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**Contributions to
economical
geography-making**

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Contributions to economical geography-making

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Abstract

This paper outlines a theoretical and methodological concept, which ties in with the tradition of the German pioneer in action-orientated geography, Wolfgang Hartke. In his view, which is hardly known in the Anglo-Saxon debate, geography should analyse how “geographies” are made by capital investment. His idea can be taken as social geography’s perspective on the economic, which contributes to the ongoing debate about the subject and aims of economic geography. In this perspective, economic action means individual action in economic contexts such as firms or markets, closely relating organisation theory and explanatory management approaches to the concept. To theorise space and its relation to economic action we hark back to Benno Werlen’s concept of everyday regionalisation.

“We are worried about political problems because we think we can make politics, whereas it’s high time to make geography” (Hartke, 1962:115, translation Van Wezemaël).

1. Introduction

The lively debate on economic geography and its real or alleged crisis (see e.g. Amin and Thrift, 2000; Martin and Sunley, 2001; Perrons, 2001; Plummer and Sheppard, 2001; Sayer, 2001) made clear that economic geography is a heterogeneous subject, which makes it a hard or maybe a needless task to define universal methods or even a shared perspective. But the discussion also made clear that an accurate connection of theoretical concepts and empirical data is crucial for an empirical science such as economic geography. Economic geography too often suffers from an “enormous discrepancy between theoretical claim and empirical realisation” (Haas/Thomi, 2003, translation Van Wezemaël). Therefore the development of theoretical approaches is best realised in interaction with empirical research. The research framework for economic geography presented in this paper is a product of a comprehensive project,

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which analyses action strategies in the Swiss housing industry (Van Wezemaël, 2005). It aims at continuing the discussion on the connection of the aim of the subject, its theoretical-methodological realisation (i.e. the approaches applied) and its empirical power.

5 Social and economic geography are increasingly regarded as action-centred sciences rather than as spatial research. One of the main reasons for this is the growing dissociation of spatial references and socio-economic practices in late modern societies, which shows the weaknesses of geography as a spatial science (Löw, 2001; Werlen, 1988; Werlen, 1995; Werlen, 1997a; Bathelt and Glückler, 2002a; Glückler, 10 1999; Glückler, 2002; Glückler and Bathelt, 2003; Gregory, 1985; Gregory, 1989; Läßle, 1991; Massey, 1985), and which leads towards an actor orientated view on the world. Naturally, this does not mean that space or spatial settings are irrelevant today, as the concept of locales (Giddens, 1984; Agnew, 1987) or the studies on *geographies of opportunity* (Squires and Kubrin, 2005) clearly show. However, in an actor-focussed 15 view we have to ask how spatial settings are being produced and reproduced, and explore their effects on the geographies of everyday life.

In an action orientated perspective, geographies of production as topics for economic geography can be conceptualised as mostly unintended consequences of capital investment analogically to the constitution of society in the course of daily action 20 (Giddens, 1984). So if we want to explain our cities and landscapes as created and reproduced by investing as a field of action (Van Wezemaël, 2005) we have to study the regionalising dimension of economic action. This links capitalist production to the geographies it produces and assists policy-makers in their spatial decision-making.

25 Today economic geography is mostly firm-centred and asks how wealth generation, socioeconomic welfare, and individual well-being vary over space (Martin and Sunley, 2001:159). In the sense of a pluralist approach to economic geography (Plummer and Sheppard, 2001:195) I propose the *geographies of production* (Werlen, 1997:295–325) as a further field of research for an actor-centred *economic* geography. This complementary view aims at analysing the ways in which geographies are produced

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in and through economic action. The production of spatial structures, i.e. the basic elements of the locales, which serve as settings for people's daily interactions, reveals the close relation of this approach to questions of urban planning. For this project I tie in with Hartke's classic approach in German geography, which seems worthwhile rethinking.

Fourty-five years ago Wolfgang Hartke proposed a revolutionary research agenda for human geography and defined the main task of academic geography as investigating the geography-making of economic leaders in daily action. Since this implied a radical turn in respect of conventional geography, only fragments of his work entered mainstream geography. It was not until Benno Werlen's outline of a social geography based on action theory (Werlen, 1992, 1995, 1997b) that Hartke regained his place in (at least German) human geography.

But in order to take geography-making as the starting point of an alternative approach to economic geography we need to develop Hartke's work regarding the demands of a critical qualitative economic geography. Although their limitation of economic geography to behaviouralism and structuralist explanations is far too narrow, the demand of Martin and Sunley (2001:153) for a detailed, carefully formulated and empirically testable theoretical framework, which integrates structural causes and focuses on processes, seems a worthwhile aim for economic geography as an empirical science in general.

After summarising the main ideas of Hartke regarding the purpose of this article in Sect. 2, I will outline the research framework based upon this research tradition by defining the main terms and concepts in Sect. 3.

2. Main ideas of Hartke

According to Hartke (1962:115), academic geography should critically analyse how geography is made in daily action. Although everybody is making geography, the potent agents are "the economic leaders, who daily perform geography-making, frontier-

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making etc. by investing capital” (ibidem, translation Van Wezemael).

Hartke proposed a veritable Copernican Turn (Werlen, 1998) in human geography: landscape was no longer the research object. It should now serve as an printing plate (Registrierplatte) in order to analyse human activities. Since he defined every-day geography-making as the research problem of geography, action instead of space became the topic of human geography. According to Hartke every individual engages with her/his physical environment, thereby considering the expectations of his/her social group. At this, two aspects must be pointed out:

1. geographies are no intentional products but mostly unintended results of everyday action,
2. in order to understand the geography-making of an agent it is necessary to analyse the values of the social group to which the agent refers to. This means that *social individuals* are conceptualised as agency, and therefore *social action* (Weber, 1980) in the context of production forms the research topic. Thus the aim of the research must be an empirically led typifying of conducts and consequences.

A main focus of Hartke’s empirical research lay in social change and its detection by studying the (in)adequacies of spatial structures. He drew special attention to technological change as a key aspect of social change. His most popular empiric studies dealt with parcels of land , which were turned to waste lands *due to social reasons*. He called them social fallows (Hartke, 1956). The idea of social fallows forms a bastion against spatial determinism since “space” is differently valued, used and shaped or designed depending on social and technological change. Although he emphasises the contribution of his work to (peace) policy, economic leaders remain the main geography-makers. So let me take Hartke at his word: economic geography should analyse the geographies made by investing capital.

According to Werlen (1998:30) the primal research focus of Hartke had a lot in common with criminal investigation: based on material evidence, the course of events is being reconstructed. One problem with Hartke’s approach is that he did not provide

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what Werlen metaphorically calls a “theory of the crime”. In analogy to a crime scene, whose “artefacts” like broken glass or rummaged drawers only become “evidence” like traces of a burglary when they are connected to an idea of how the crime occurred. The linkage of the material artefacts in landscape as a printing plate with the socio-economic “deeds” is underdetermined and vice versa. Thus, in order to improve the power of the *geography-making approach* we need to define economic action, provide “theories of the crime”, define space and its position in action analysis, and arrange these elements in a coherent research framework.

3. Geography-making: a research framework

3.1. Economic action

Regarding economic geography as an action-centred science puts up the question of agency and the task to define economic action. According to Perrons (2001:209), many of the new economic geographies focus on the behaviour of firms and thus let collectives act. Some argue that most questions concerning economic geography do not fall below the aggregation level of an enterprise or firm (see e.g. Bathelt and Glückler, 2002b:36). This certainly depends on the questions asked, but it obviously homogenises the firm members analogously to spatial metaphors (“Europe decides...”, “Boston wants...”, “the Ghetto needs...”). But most notably, to define collectives as agency restricts the valid applications of social scientific theories of action such as action or structuration theory (Werlen, 1995:36–49). Therefore, to accomplish the preconditions to accordingly theorise economic action, we must define agency as individual action in an economic context. Individual action can formally be theorised by action theory in a Weberian tradition (Max, not Alfred), which assumes that individuals are the only agency but at the same time no action is a sole expression of an individual’s characteristics (Weber, 1980). Figure 1 depicts a general model of social action.

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Social scientific action theories basically assume purpose-orientated action of so-
cialised human beings (Hillmann, 1994:319). This perspective agrees with the method-
ological – *not* the ontological – individualism (Werlen, 1995:36–49), which by no means
neglects the existence of collectives, institutions, or systems, but they are not seen as
agency *sui generis*. Whereas this definition is a general epistemological condition in
action analysis, what is “the economic” in economic action? I will point out two aspects:

1. the system integration of agents into the institutionalised action contexts of eco-
nomic organisations such as firms and market segments,
2. the strong intersubjective pre-interpretation of action in economic fields.

So I do not primarily focus on the question, whether action is economically oriented as
far as, according to its subjective meaning, it is concerned with the satisfaction of a de-
sire for utilities. This is firstly because structuration theory defines action independently
from intentions, and secondly because the context of economic action provides a valu-
able definition of the action situation (see below). This means that an action analysis,
which aims at including structural properties, better focuses on contexts instead of in-
tentions when defining a field of action. In an economic context individual agents are
integrated in economic organisations such as firms, which can be reflected with con-
cepts of formal and informal structures (Kieser, 2002). Economic organisations can
be understood as a special case of social systems, which stabilise social relationships
and bind space and time (Giddens, 1984:432). As Sayer states, systems go beyond the
subjective experience of actors, “both insofar as they impart a formal rationality to ac-
tion and through their interlacing and steering of the consequences of action, whether
intended or unintended” (2001:689). E.g., a firm codes business options as profitable
or unprofitable, leaving little space for hermeneutic negotiation.

This limits the use of action theory in investigating economic action. Taken as sys-
tems, organisations are reproduced or transformed by the actions of the members of
the organisation. This dual relationship of structure and action is theorised by struc-
turation theory (Giddens, 1984). Therefore the analytical scope of action theory can

be complemented with structuration theory, which allows taking into account organisational, institutional and systemic aspects that go beyond individual action and particularly beyond intentionality. Social research based on structuration theory can methodologically be bracketed either by institutional analysis or by the analysis of strategic conduct. The latter focuses upon modes, in which actors draw upon structural properties in the constitution of social relations (Giddens, 1984). Action theory can operationalise strategic conduct. Therefore action and structuration theory can be used for a division of labour in research, as outlined in Fig. 2 (see Sect. 3.3).

As mentioned above, organisation theory distinguishes formal organisation (planned and wanted, defined authority, allocation of duties) and informal organisation (not planned networks of social relations), which jointly build the organisation as a whole (Kieser, 2002). This is mandatory from a structuration theory point of view, since the consequences of action are necessarily both intended *and* unintended.

Since economic practises are strongly structured and intersubjectively pre-interpreted, instrumental-rational models of action provide the highest degree of casual adequacy (Sinnadäquanz) when analysing economic action (Van Wezemaal, 2005:23). These models (see Table 1) conceptualise action, in which the means to attain a particular goal are rationally chosen.

What has been said so far has two major implications on defining economic action:

1. economic action can analytically be modelled as instrumental-rational action
2. the integration of individuals into economic systems strongly structures both the conditions and the outcomes of economic action. These institutional aspects of action can be theorised with structuration theory.

So far this is still a formal frame of research. It needs to be developed to meet the needs of empirical research to analyse geography-making. As stated above we additionally need explanatory theories (or “theories of the crime”), which connect the empirical contents in a research field with the analytical and interpretative instruments of a formal action and structuration theory framework.

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3.2. Docking explanatory theories (theory of the crime)

Firms are no random social systems. There are many theories in the area of *action and firms* such as business management theories on different levels (Barnes, 2001; Drejer, 2002; Foss, 2000; Wagner-Tsukamoto, 2003, or Behr, 1999; Behr, 2001; Eckert and Wiegelmann, 2002; Ulrich and Krieg, 1973), theories of organisation and bureaucracy (Kieser, 2002; Weber, 1980), theories of decision-making (Schelling, 1984; Braybrook and Lindblom, 1972) or the approaches to firms, markets or networks by new institutional economics and new economic sociology (Williamson, 1990, 1996; Granovetter, 1985). But how can theoretical explanations of economic phenomena be used to scrutinize economic action *in a Weberian perspective*? At this, Popper's (1993) approach of situation analysis gives us a hand to integrate the mentioned theories into the formal theoretical-methodological framework.

According to Popper (1993) the *situation of action* is a valid approximation of the conduct of agents. The method of situation analysis generally is an "idea of solving problems" (Popper, 1993:188) and it matches the general "scientific procedure": Starting point is a *problem*, which is understood as a *consequence* and hence it calls for a *reason*. So Popper (1993:184) defines situation analysis as a specific, provisional and presumable explanation of human conduct, which is derived from the situation of action. If we interpret human action as an attempt to solve problems, the procedure of problem-solving can serve as an explanatory theory for human conduct (Popper, 1993:185). This allows us using alleged system properties to carry out action analysis in the sense of situation analysis: e.g. if we know the agent's position in the organisation we can define the attributes of that position in the sense of action conditions (responsibility, competency, capacity etc). On the basis of a management approach used as a provisory ex ante explanation of action we can construct an action process, following the formal model of action (see Fig. 1). The adoption of explanatory theories to the formal framework is referred to as *docking* (Van Wezemaël, 2005:20).

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The key point is that the theories are not used in their original function, which is *explanatory*. We contrarily use them as *ideal type constructions* by transferring them from an explanatory position to the position of an ideal type (Van Wezemaal, 2005:16–22). Such ideal types serve the purpose of being compared with empirical reality, allowing a systematic analysis of the deviances of the empirical results from the model-based hypotheses. Thus, explanations of the (management-) theories are provisionally and hypothetically, and they are used prior to data collection. Let me clarify the framework as it has been constructed so far in *epistemological respects*.

3.3. Epistemological impacts

By following Popper's situation analysis we also inherit his epistemological anchoring in an objective approach to the research object, which is *human action* (Van Wezemaal, 2005:15, 21). According to Bourdieu's critique on the subjective perspectives of phenomenology, ethnomethodology and the like, an objectivist rupture with pre-interpretations, ideologies etc. is a precondition for working scientifically (Bourdieu, 1992). The reason for this is that the social meaning of action goes beyond the intention of agents (Bourdieu, 1987:127), which agrees with the notion of Sayer (2001:689) mentioned above. Nevertheless, the subjective meaning of action, which is the primal research object of Weberian analysis, is a constituent of social reality. Thus, the objective perspective must be abandoned as well; it will be turned into a provisory objectivism on the level of model construction and hypothesis formulation. The explanatory role of structural causes called for by Martin and Sunley (2001:153) is thus only provisory in this framework, and it has to be tested empirically. By confronting the provisory explanations with empirical reality the "subjective meaning" returns into the research framework. (Van Wezemaal, 2005:21–22)

The combination of action and structuration theory and the docking of explanatory theories allow the construction of a research framework (see Fig. 2): Firstly, we analyse strategic action using structuration theory as a basic means of comprehension of social/system integration of structure and action. This leads us to specific research

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questions of individual action in economic organisations. Secondly, these questions or problem definitions form the starting point of a situation analysis, which leads us to an ideal-type modelling of goal-rational action. The docking of management theories etc brings “economic life” into the formal models of action, and it allows connecting this approach in economic geography with complementary debates in the field. These provisory explanations are to be contrasted with empirical reality of in-depth interviews or content analyses. Thirdly, the results of the empirical work are being reinterpreted with structuration theory. Lets now move on to the question of addressing the interrelation of action and space.

3.4. Action and space

Economic geography investigates the conditions, the modes and the outcomes of geography-making as mostly unintended consequences of investing capital. This corresponds to the view of Hartke (1959:426) who conceptualises landscapes as by-products of human life and human action. Therefore, to analyse geography-making we need to theorise space and relate it to economic action. Since a substantialist concept of space is not adequate for action analysis (Werlen, 1995), relativistic and contextual conceptualisations of space have been brought forward in recent years (Agnew, 1987; Allen, 1997; Cooke, 1996; Cox and Mair, 1991; Gregory, 1989; Massey, 1985; Massey, 1995; Sayer, 1985; Werlen, 1992). As we used structuration theory to define economic action, it may seem straightforward to use Giddens’ concepts of space – the locale and regionalisation – or the geographical elaborations based on structuration theory respectively (Agnew, 1987; Cooke, 1996; Cox and Mair, 1991). However, the latter did not improve Giddens’ concepts in regard to geography-making. Rather they tend to a reductionist and space-centred view (Glückler, 1999) and worsen the inherent tendencies in structuration theory towards seeing space as a container, which derives from its reference to time geography (Werlen, 1997b:206–207).

Speaking in Marx’s terms, investors are interested in the exchange-value of a location, whereas people are interested in the use-value of their physical settings for daily

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interaction (locales). The view of Saunders (1987 in Glückler, 1999:138), whereby space refers only to a specific combination of objects in the sense that different things come together in different combinations at different places and with different effects, seems to fit the everyday view of economic agents. But the difference that space makes cannot merely be defined by a “specific combination of objects”. It takes a specific course of action to make sense of this combination. Thus the meaning of space changes with the agents referring to it. Therefore we need an approach that theorises the referring of agents to space in their courses of action. Since in decisions on locations, locales cannot be predefined, we have to analyse the way agents constitute regions in their action. Thus we have to access the question of space from the idea of regionalisation as an aspect of everyday action. In late-modern societies, especially in economic concerns, spatial references and socio-economic practices are increasingly dissociated. The scales relevant to action vary tremendously between different agents and different contexts respectively.

Werlen’s (1995, 1997b) social geography of everyday regionalisation provides a valuable basis to work on. He theorises space as a term, which must only refer to physical objects. But unlike the Kantian concept of a priori space, Werlen’s concept precedes current experience, but it is at the same time based on the agent’s experience of his/her body. Analytically we can divide the concept of space into a formal and a classificatory aspect (Werlen, 1995):

- Formal aspect: provides a kind of grammar for the orientation in the material world
 - objects have a certain length and width and a topological relation to each other.
- Classificatory aspect: allows us to arrange elements.

In the framework put forward so far, regionalisation is inherent to action and it means the referring of agents to space as well as the reproduction or transformation of geographies as a mostly unintended consequence of action (Van Wezemaal, 2005:35–38). Technically spoken, modes of regionalisation are an analytical dimension of the frame of reference (see Fig. 1). Since action implies an engagement with the physical

environment, action models require specific modes of regionalisation to analyse the relation of action and space.

Since action implies regionalisation, the modes of regionalisation will vary with the modes of action. In terms of ideal-types, we can therefore distinguish instrumental-rational action with productive-consumptive modes of regionalisation, norm-oriented action with normative-political modes of regionalisation, and communicative action with informative-significative modes of regionalisation (Werlen, 1997b:295–419). Table 2 gives an overview of the relation of action and space.

Since economic geography works with an instrumental-rational model of action, we consequently use a metrical concept of space and find a calculatory predominance in classification (Werlen, 1997b:271–273). By putting modes of regionalisation on the same level as instrumental-rational action they are part of the model of economic action. Thus they *do not explain* how people act but they serve as an analytical tool. This approach in economic geography focuses on the constitution of regions as regionalising aspects of economic action and their implications for a problem-centred view on further economic action as well as on the co-constitution of locales or socio-spatial conditions for people's daily interactions respectively. Since we start from action and not from a pre-defined region, regionalisation may concern any geographical scale relevant to the specific conduct.

4. Summary of the framework to analyse geography-making

The framework set up to analyse geography-making can be summarised as follows:

1. Economic action is defined as individual action, which is intersubjectively pre-interpreted by the demand of rationality and binary codes of the economic (profit/no profit), and it is integrated into economic organisations. It is analysed using the ideal type construction of instrumental-rational action, which is an operationalisation of the structuration-theory concept called *analysis of strategic conduct*.

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Structural elements of system integration shape (not determine) individual action.

2. Explanatory (economic) theories are integrated into the formulation of provisory explanations by docking them to the formal models of action. They strongly structure the empirical research by building the basis for the formulation of hypotheses.
3. Space is an element of the frame of reference. References to space are analysed using the formal-classificatory term of space. This allows investigating the (re-) constitutions of regions in the course of economic action.

The actor-centred research design delimits economic geography as a social science and allows using the formal approaches of action and structuration theory. This means that the research objective is an understanding of economic action, not the explanation of firm behaviour, which enables more effective interventions e.g. in urban development initiatives. The docking of explanatory theories highlights Giddens' idea of the double hermeneutic (1984), which means the continuous exchange of scientific and life-world concepts. This evaluative approach challenges the theories used, and economic leaders can be confronted with the geographies they make in a mostly unintended way (see e.g. Van Wezemaal, 2004). This focussing on socially relevant and spatially differentiated problems defies the so-called new "regional orthodoxy" in economic geography (Zeller, 2003), which at large is preoccupied with questions of improved competitiveness of firms and regions, and it leads (back) to a more critical economic geography.

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Table 1. Properties of instrumental-rational models of action.

goal orientation	benefit maximation
frame of reference	objective knowledge/subjective stock of knowledge/ Organisational system-logic
situation	certainty uncertainty

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Table 2. Regionalisation, action and space (Werlen, 1999:329).

	formal	classificatory
instrumental-rational	metric	classificatory calculation
norm oriented	metric/body-centered	classificatory relational rescription
communicative	body-centered	relational signification

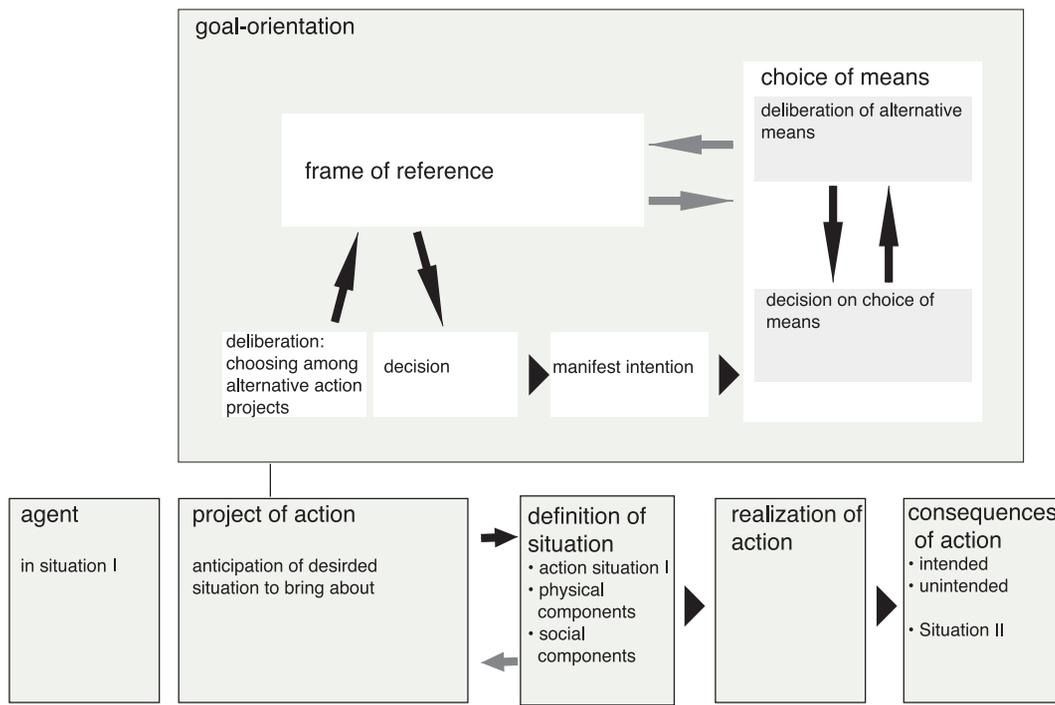


Fig. 1. Model of social action.

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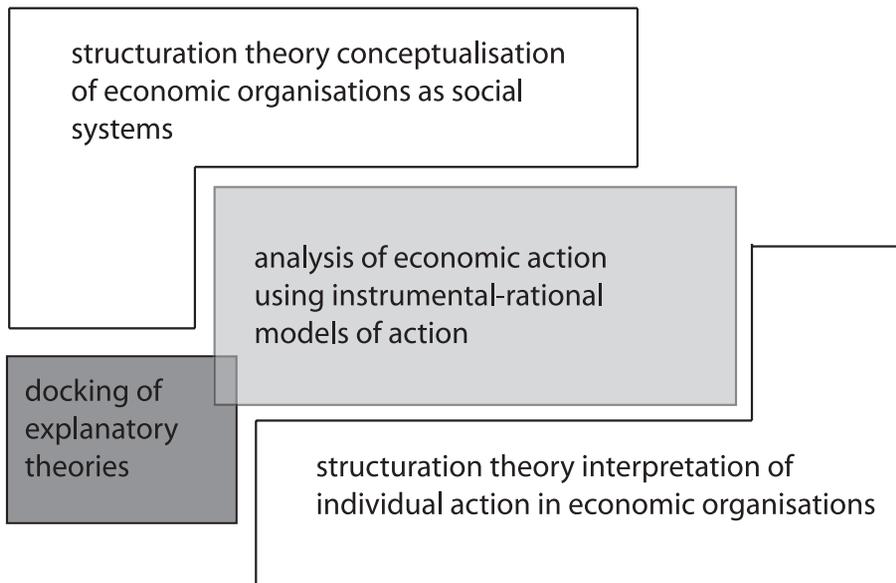


Fig. 2. Research framework for economic action

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Fig. 3. Integration of individual action into economic systems.

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