

# Hosted by Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method

## Lakatos Award Lectures

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THE LONDON SCHOOL  
OF ECONOMICS AND  
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

# Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences

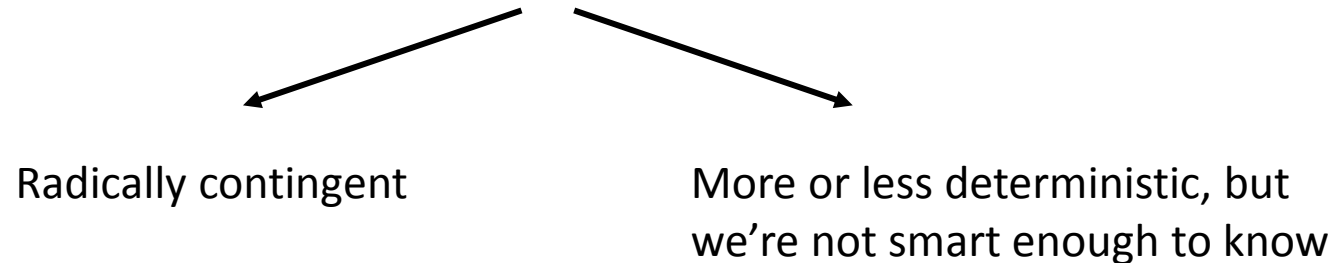
Brian Epstein

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

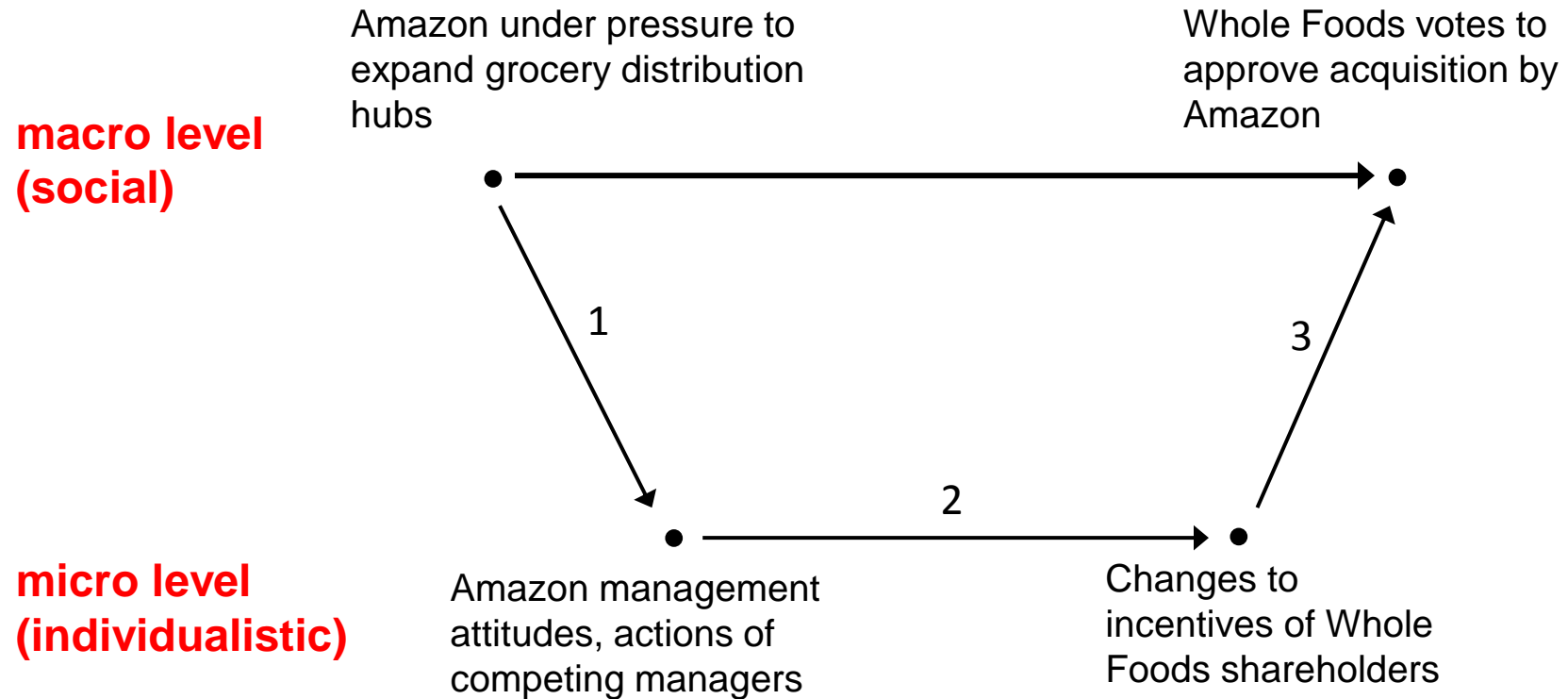
Amazon under pressure to  
expand grocery distribution  
hubs

Whole Foods votes to  
approve acquisition by  
Amazon



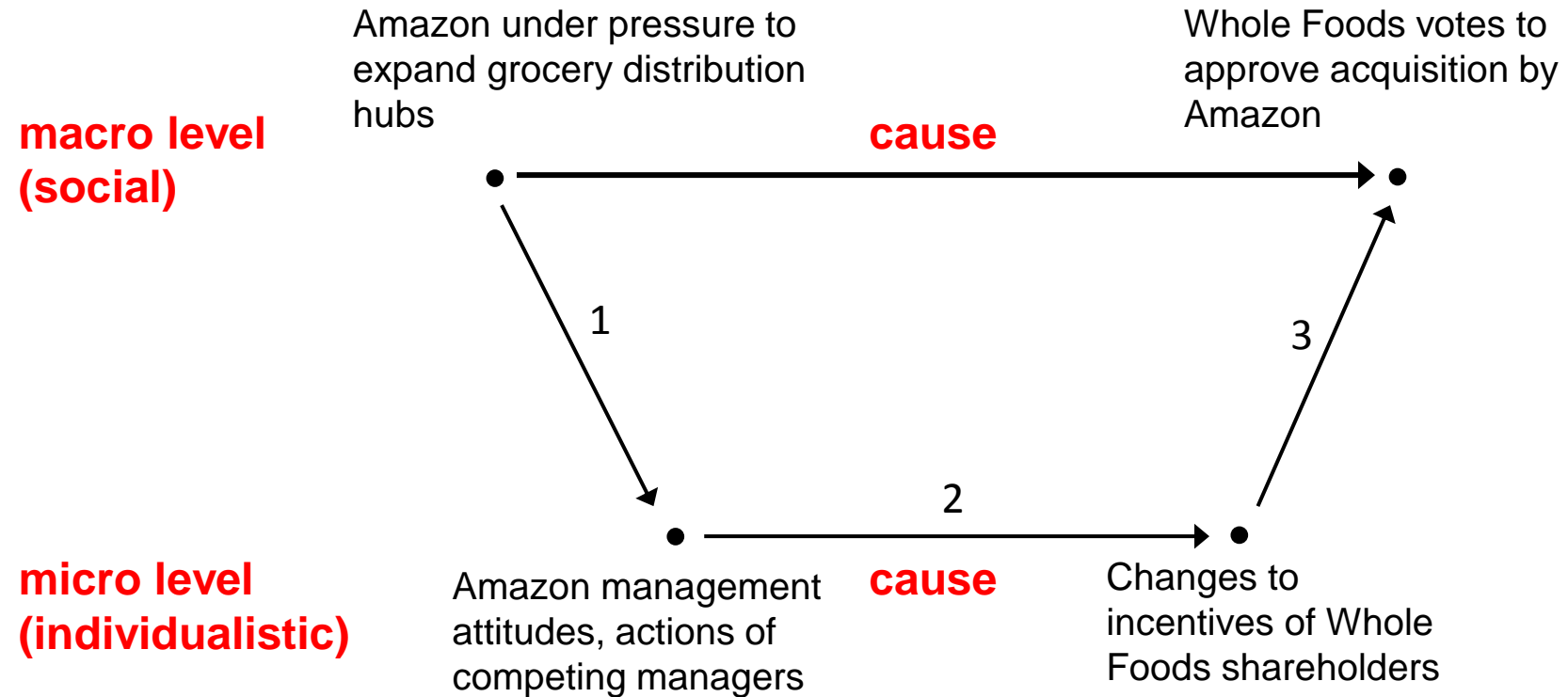


# Coleman's diagram

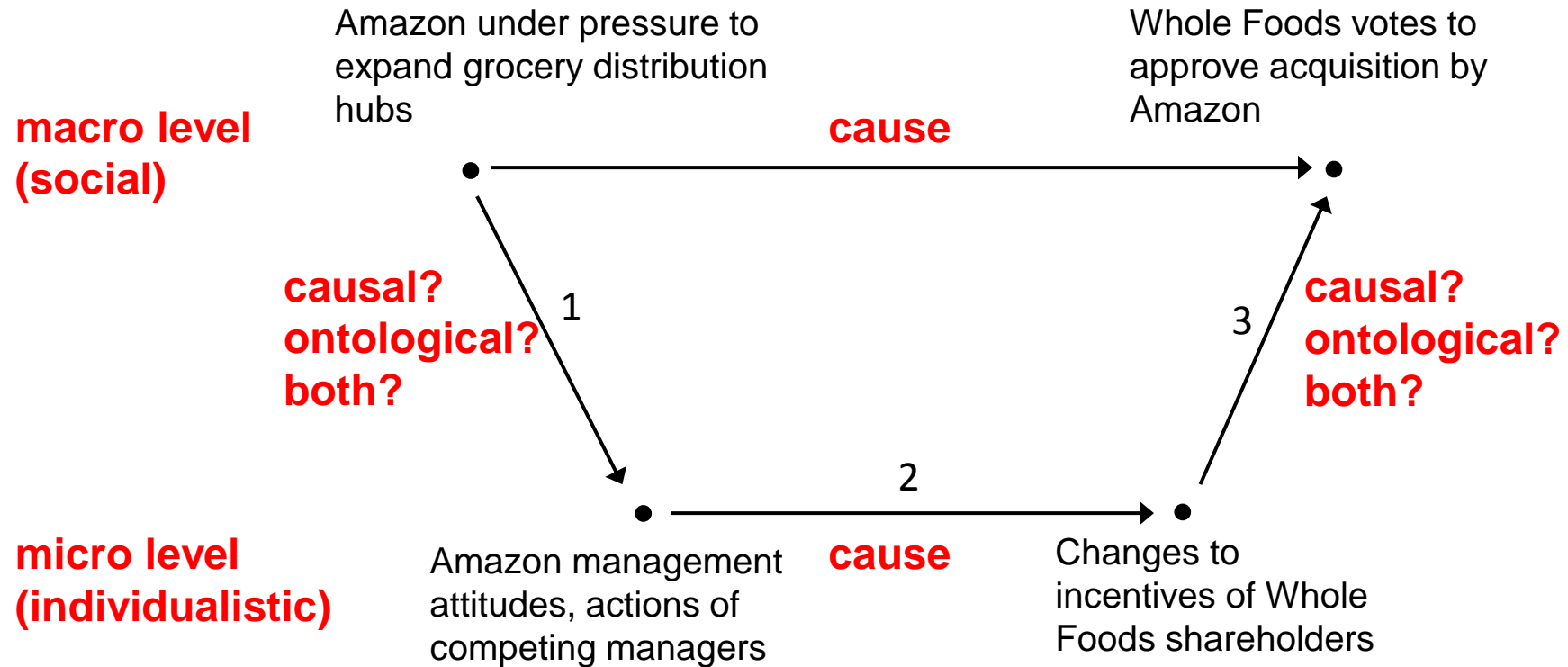


- “Good social explanations” in terms of individuals
- Individualistic, but not the most extreme form of individualism

# 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

Amazon under pressure to  
expand grocery distribution  
hubs

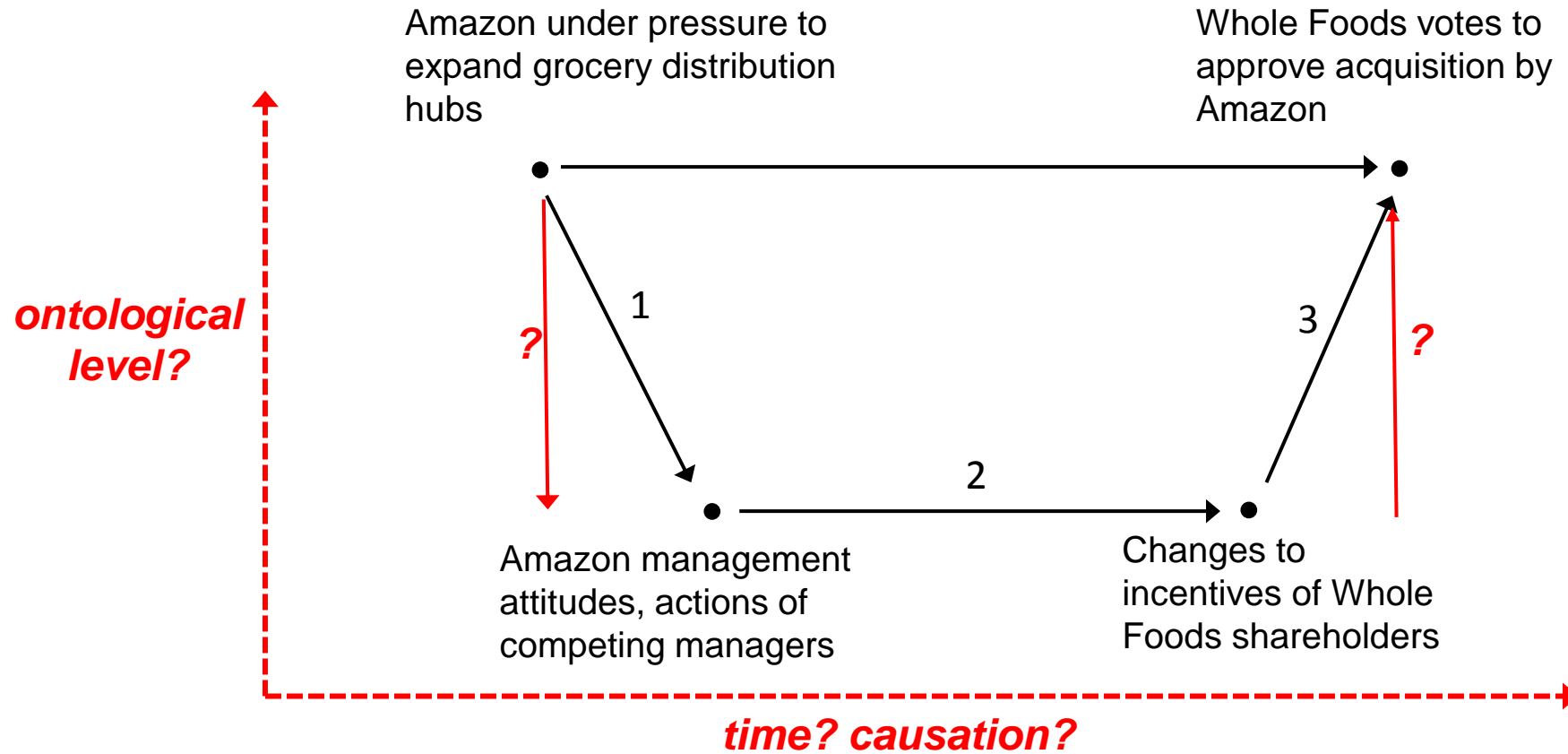


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Amazon



- 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?

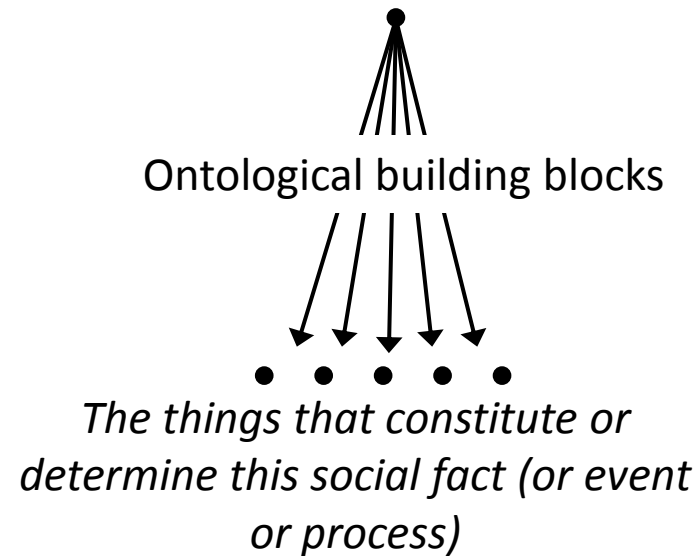
In connection with this, problems with the dimensions of the diagram



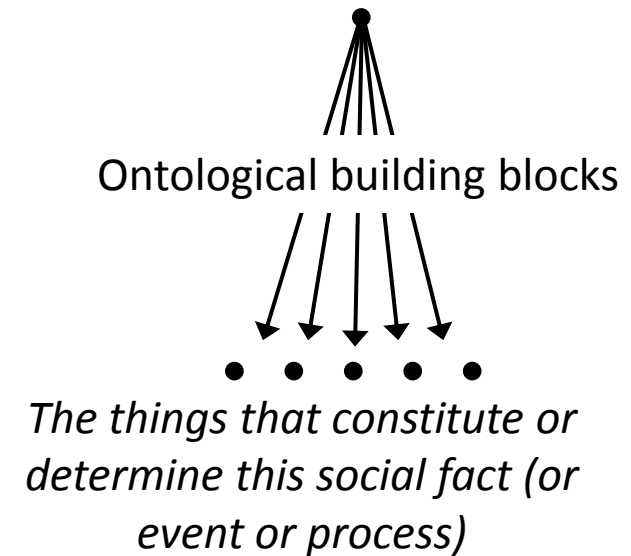
- Square the diagram?

# Ontology versus causation

Amazon under pressure to  
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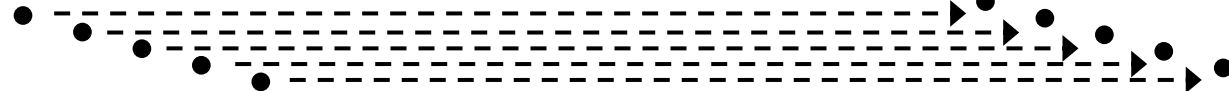


- **Ontological building blocks need not be synchronic**
  - **Coleman's diagram cannot make sense, and the idea of "horizontal" and "vertical" determination is very misleading**

# Ontology versus causation

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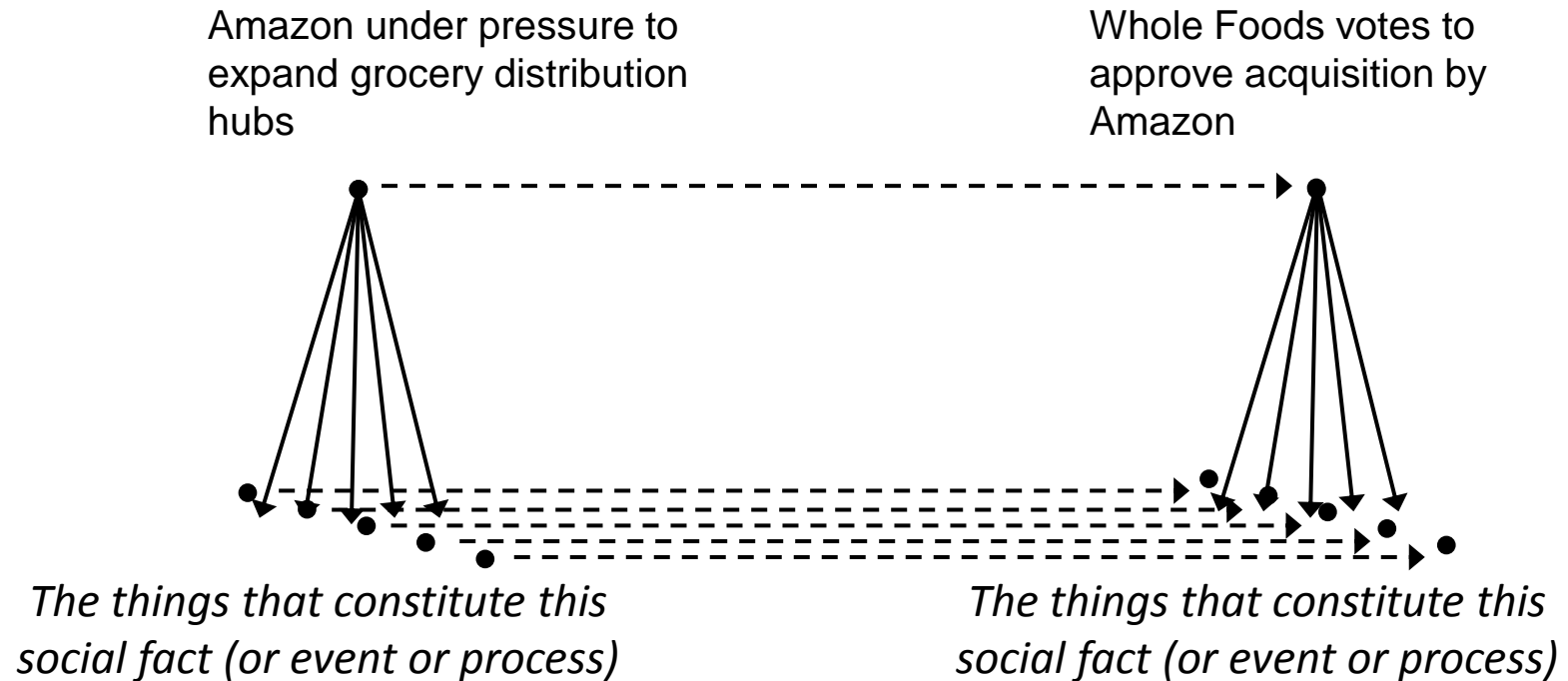


*The things that constitute this  
social fact (or event or process)*

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social fact (or event or process)*

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

# A more fundamental question about Coleman and much social explanation



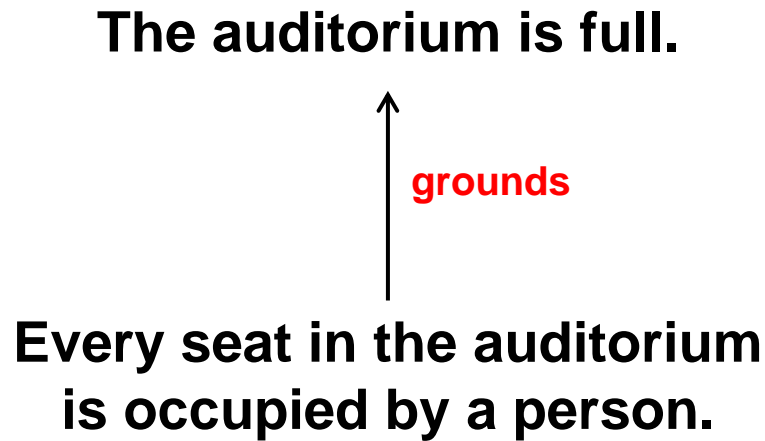
- **Why would one think that either the building blocks or the important causal factors would be individualistic?**
  - The model ignores the heterogeneity of building blocks
  - The model ignores the heterogeneity of causal factors



# 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



- 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.

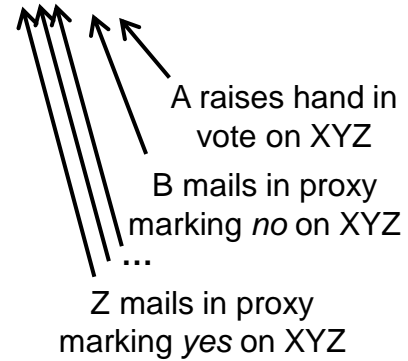
The heterogeneous grounds of a typical social fact:  
Example: action of the Facebook stockholder group

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approve acquisition**

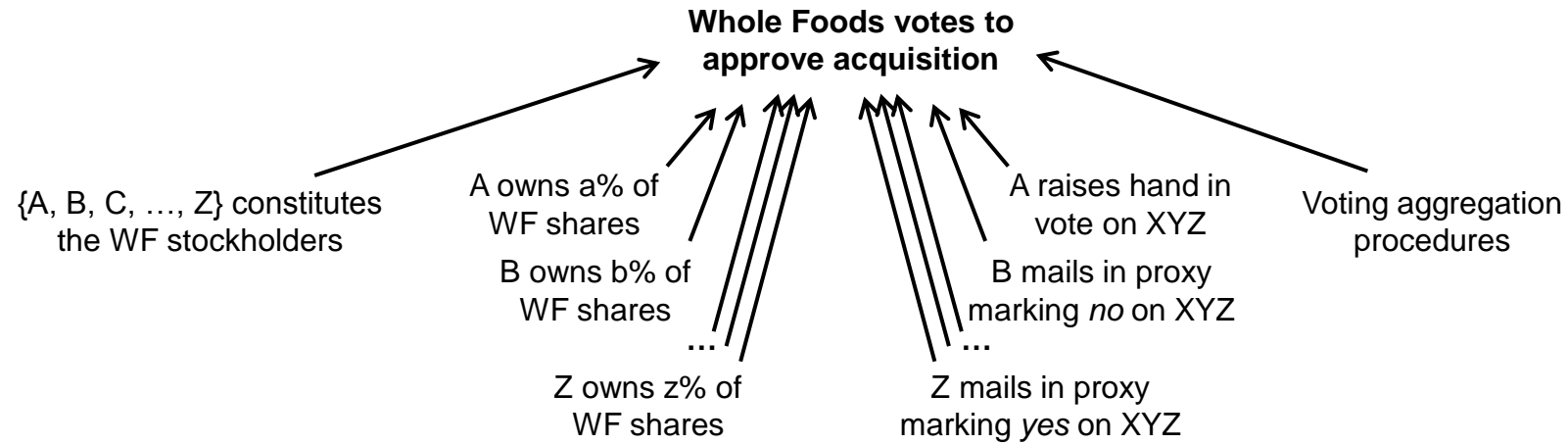
# Grounds of a social fact:

## Some obvious determining facts

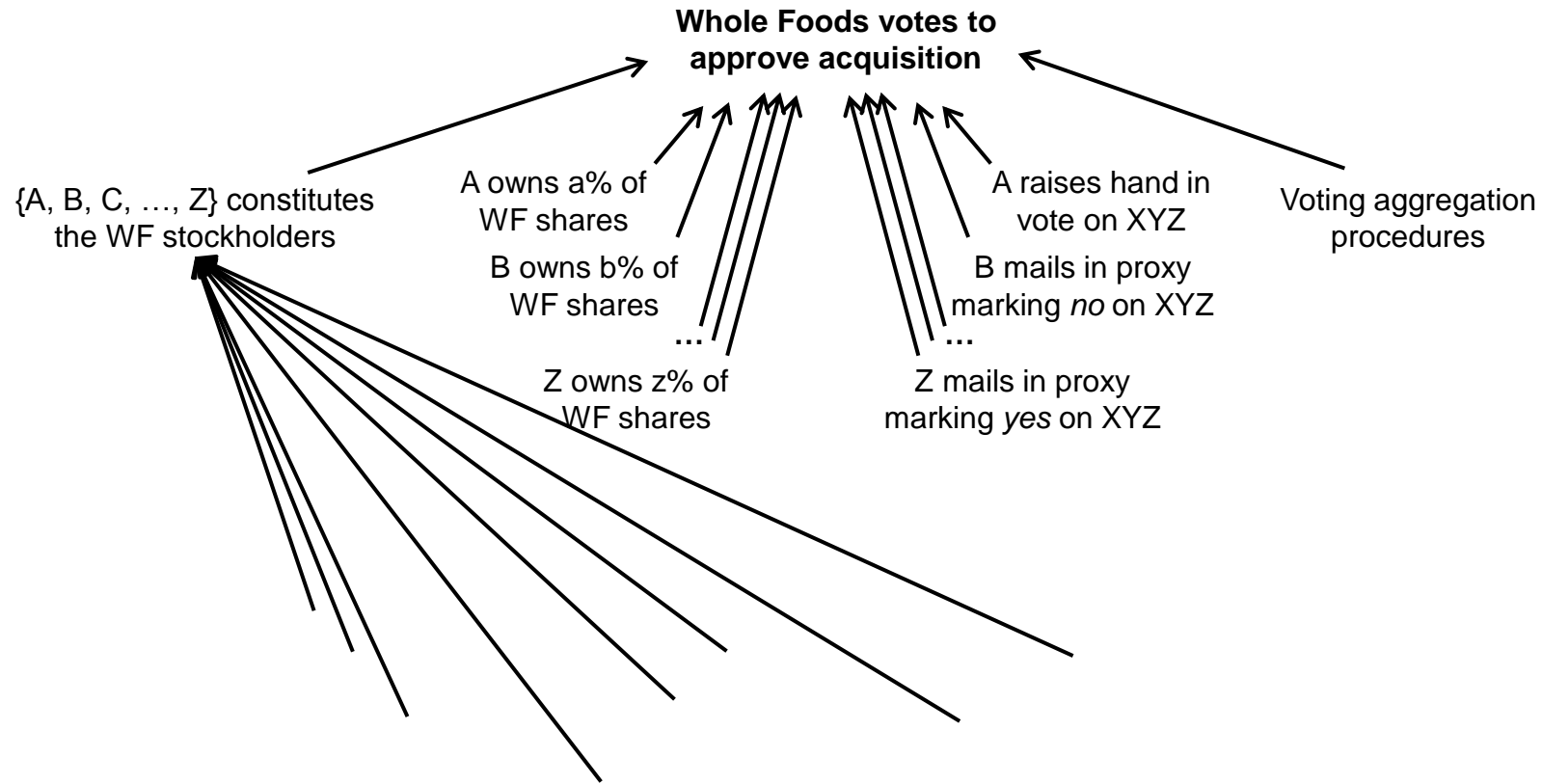
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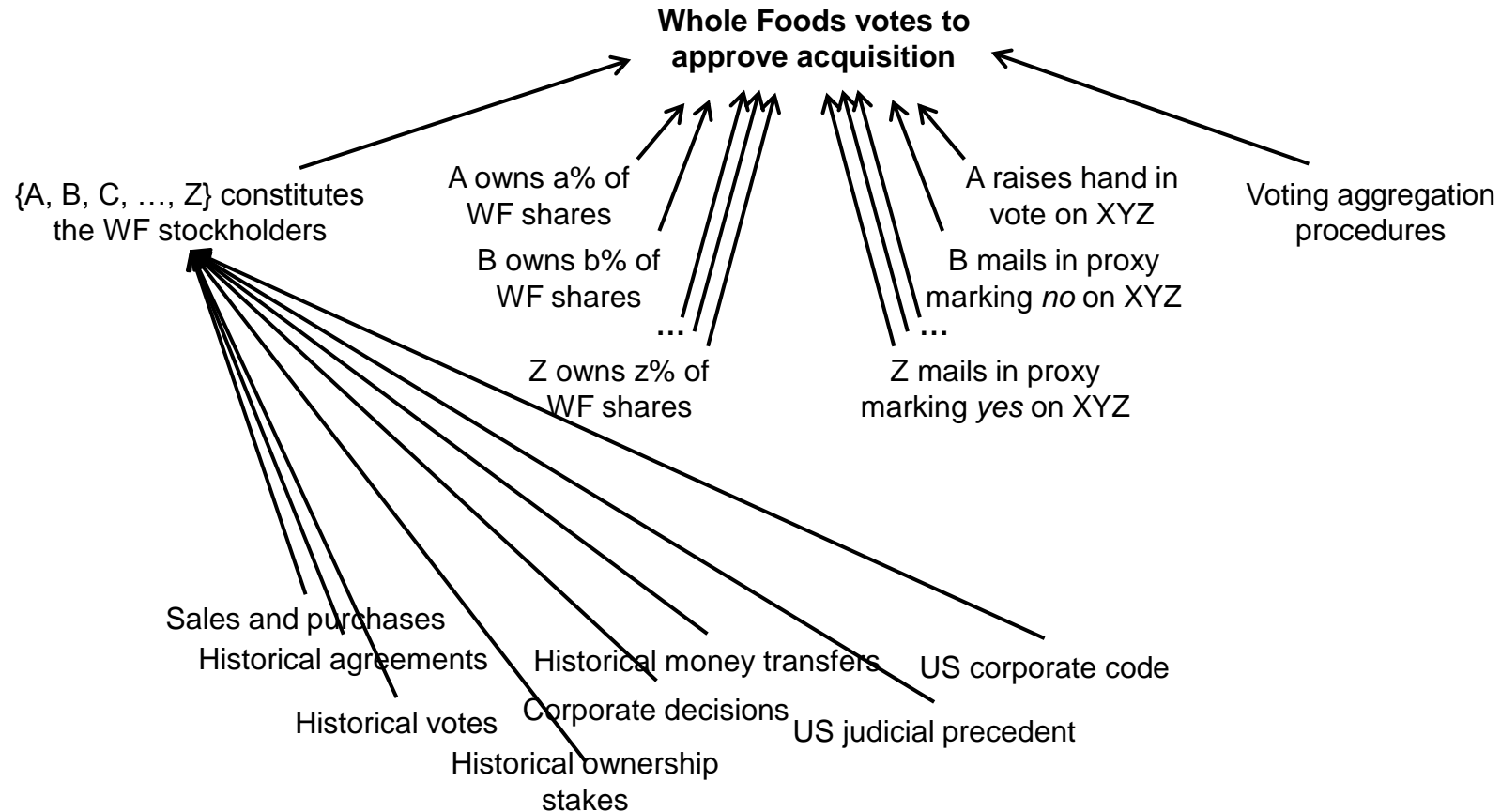
# Grounds of a social fact: Aim for comprehensiveness



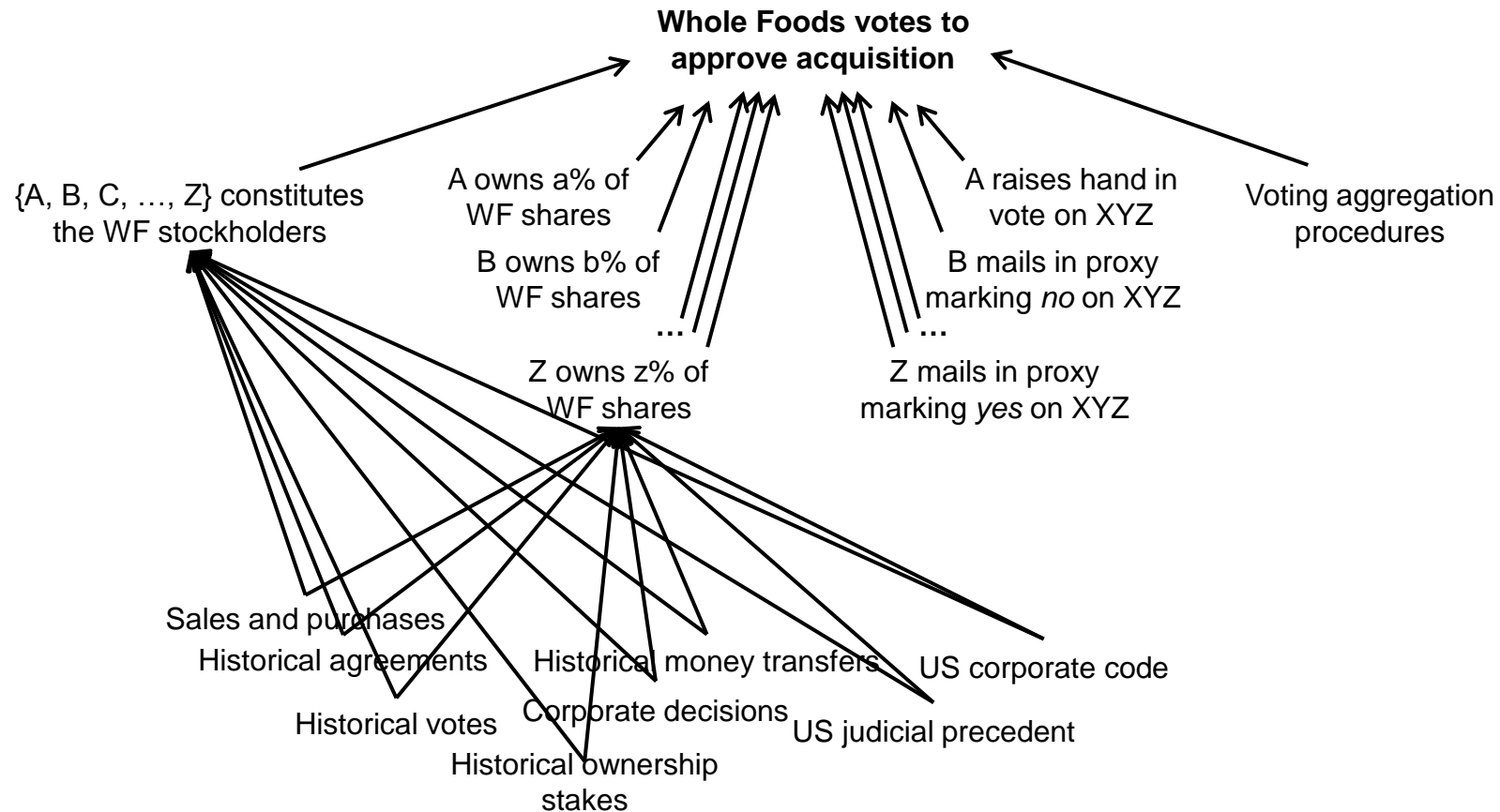
# Grounds of a social fact: Break down into more detail



# Grounds of a social fact: Heterogeneous types of grounds

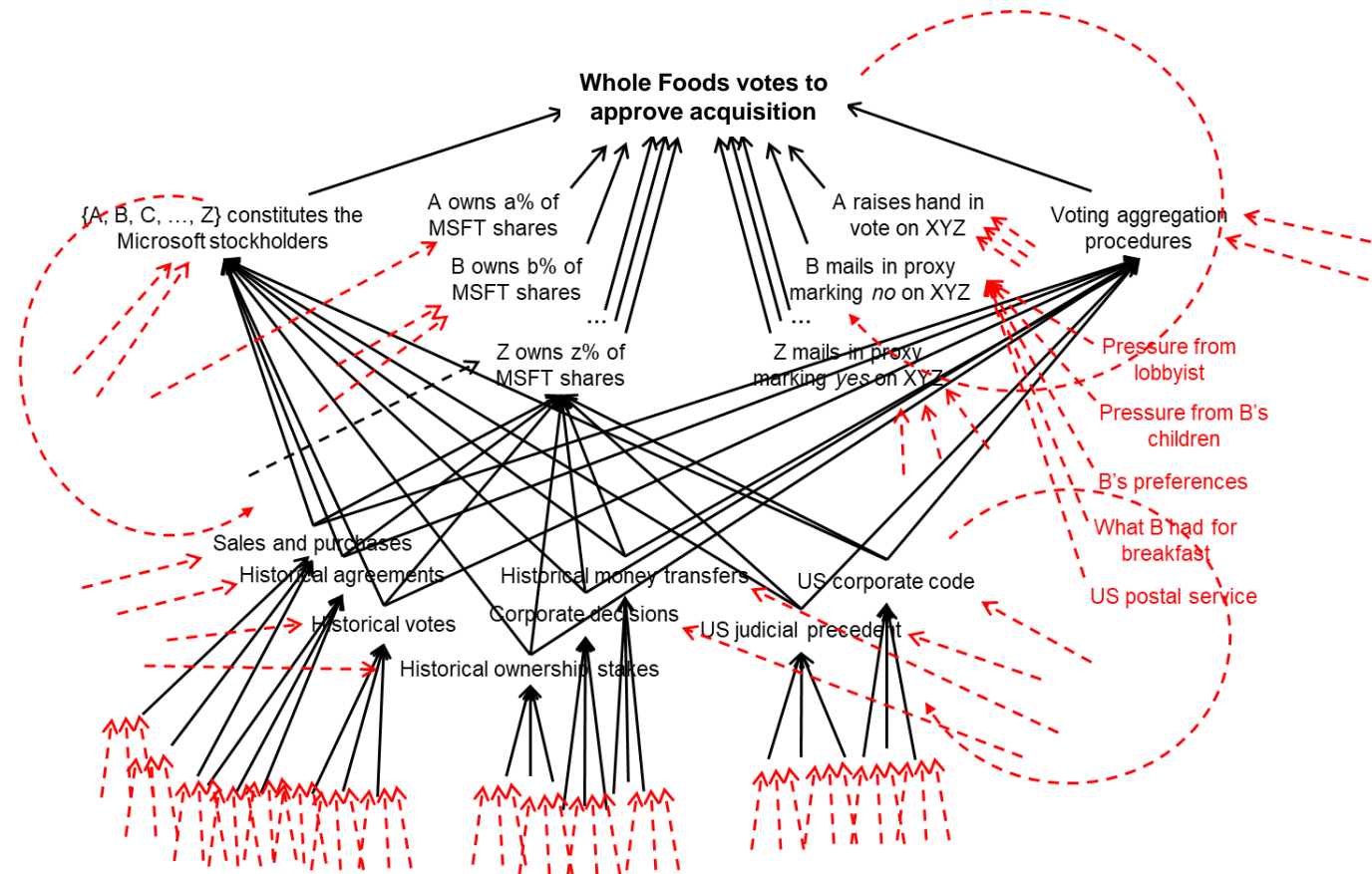


# Grounds of a social fact: Unexpected dependencies





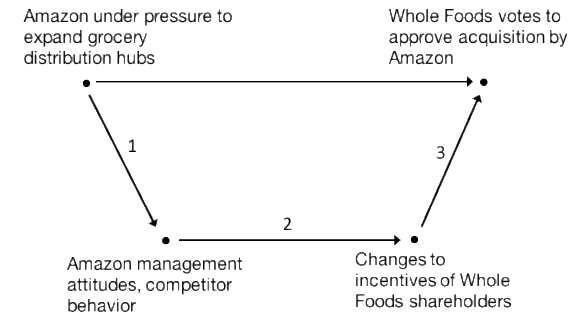
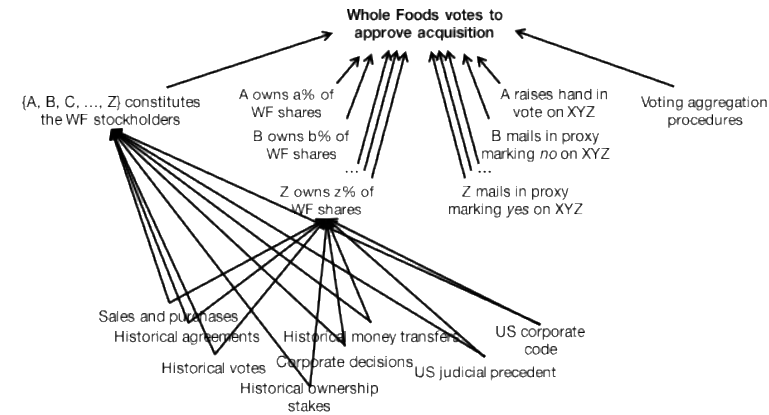
# Causal structure



- 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?