invoke mass ranks of fully-committed Cambridge citizens willing to shed blood on behalf of SPT (though if this were so it seems likely the current Cambridge economics department houses its own doughty group of mainstream objectors, conscientious or otherwise); that said, “the Cambridge conception” is no more a conceit than the existence of a “Vienna Circle” and is part and parcel of the mythologising that typically surrounds philosophical movements. In any case, easy to read is no mean feat for a work dealing with complicated ideas about the building blocks of social reality. Anyone interested in (or assigned to teach) social theory, economic philosophy or methodology will likely find it worthwhile.

As for the broader issue of the adequacy of SPT in itself and as an aid to making inroads into the mainstream (or displace it) this may be harder for a reader to come to any reasonable conclusion about based on an introductory book. While one might suggest this is compounded by the absence of an explicit “why read this book” thread to Slade-Caffarel’s argument, the book implicitly sits within the broader realist argument that it nods to right at the beginning. Realists argue that all theory presupposes some form of ontology and it makes sense to be explicit about ontology in order to avoid various pitfalls. Why this theory of social ontology (SPT) rather than another, however, cannot be answered merely by arguing in favour of an orientation on, rather than demonstrating more thoroughly descriptive and explanatory adequacy (since this in realist discourse amounts to no more than a general claim that theory ought to adhere to realism).

As I noted in the introduction, however, answering the question “why this theory and not another” does not seem to be the purpose of Slade-Caffarel’s book – use of “defended” notwithstanding. If one were to actually “defend” the theory though, its strongest claim is the one he concludes with, and that is how its use sensitises one to the conflation of attributes of positioned items and features owed to the organized relations of positions (something Lawson has pursued quite a bit with regard to the nature of money).¹⁶ It seems likely though that the first hurdle a reader will find themselves negotiating is the received meaning of many of the terms and I’ve already alluded to this. Along these lines (hurdles), referring to humans as components still carries, accepting that the term is given meaning within the theory, dehumanising connotations that act as an irritant when thinking with this use of language and its concepts – social totalities, communities, positions etc. But, if asked to provide an alternative term for a positioned part of a structured socially relational entity, is there a better one? I expect this will exercise some interested in social economics.¹⁷ And it’s also likely the case that the brevity of Slade-Caffarel’s book will provide opportunity for interested social theorists and social economists etc. to fill in the blanks in terms of comparisons, contrasts

¹⁶ For example, Lawson (2022b).

¹⁷ As well as sociologists and anthropologists. There are great swathes of how we are in the world that seem to overflow the conception of allocated positions. For example, Joy White’s *Terraformed* has a very different emphasis regarding how it feels to be (and to not be) part of communities in her “hyperlocal” research on the experience of black youth in Newham London (White 2020).

and critique from various other perspectives (with this in mind there is also at the moment a special issue of *Cambridge Journal of Economics* in preparation that is doing some of this).¹⁸

Finally, it is worth returning to something else I said in the introduction. While SPT may at first seem an odd way to address economic phenomena this in itself is not a reason to reject it. It's easy to forget how much of the way we currently think about economy started as analogy that required justification. Francis Edgeworth, for example, was very clear that his early attempt to introduce an idea of competitive equilibrium in *Mathematical Physics* began from analogy:

An analogy is suggested between the Principles of Greatest Happiness, Utilitarian or Egoistic, which constitute the first principles of Ethics and Economics, and those Principles of Maximum Energy which are among the highest generalisations of Physics, and in virtue of which mathematical reasoning is applicable to physical phenomena quite as complex as human life. (Edgeworth 1881: v, emphasis added)... To illustrate the economical problem of exchange, the maze of many dealers contracting and competing with each other, **it is possible to imagine a mechanism of many parts where the law of motion**, which particular part moves off with which, is not precisely given—with symbols, arbitrary functions, representing not merely *not numerical* knowledge but ignorance- where, though the mode of motion towards equilibrium is indeterminate, the position of equilibrium is mathematically determined. (Edgeworth 1881: 4, emphasis added).¹⁹

It surely took some considerable effort to internalise this way of thinking from laws of motion to ways of transacting in pursuit of exchange. Convincing oneself that this was science likely did not come easy to many an early reader – a transition from improper to proper “economics” – a matter that history of economic thought has had much to say about in addition to critique of consequences.²⁰ The indirect point I am making here is why not give SPT an outing and see how it sits. It could be an afternoon well spent.

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¹⁸ For example, Lewis and Runde (2024).

¹⁹ See also his discussion of the conditions of normal and perfect competition and the four required conditions (unrestricted recontract, unrestricted contract, recontract without reference to third party constraint, contract independent of third-party interference), Edgeworth (1881: 17-18).

²⁰ Most notably Mirowski (1989). For others see Morgan (2023, 2024).

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