

Hosted by Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method

Lakatos Award Lectures

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THE LONDON SCHOOL
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Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences

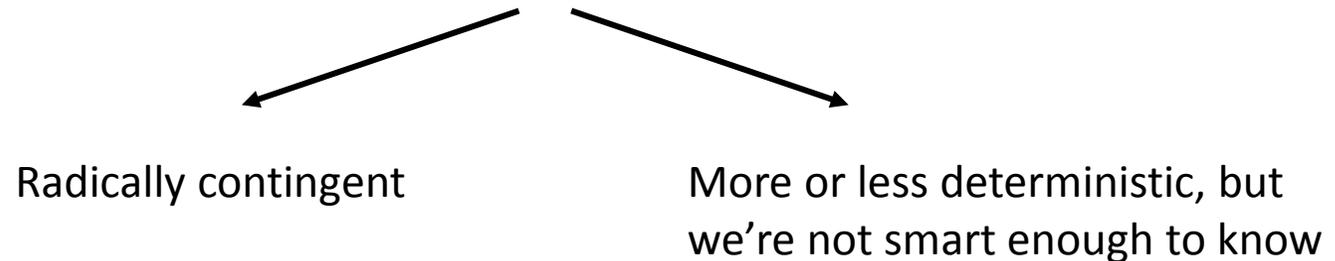
Brian Epstein

Tufts University

Lakatos Lecture, November 2017

Social turbulence

- Financial crisis, Arab spring, recent referenda and elections
- Erosion of confidence in social science
 - Not just turbulent, but seems unpredictable



- Warranted skepticism about understanding and improving the social world

Grounds for pessimism, grounds for optimism

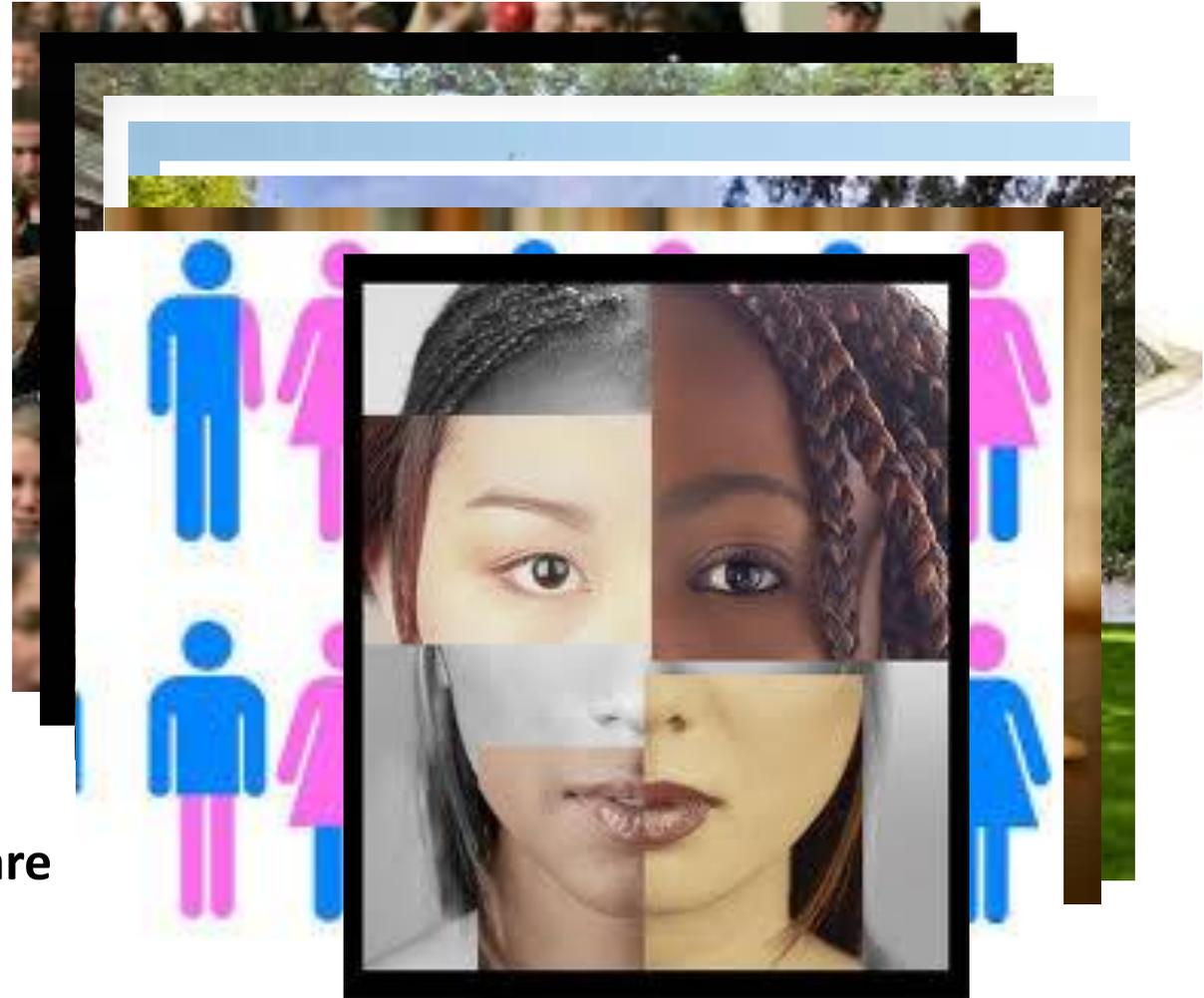
- Dead ends, obstacles, failed promises
- Many unexplored directions
 - Opportunities
- Increased recognition that what matters is social policy, institutional structure, fixing political systems

Many options for improving the social sciences

- Focus on just one
- Social ontology
 - An interesting and foundational topic
 - Quite theoretical, though with practical applications
- The field has ancient roots, but the inquiries have always been oddly limited
 - Remains underexplored

Social ontology: The nature of the social world

- A crowd
- A jazz ensemble
- A marketplace
- A corporation
- A university
- A dollar bill
- A piece of property
- A law
- A gender category
- A racial category
- **What are these? How are they built?**



Some aims of *The Ant Trap*

- Critique widespread assumptions about how the social world is built, and especially the role of individual people in constituting social things
- Develop a new framework for social ontology
 - The “grounding” and “anchoring” model
- Focus on widely discussed cases
 - E.g., group agents
- Set the stage for applications to models in the social sciences
- Today:
 - Explain and motivate foundational work in social ontology
 - Start with an example of a simple (and problematic) model
 - James Coleman’s 1990 model for social explanation
 - Somewhat dated, but remains influential, and useful for clarifying why it’s helpful to think about ontology

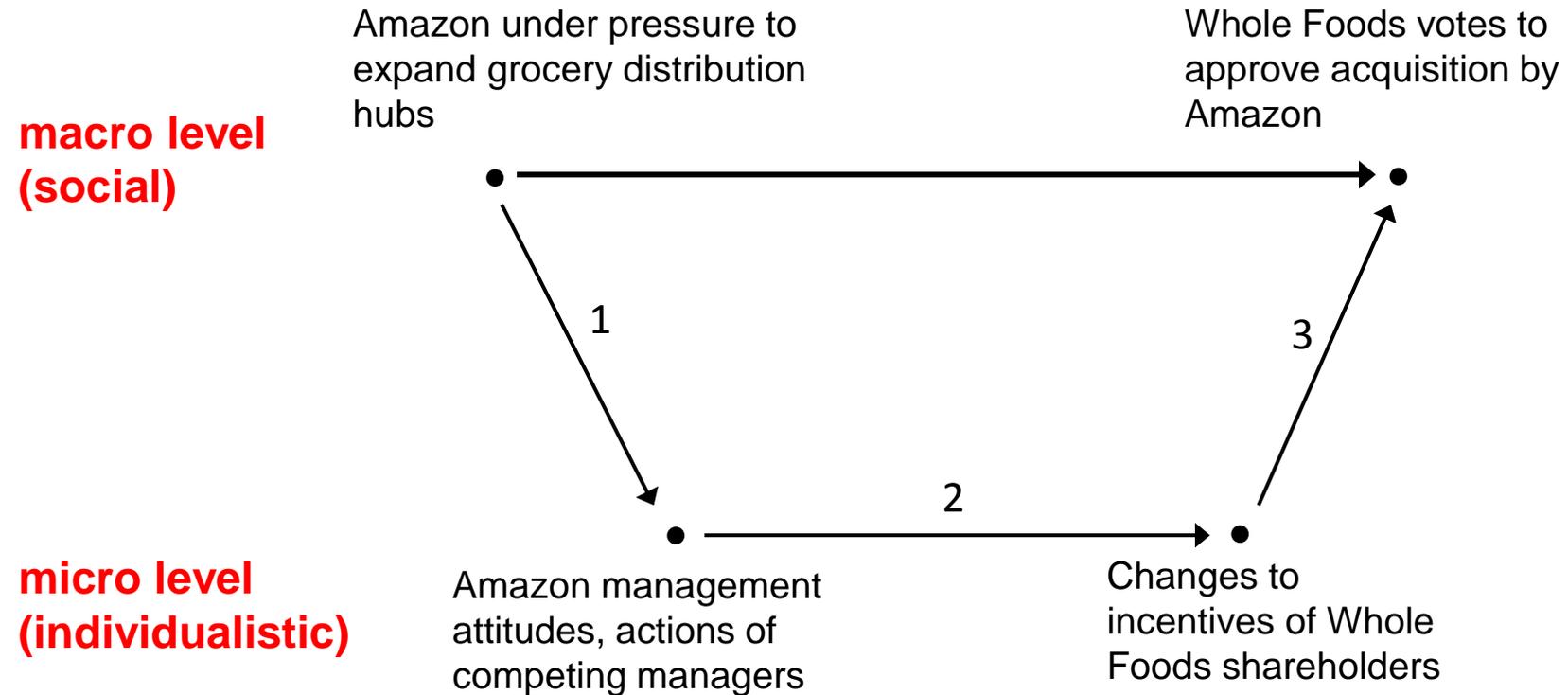
Explaining a social phenomenon

Amazon under pressure to
expand grocery distribution
hubs

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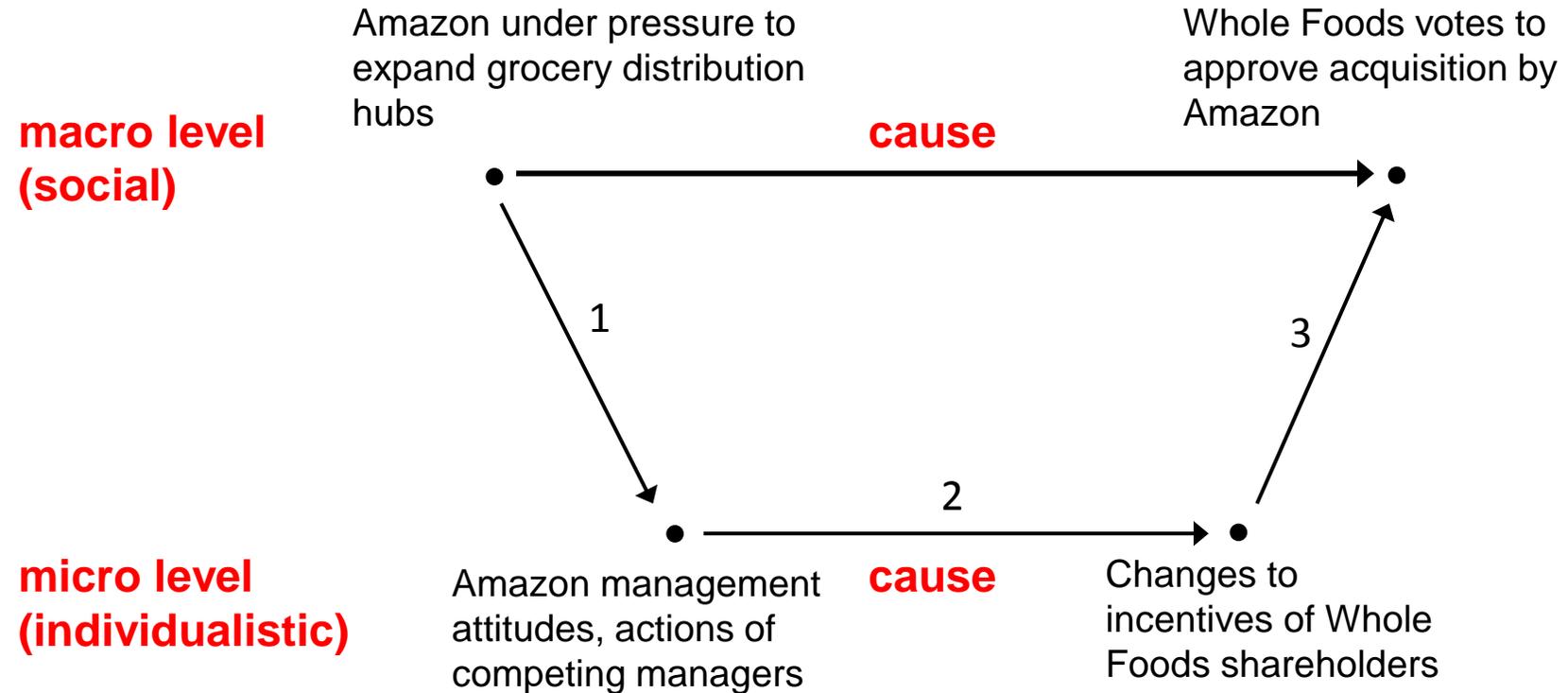


Coleman's diagram

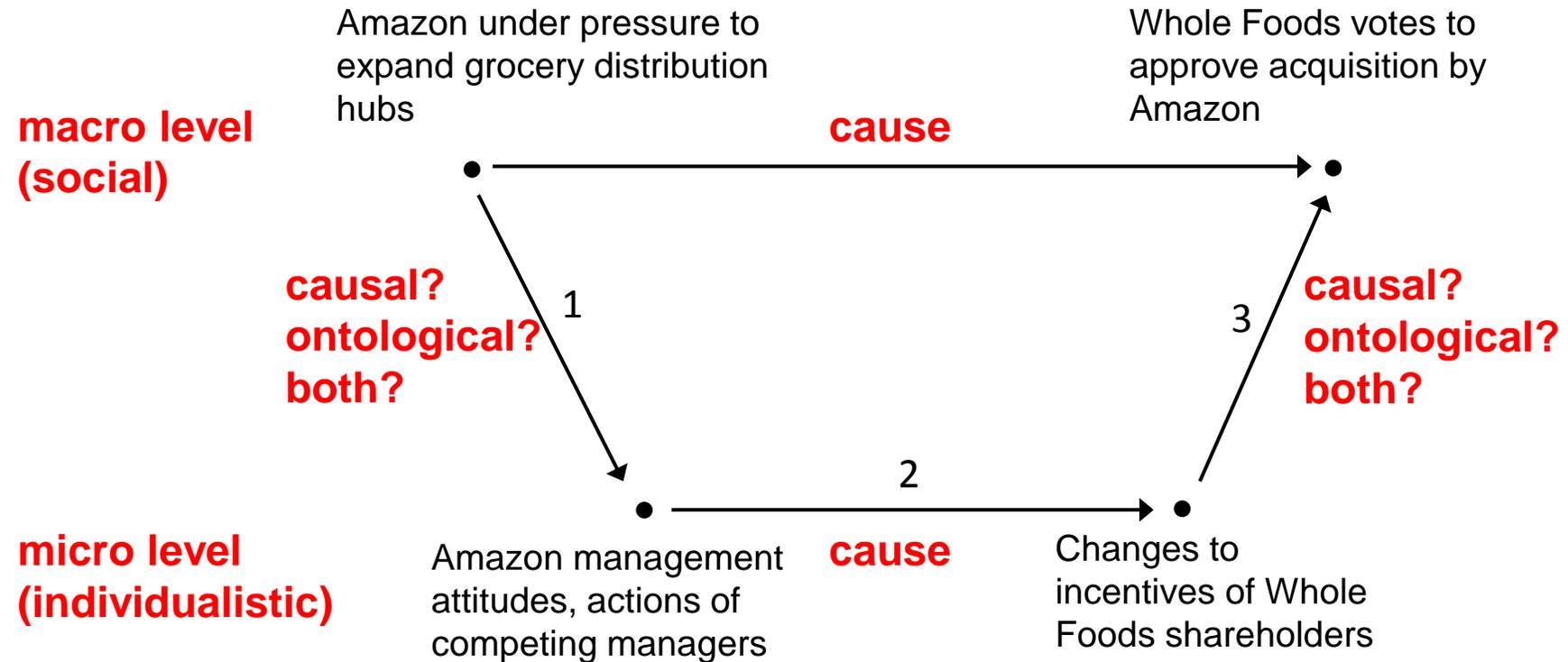


- “Good social explanations” in terms of individuals
- Individualistic, but not the most extreme form of individualism

Horizontal arrows



Diagonal arrows



- Do the social phenomena “consist of” the individualistic ones?
- What kind of “dependence” do arrows 1 and 3 represent?

Failure to separate ontology from causation

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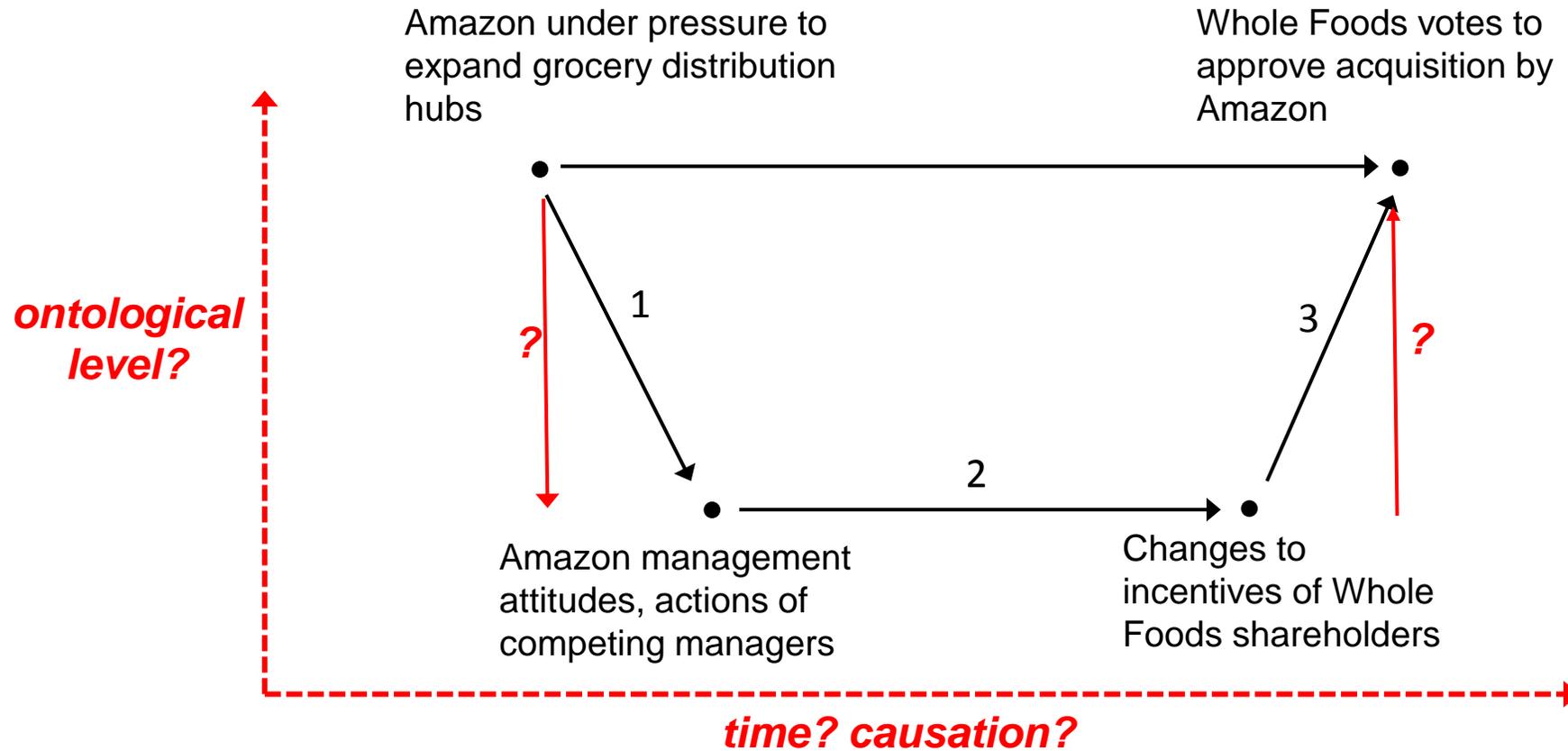


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- Ontology: What are these events, social phenomena, or social facts?
- Causation: How does the sequence work? What are the relevant causal relations and/or mechanisms?

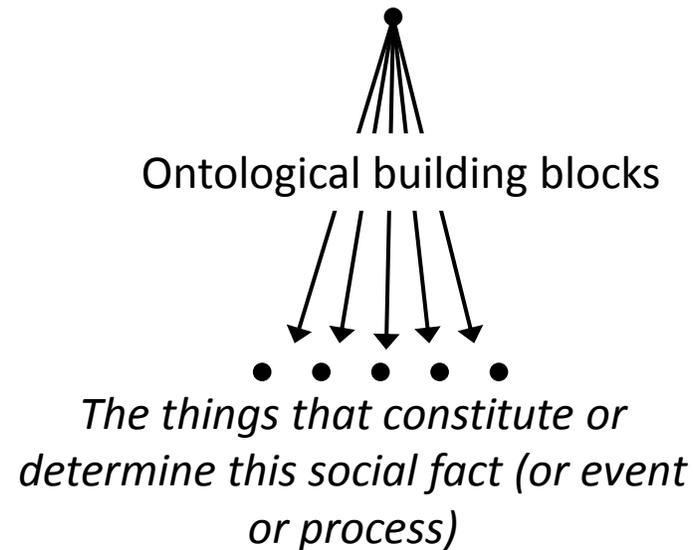
In connection with this, problems with the dimensions of the diagram



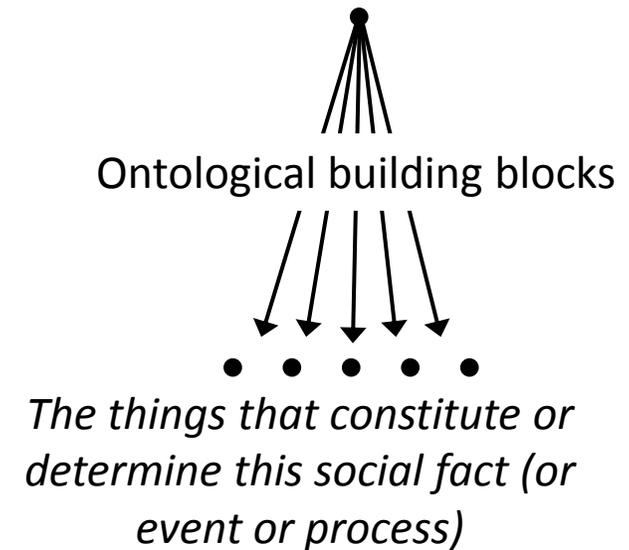
- Square the diagram?

Ontology versus causation

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- **Ontological building blocks need not be synchronic**
 - **Coleman's diagram cannot make sense, and the idea of "horizontal" and "vertical" determination is very misleading**

Ontology versus causation

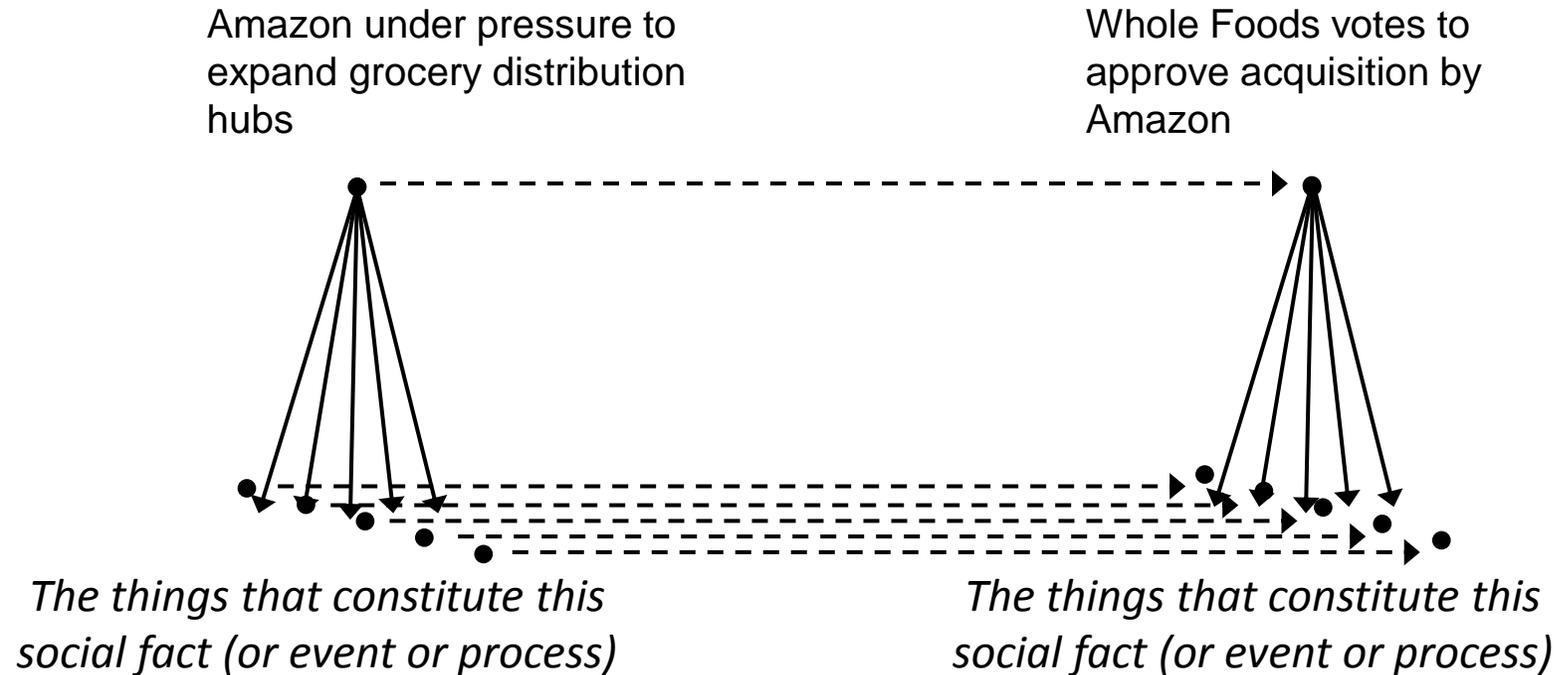
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- **How we construct causal explanations tacitly depends on prior commitments regarding the ontology**

A more fundamental question about Coleman and much social explanation



- **Why would one think that either the building blocks or the important causal factors would be individualistic?**
 - The model ignores the heterogeneity of building blocks
 - The model ignores the heterogeneity of causal factors

Rethinking the ontology

- The motivation for investigating social ontology:
 - Not just the intrinsic interest of the nature of the social world
 - But applications to model building and explanation
- Other fields invest much more substantially in ontology, or “what is it” questions
 - Biological sciences:
 - Genomics
 - Proteomics
 - Connectome mapping
 - Etc.
 - Social sciences:
 - Minimal
- How to approach inquiries into the nature of the social world?

A key notion: ontological determination

The auditorium is full.



grounds

**Every seat in the auditorium
is occupied by a person.**

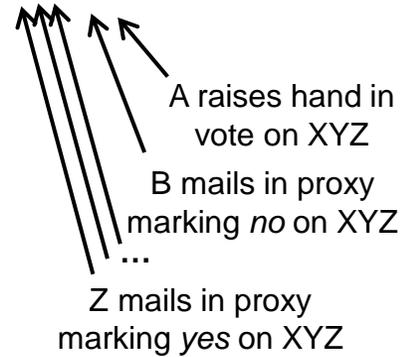
- Lots of ways to understand this relation
- Grounding
 - Metaphysically sufficient explanation of one fact by a set of other facts
- An ontological relation, not a causal one
 - The fact that every seat is occupied ontologically determines the fact that the auditorium is full.

The heterogeneous grounds of a typical social fact: Example: action of the Facebook stockholder group

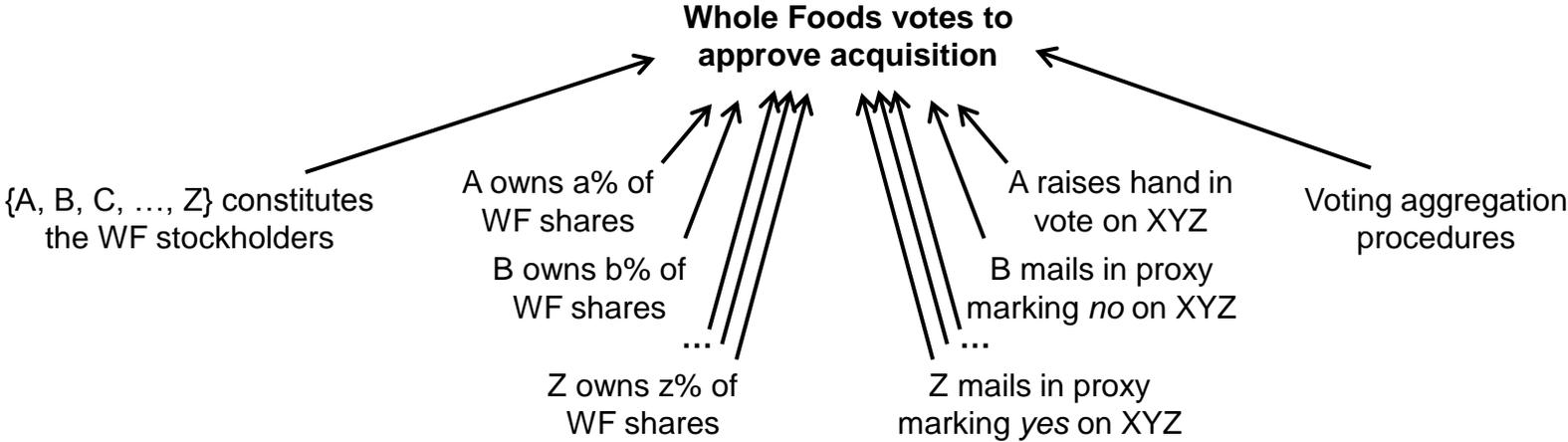
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Grounds of a social fact: Some obvious determining facts

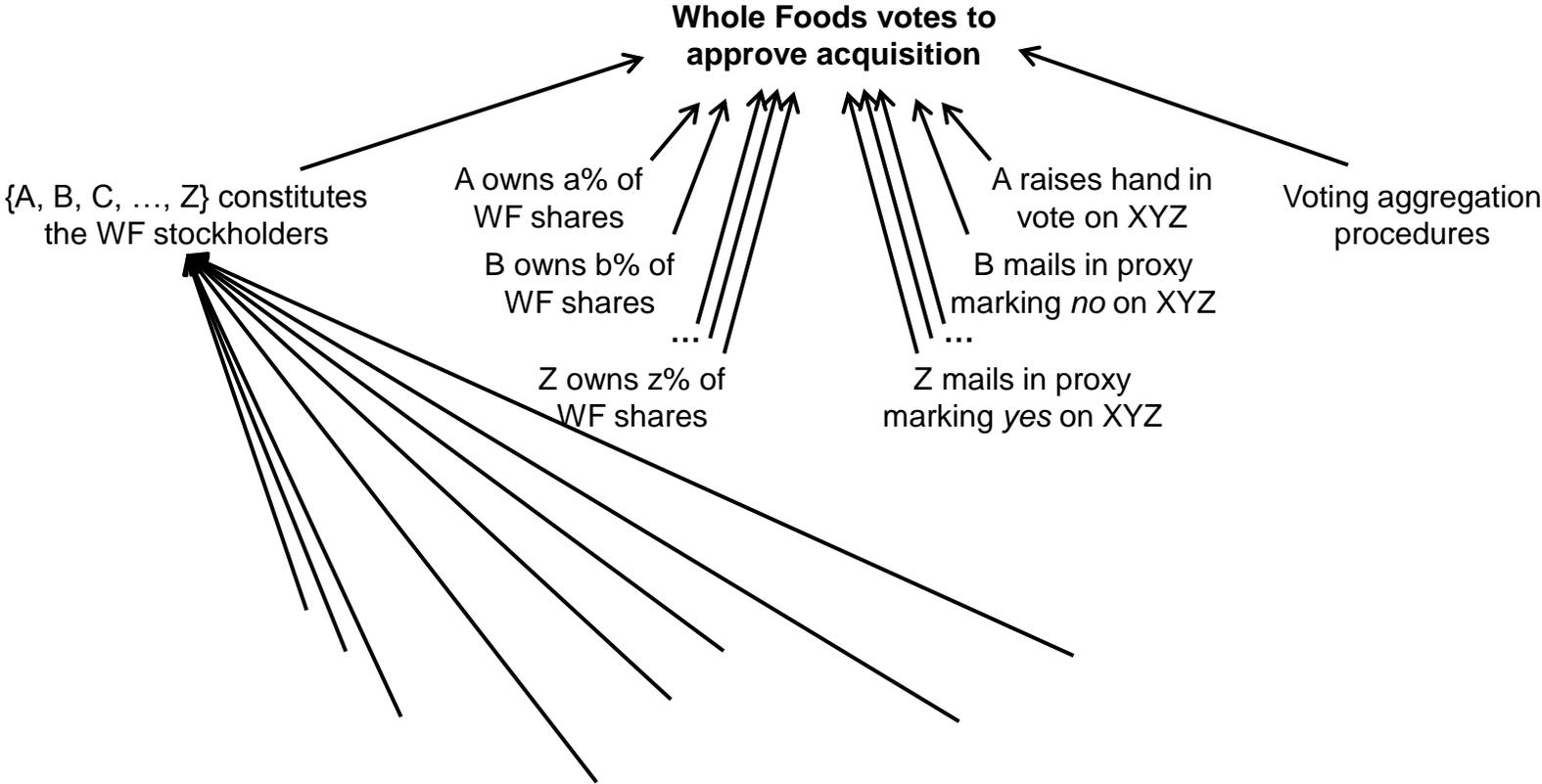
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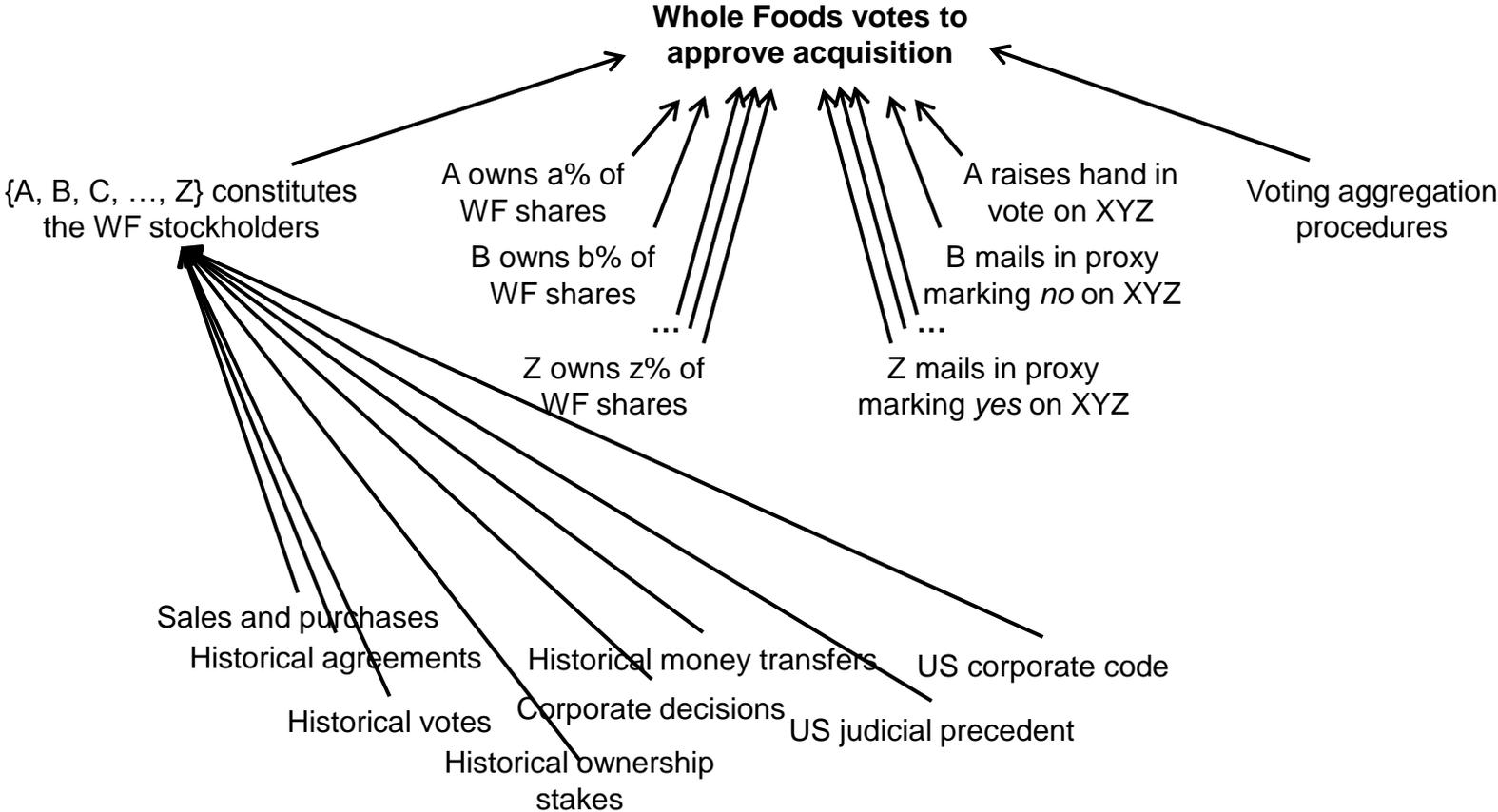
Grounds of a social fact: Aim for comprehensiveness



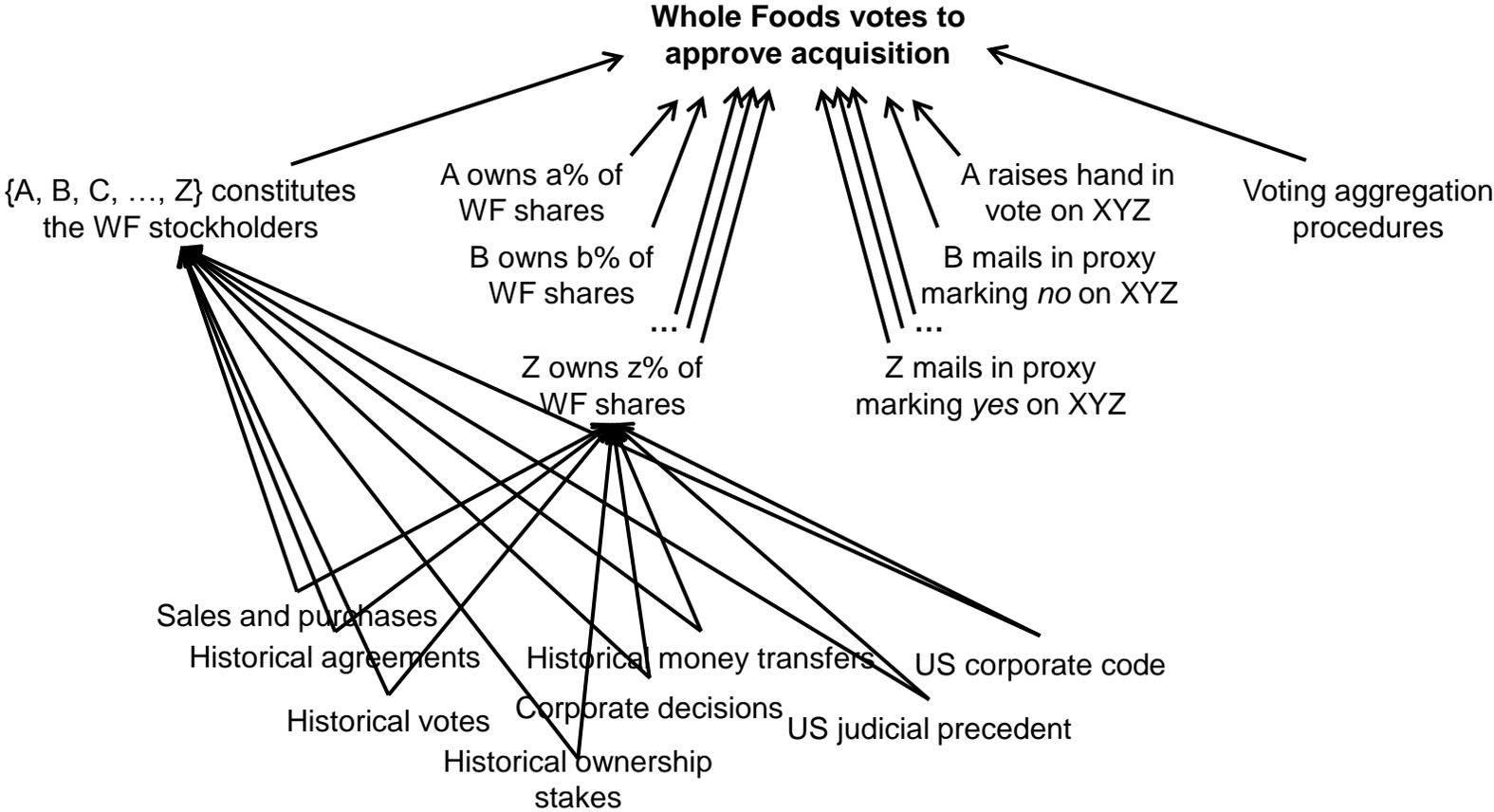
Grounds of a social fact: Break down into more detail



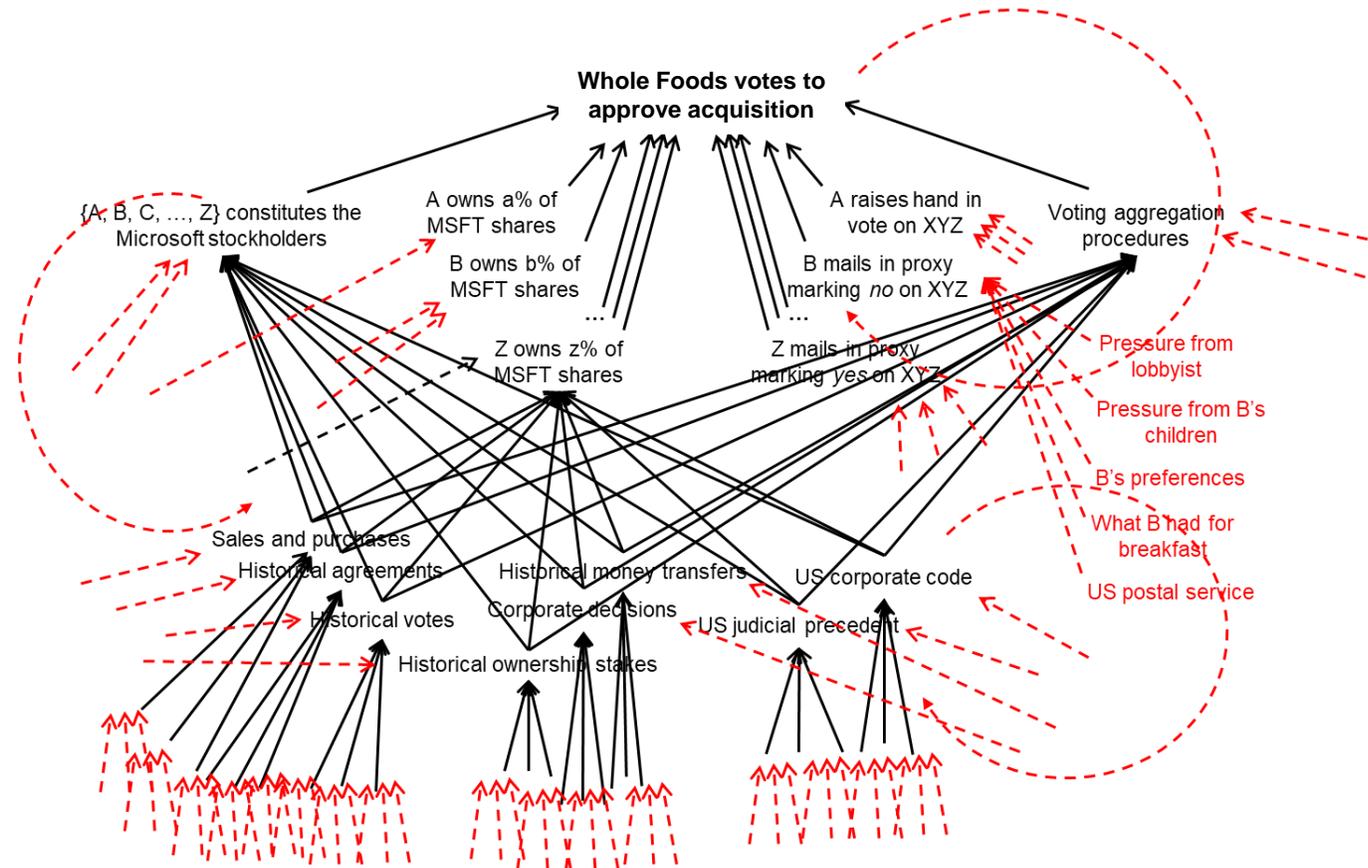
Grounds of a social fact: Heterogeneous types of grounds



Grounds of a social fact: Unexpected dependencies



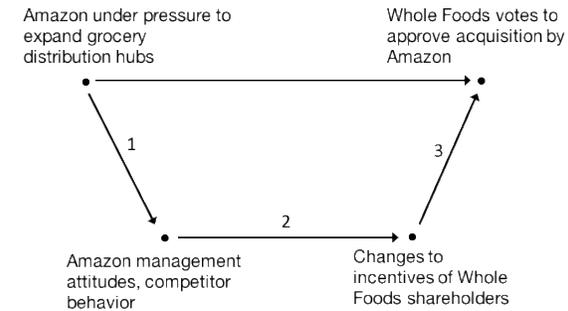
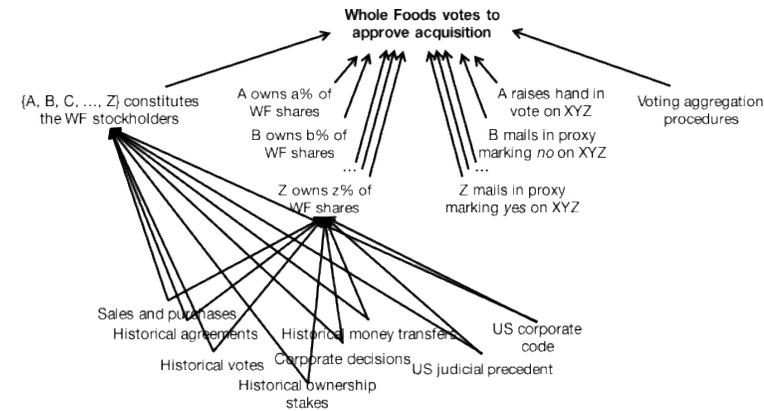
Causal structure



- Causal models are built atop ontological structures

Dealing with complexity

- Complex structures like this are ubiquitous
- Misleading to start with a shoddy ontology
 - It matters that we get the ontology right
 - Also matters that we include the heterogeneity
- Not arguing against simple models
- Rather, arguing against choosing the same kinds of simple models over and over



Tip of the iceberg

- More to social ontology than arrows of grounding
- Two sets of questions, corresponding to two kinds of ontological determination
- What grounds the fact?
- What **sets up** these social categories?
 - What makes these the grounds for being a stockholder vote?
 - What makes these the grounds for being a stockholder group?
 - What makes these the grounds for being an American C-type corporation?
- The theory of anchoring

Taking stock

- Rich field of social ontology
- But even this much reveals the opportunity
 - The heterogeneous nature of social entities
 - Concrete projects to pursue and synthesize
 - Far reaching implications for expanding how we model
 - Qualitative, analytic, computational
- Improving the social world?