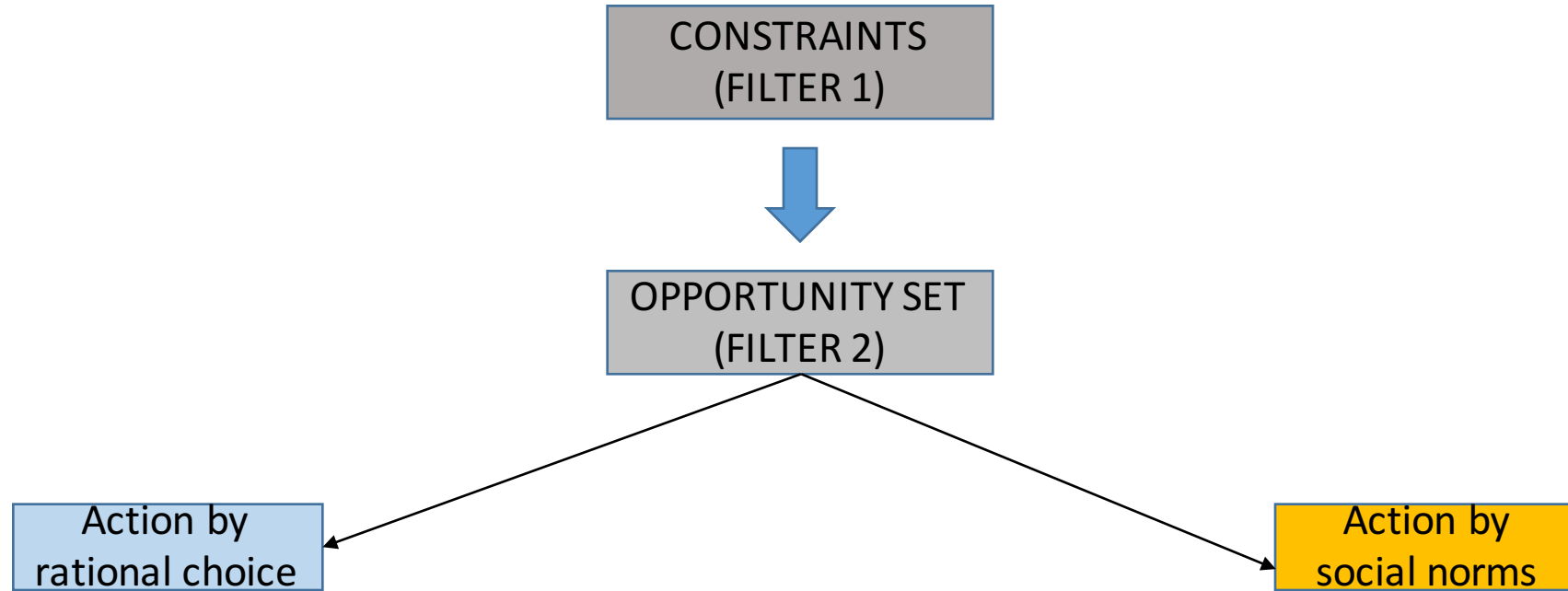


Concepts for applied sociology: social action

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ASEP PhD Seminar, 12 December 2017

HUMAN ACTION

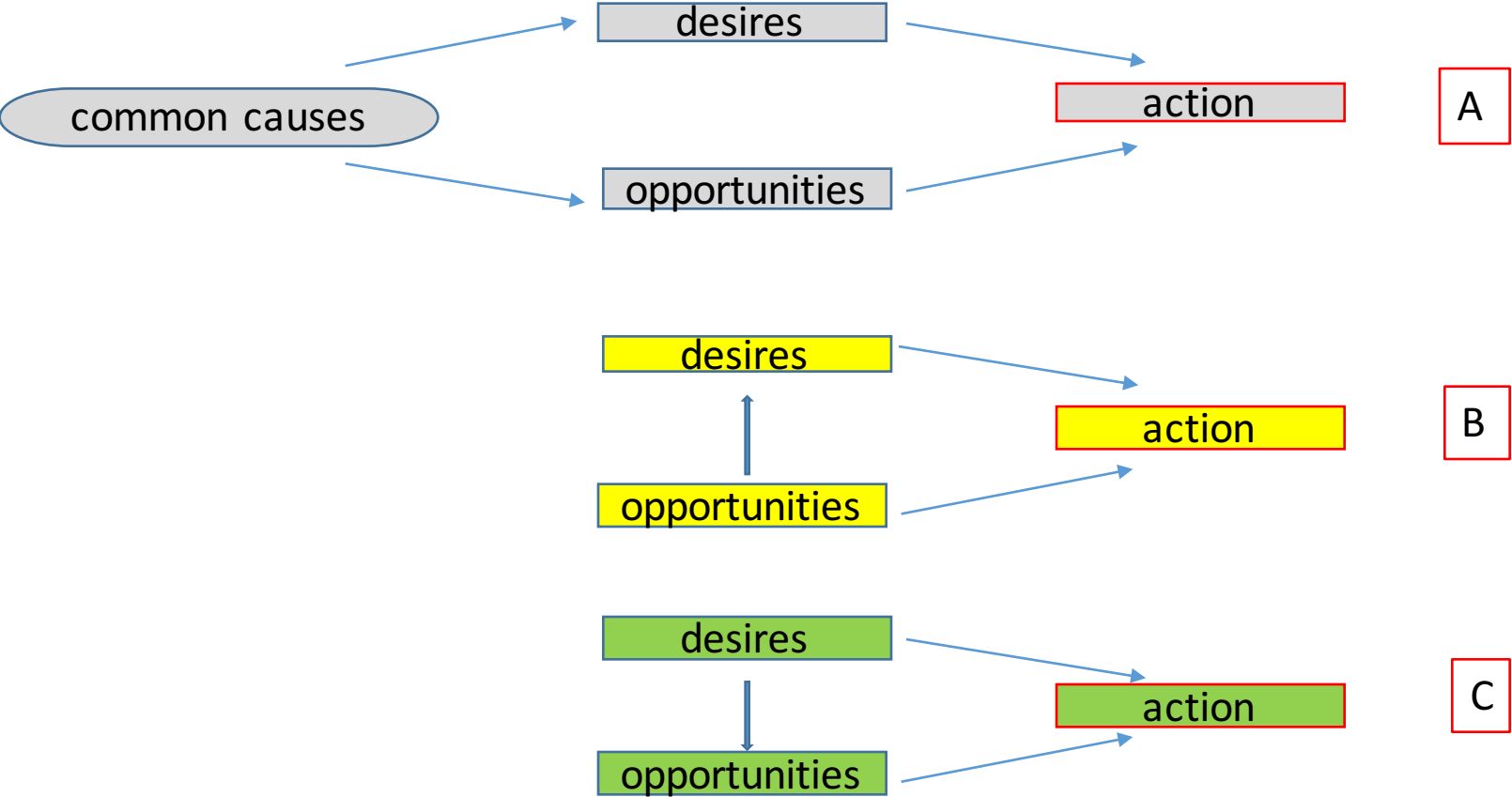


Opportunities more fundamental than desires?

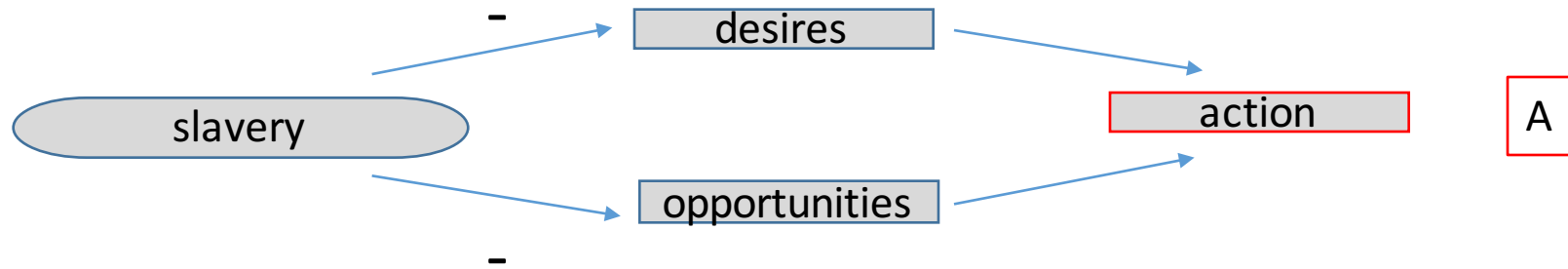
1. They are easier to observe;
2. Constraints are so hard that opportunity set is reduced to a single action;
3. It is easier to change people's circumstances and opportunities than to change their minds;
4. All people have essentially the same preferences and desires: only opportunities differ (some economists).

But people differ in their desires as well in their opportunities!
(the risk of a deterministic approach)

DESIRES AND OPPORTUNITIES

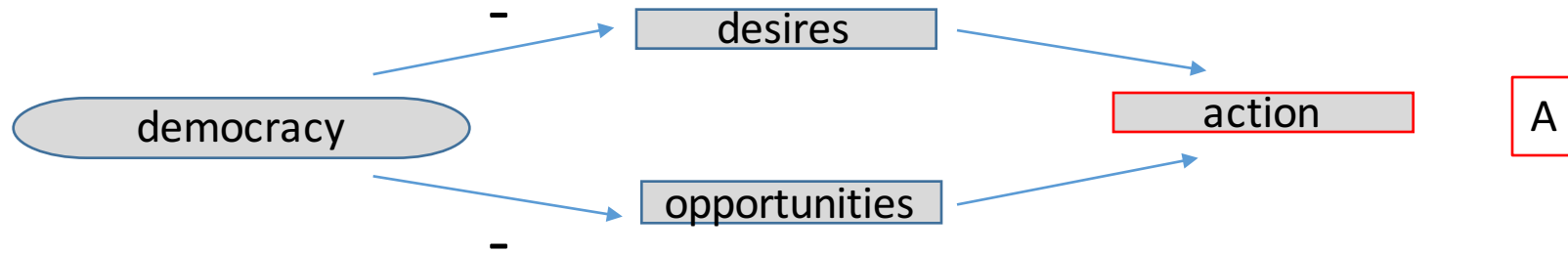


Slavery and white men



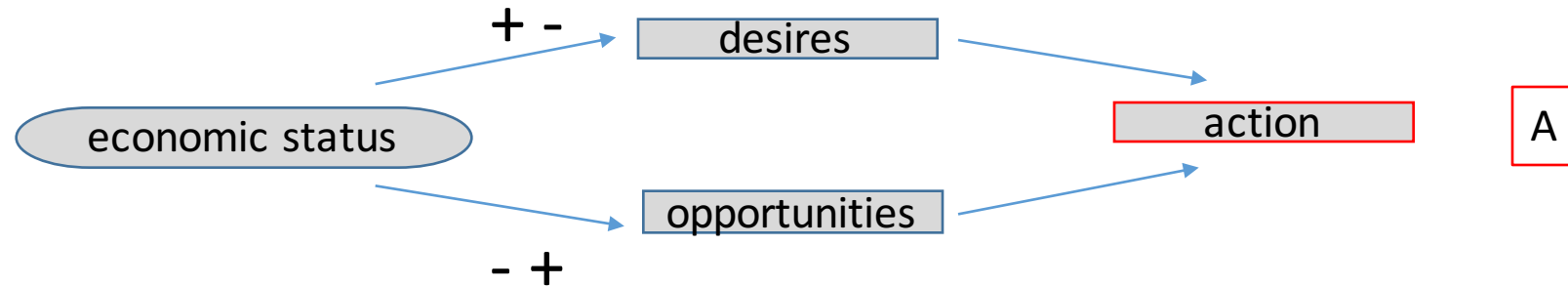
Slavery not only prevents white men from making their fortune, but even diverts them from wishing to do so .

Democracy and selection of leaders



In America, the voters never elect men of distinction to public office, partly because they have no opportunity to do so (men of distinction do not want to go into politics) and partly because they would not desire to elect superior candidates were they to appear.

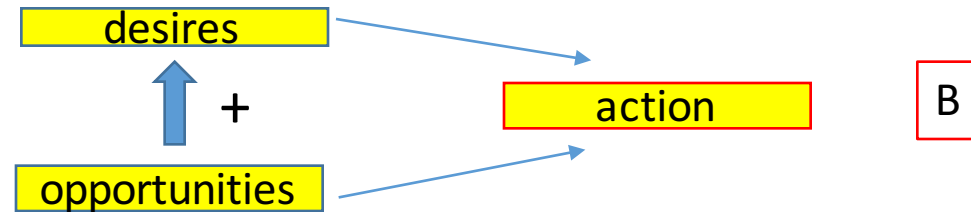
Economic status and education



There is no time in their life at which Americans have both the leisure and the inclination to study, whence the absence of well-educated Americans.

Adaptive preferences

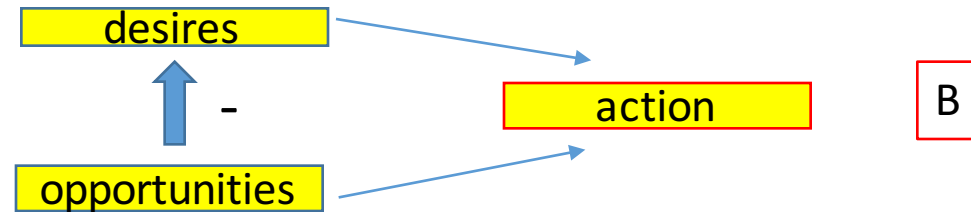
“Is it a blessing of God, or a last malediction, this disposition of the soul that gives men a sort of depraved taste for the cause of their afflictions?” (Tocqueville)



Counteradaptive preferences

“The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence”

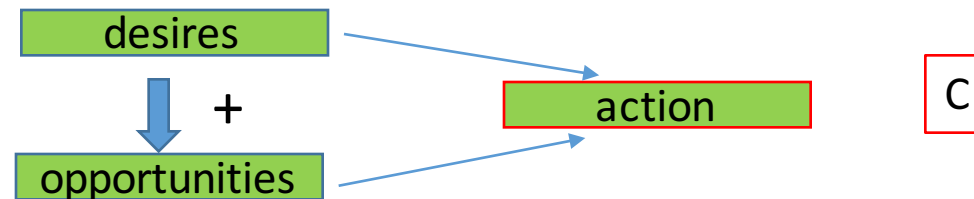
“Forbidden fruit tastes best”



Wishful thinking

“Stay hungry, stay foolish” (Steve Jobs)

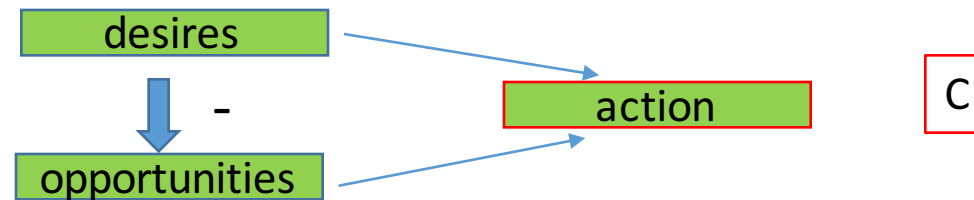
“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world. The unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man” (George Bernard Shaw)



Weakness of will

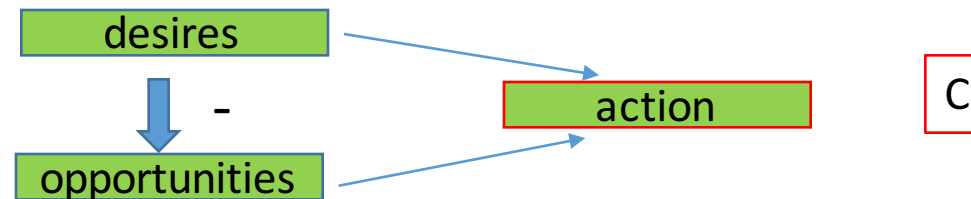
I may ask my dentist to bill me in full before my appointment in order not to cancel the appointment.

A government might hand over control of financial policy to the International Monetary Fund to prevent itself from giving in to popular demands for wage increases.

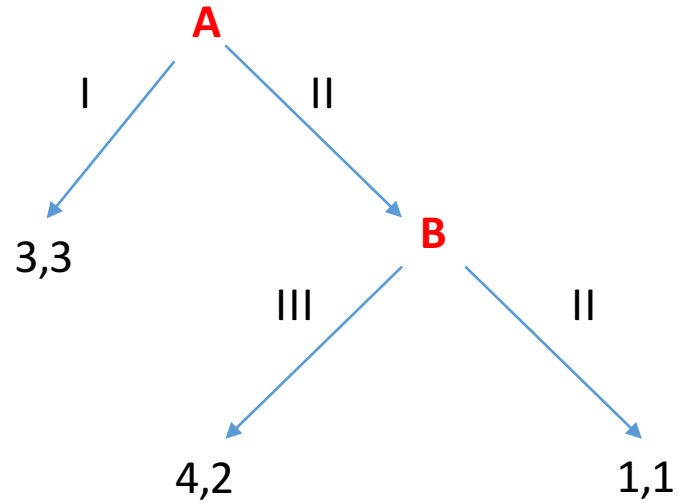


Burning his bridges

The classical stratagem of an army in order to make retreat physically impossible, also anticipating that weakness of will prevent it from fighting if he has another way out.



Strategic interaction



I = negotiation

II = attacking

III = retreating

Social action: instrumental rationality vs social norms?

- ***Homo oeconomicus*** (A. Smith): action guided by instrumental rationality; social actor completely autonomous, “pulled” by the prospect of future rewards;
- ***Homo sociologicus*** (Durkheim): action dictated by social norms; social actor as an executor of inherited model; “pushed” from behind by quasi-inertial forces;
- **Granovetter (1985)**: *most behavior is closely embedded in networks of interpersonal relations...such an argument avoids the extremes of under- and oversocialized views of human action”*;
- Among the determinants of most actions there are both instrumental rationality and social norms.

The Granovetter's Problem of Embeddedness

- **Over-socialized conception of human action** (Wrong, 1961): *“a conception of people as overwhelmingly sensitive to the opinions of others and hence obedient to the dictates of consensually developed systems of norms and values, internalized through socialization, so that obedience is not perceived as a burden”* (e.g., the Parsonian sociology);
- **Under-socialized conception of human action**: *“the theoretical arguments disallow by hypothesis any impact of social structure and social relations on production, distribution, or consumption. In competitive markets, no producer or consumer noticeably influences aggregate supply or demand or, therefore, prices or other terms of trade”* (e.g., classical and neoclassical economics on the “atomized” man).

The Granovetter's Problem of Embeddedness

- **Utilitarian tradition** (Hobbes's "state of nature"; Rawls's "original position" **vs Embeddedness**;
- **Substantive School** (Polanyi) **vs Economics** (Smith, formalists, "new institutional economics");
- **Granovetter**: "the level of embeddedness of economic behavior is lower in nonmarket societies than is claimed by substantivists and development theorists, and it has changed less with "modernization" than they believe; but I argue also that this level has always been and continue to be more substantial than is allowed for by formalists and economists";
- **The problem** from a modern society: ***which transactions in modern capitalist society are carried out in the market and which subsumed within hierarchical organized firms?*** (see the "market and hierarchies" program of research, by Williamson).

Rational action:

- **"If you want to achieve Y, do X"**
(outcome-oriented; conditional and future-oriented);

Social norms:

- **"Do X" or "Don't do X";**
- **"If you do Y, then do X";**
- **"If others do Y, then do X";**
- **"Do X if it would be good if everyone did X".**

SOCIAL NORMS

For norms to be “social”, they must be:

- a) shared by other people:* by all members of society or by specific groups;
- b) partly sustained by their approval or disapproval:* sanctions, strong code of honor, ostracism;

“Social norms have a grip on the mind that is due to the strong emotions their violation can trigger...the emotive aspect of norms is a more fundamental feature than the more frequently cited cognitive aspects.”

*(Elster, *The Cement of Society*)*

Social action

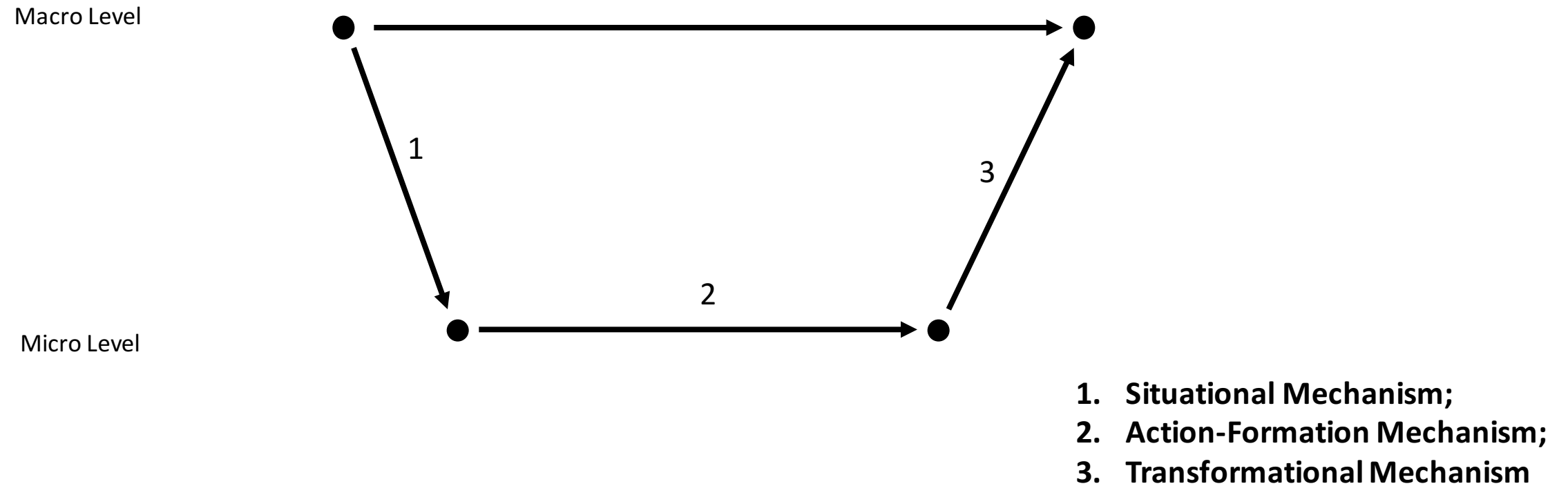
In sociology, methodological individualism differs from the way it is used in economics or psychology:

“the action being analyzed is always action by individuals that is oriented to the behavior of others” (Hedstrom, Swedberg, 1998).

- “**Sociology**: is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of **social action** and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences...”
- **Action** is “**social**” insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course”.

(Max Weber, *Economy and Society*)

Coleman's model of collective social action



Social mechanisms

1. **Situational Mechanism:** behavior in public places (Goffman, 1963); form of situational analysis (Popper, 1994); belief-formation mechanism; opportunity-generating mechanisms (vacancy chains, White, 1970); preference-formation mechanisms (reference groups, Merton and Rossi, 1968, Boudon 1988);
2. **Action-Formation Mechanism:** theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957);
3. **Transformational Mechanism:** tipping model (Schelling), standard game-theoretic model (tragedy of commons), neoclassical market models

Belief-formation Mechanisms (in situations of uncertainty)

(Hedstrom and Swedberg)

1. **The self-fulfilling prophecy** (Merton 1948): “an initially false definition of a situation evokes behavior that eventually makes the false conception come true” (e.g., a run on a bank);
2. **Network diffusion**: e.g., the diffusion of a new drug (Coleman, Katz, and Menzel 1957);
3. **The threshold-based behavior** (Granovetter 1978): the concept of an individual’s “threshold” to describe the individual heterogeneity to participate.

Belief-formation mechanism and individual action (Hedstrom, Swedberg, 1998)

An individual's propensity to perform the act being analyzed is an increasing function f of the individual's belief in the value of performing the act:

$$P_{it} = f(b_{it}) \quad (a)$$

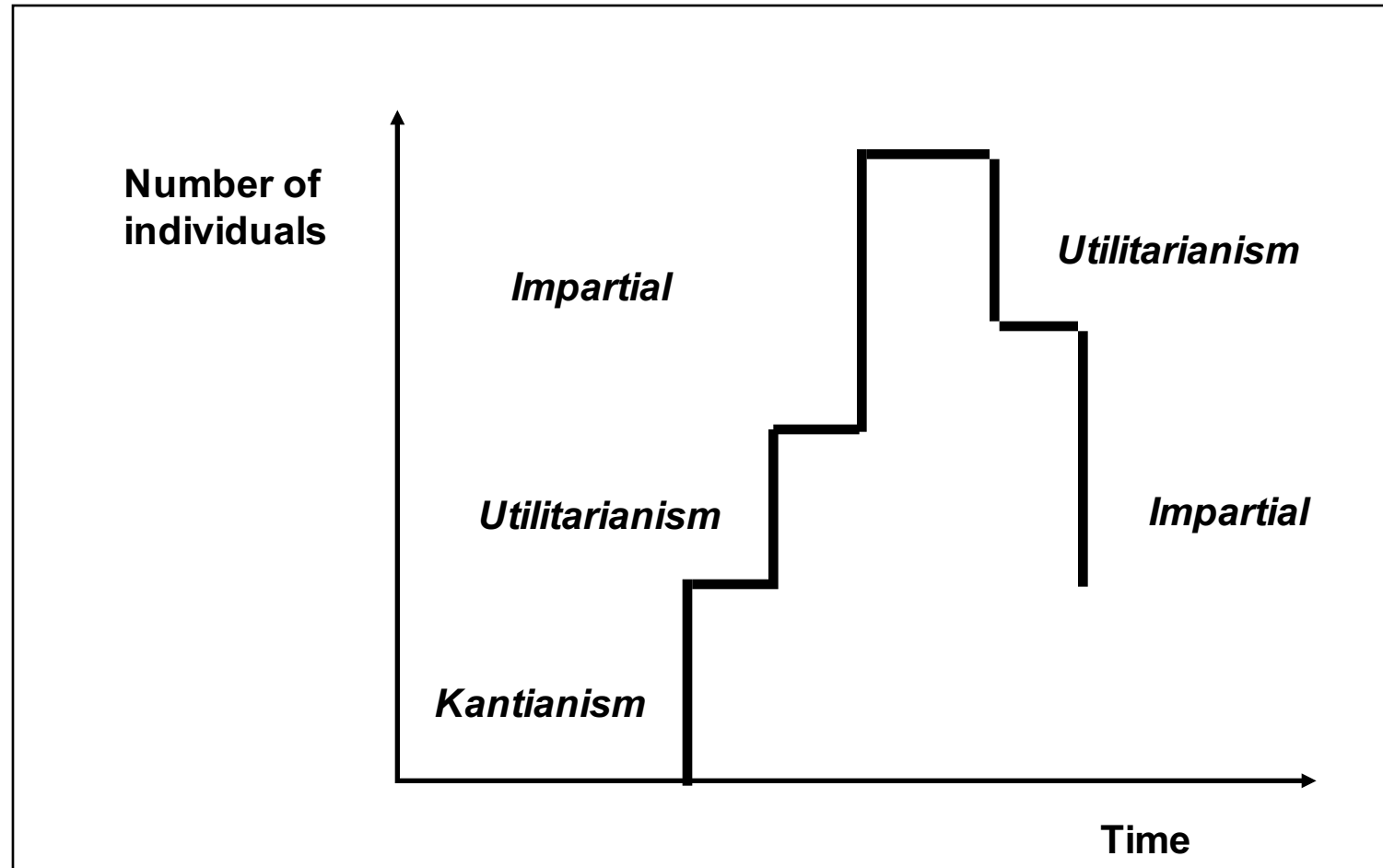
Mechanism states that individual's belief in the value or necessity of performing the act is a function of the number g of other individuals who performed the act at time $t - 1$:

$$b_{it} = g(n_{t-1}) \quad (b)$$

And then:

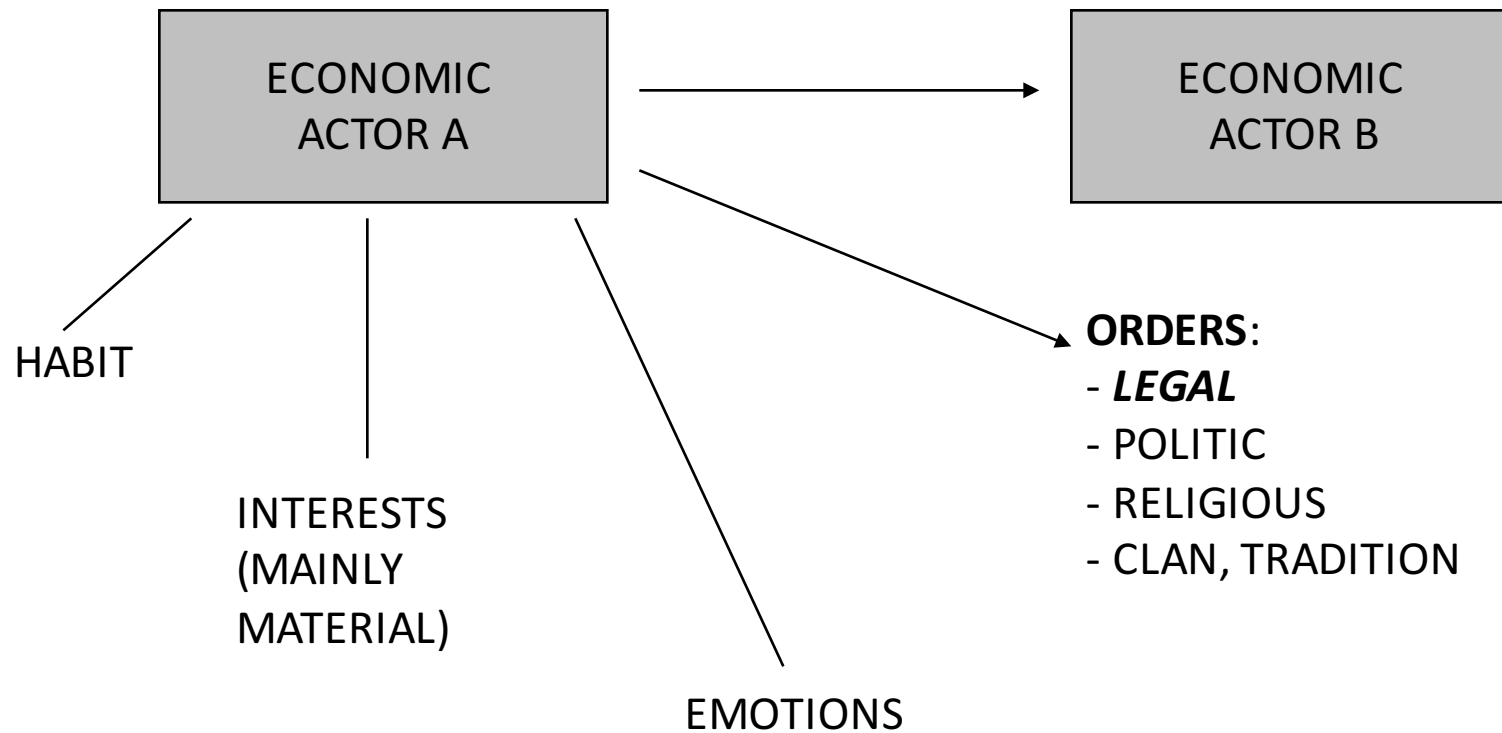
$$P_{it} = f[g(n_{t-1})] \quad (c)$$

Number and individual action



Max WEBER:

the dual orientation of individuals economic action



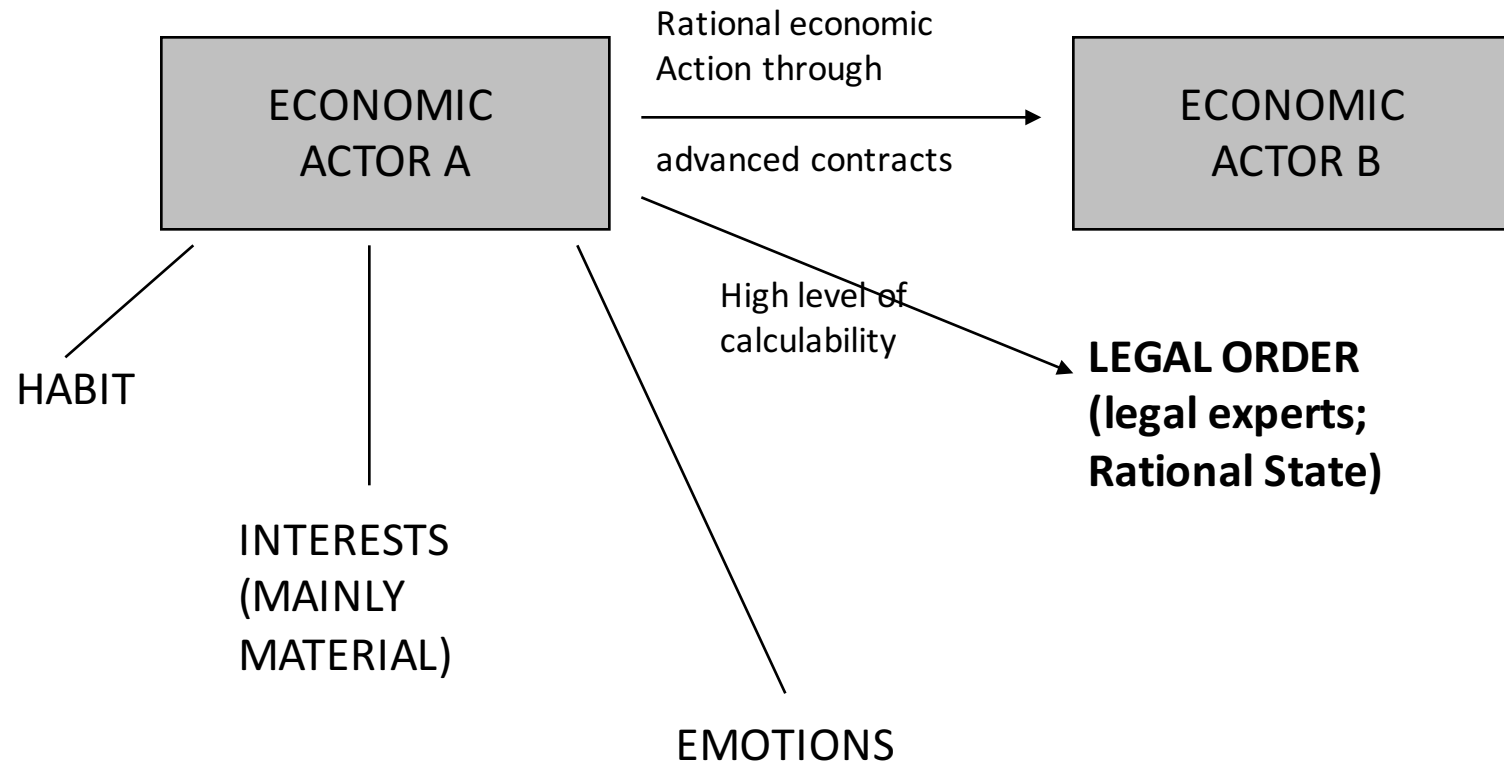
Max WEBER

The legal prerequisites for modern capitalism

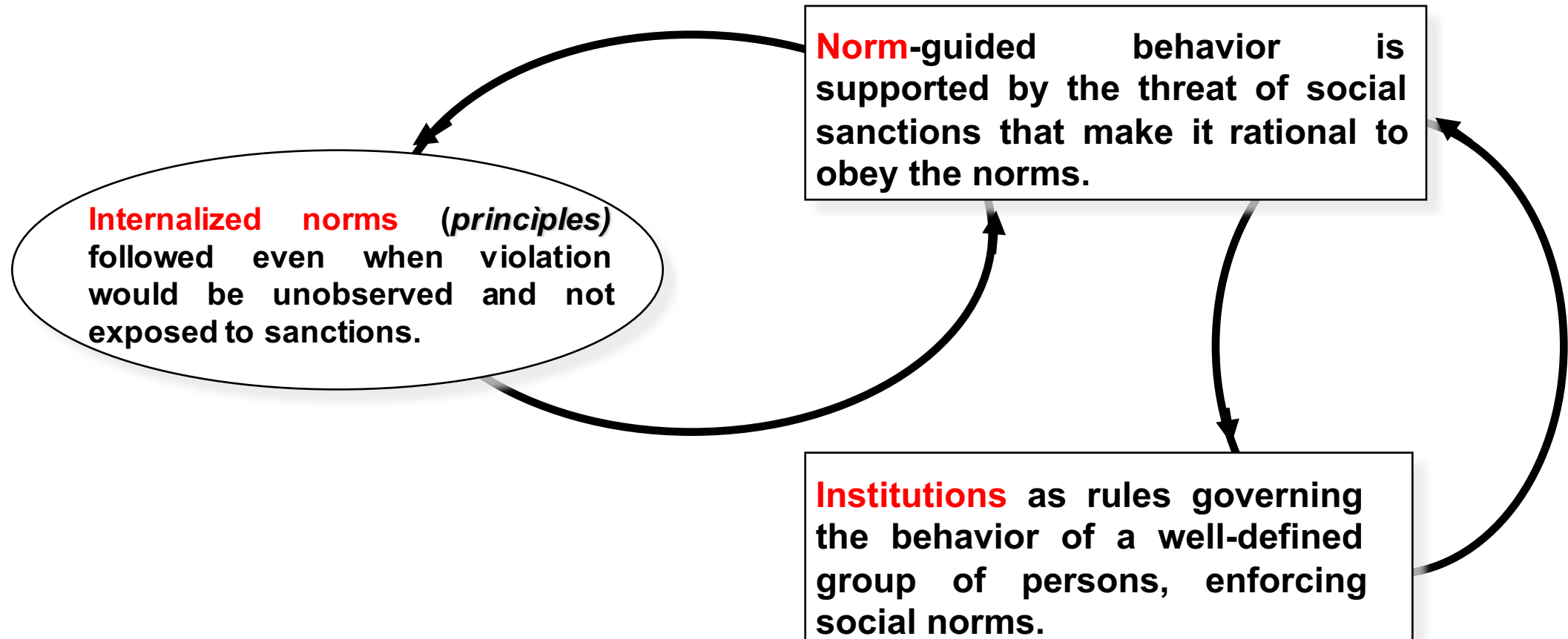
- *Advanced commercial contracts*
- *Legal concept of the modern corporation*
- *A calculable legal order*

Max WEBER

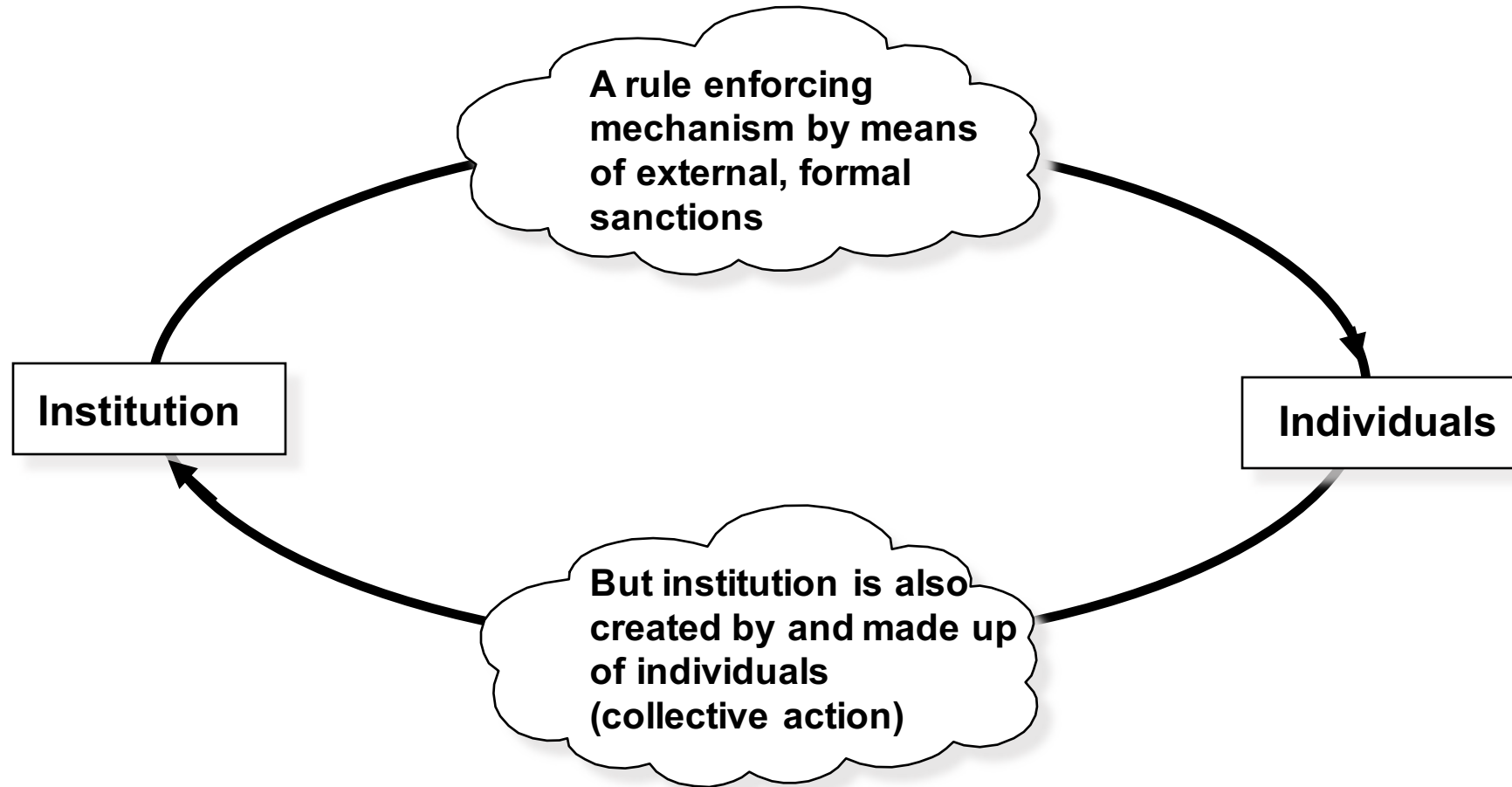
Economic action, law and capitalism



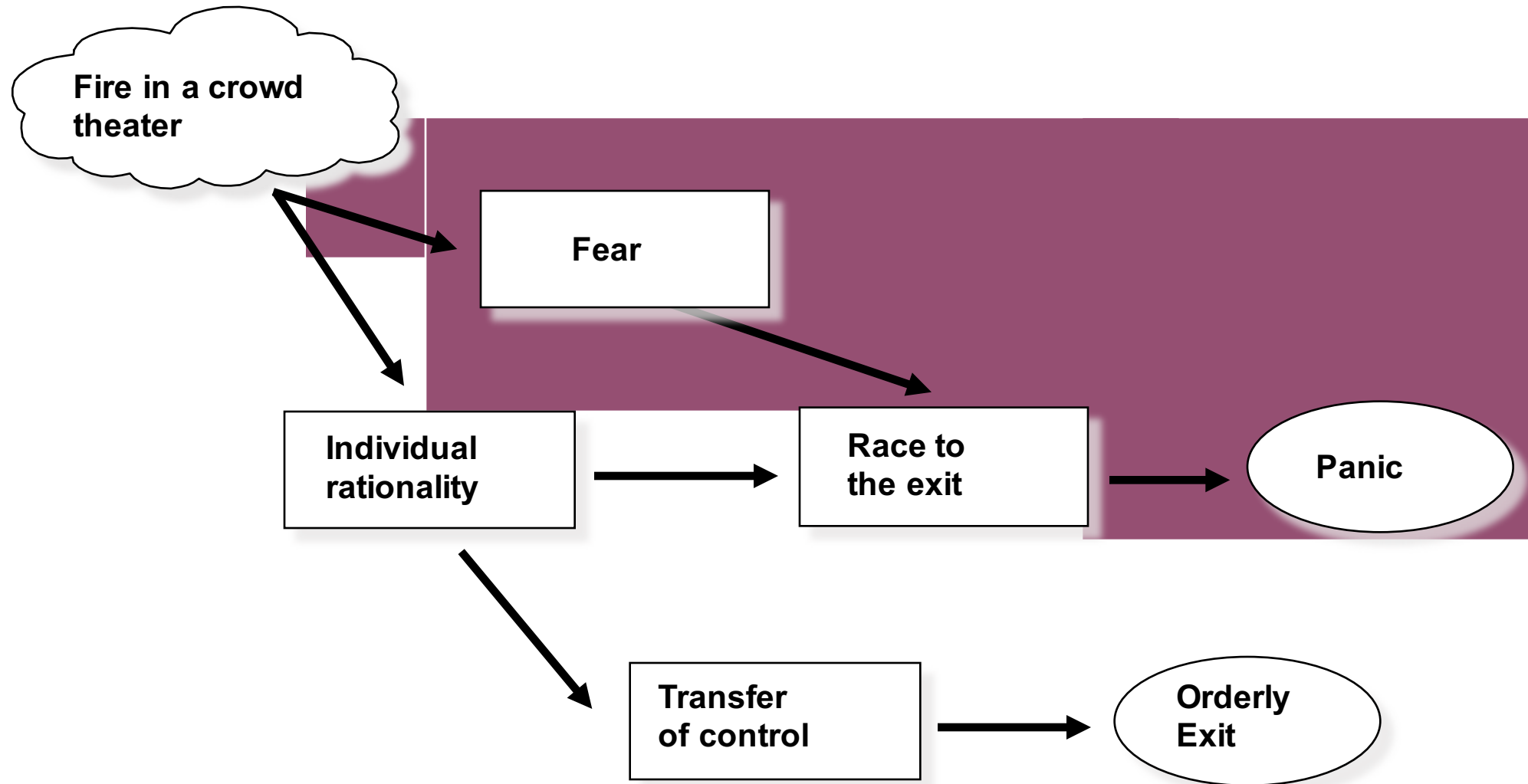
Internalized norms, social norms and institutions



The two faces of social institutions



Institutions and social cooperation



The “force” of institutions

“Whereas force is intended to make undesirable behavior more costly, inducement works by making a desired behavior less costly.” Institutions affect us in a number of ways, by different mechanisms:

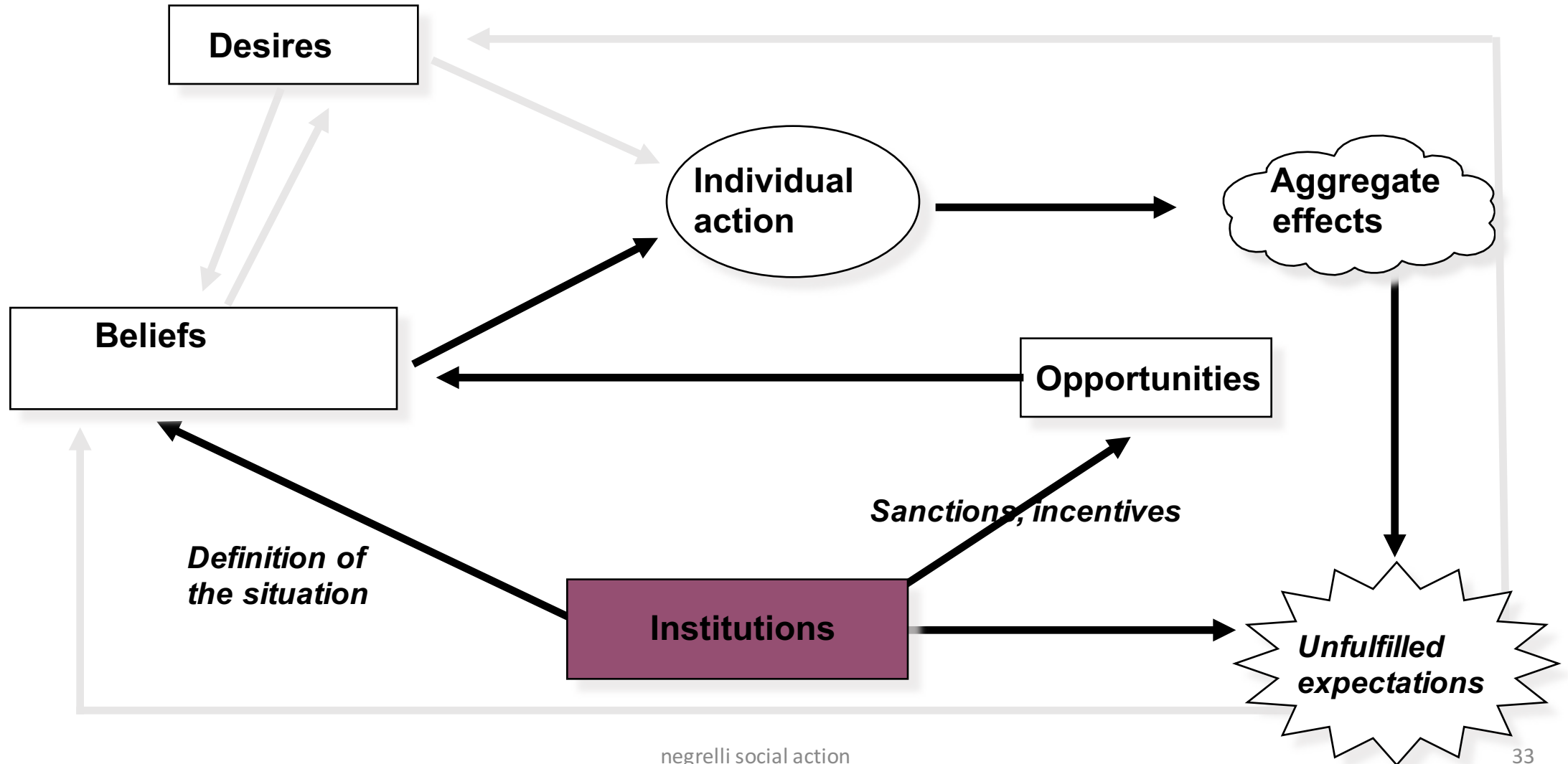
- 1. forcing or inducing us to act in certain ways**
- 2. forcing us to finance activities that we would not otherwise pay for**
- 3. enabling us to do things that we could not otherwise do**
- 4. making it more difficult to do certain things that it would otherwise be**
- 5. altering the bargaining context for individuals**

Istituzioni e modello della scelta razionale

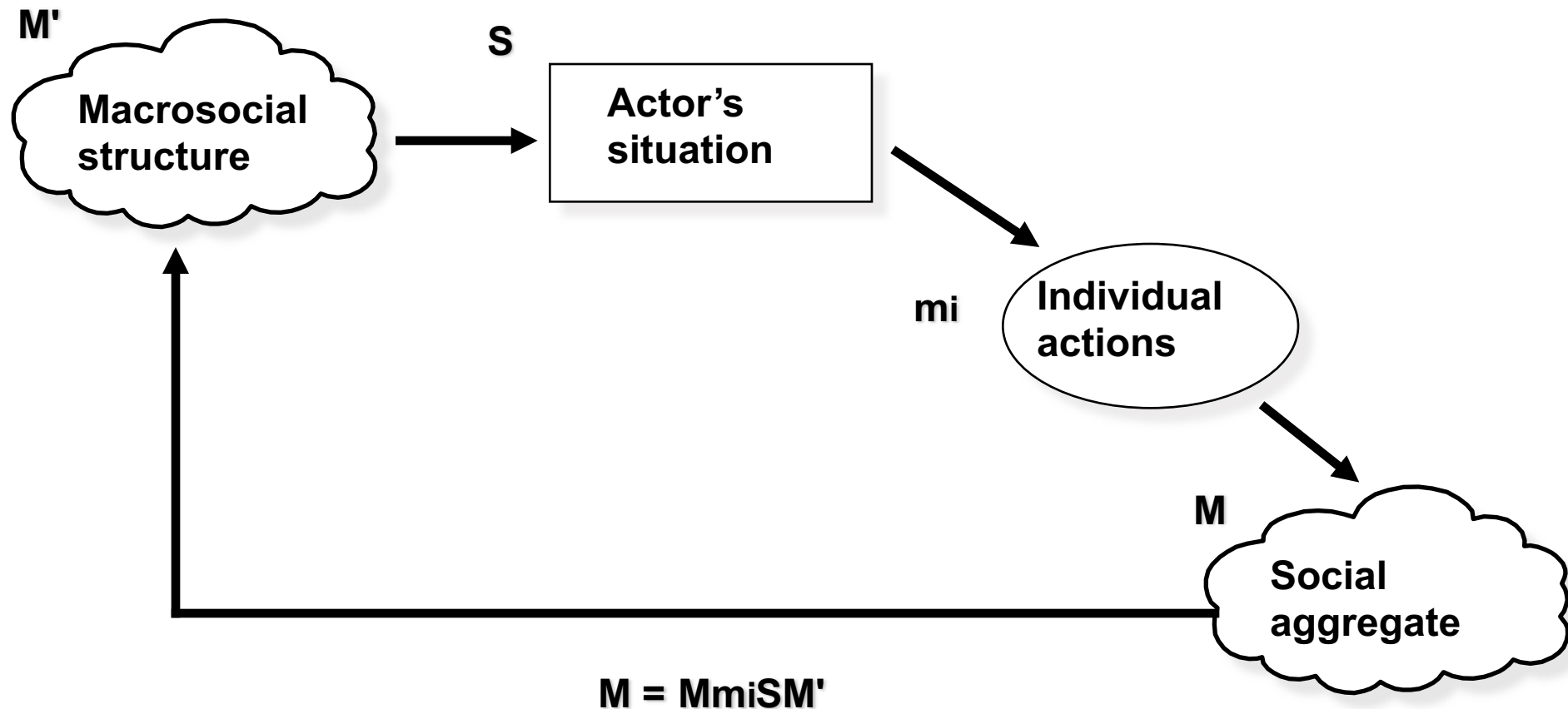
When there is a conflict of interest, majority voting will elicit or indeed constitute the popular will, acting in institutions? The limits of the utilitarian approach

	<i>Businessmen</i>	<i>Workers</i>	<i>Professionals</i>
Golf course	1	2	3
Orchestra	2	3	1
Swimming pool	3	1	2

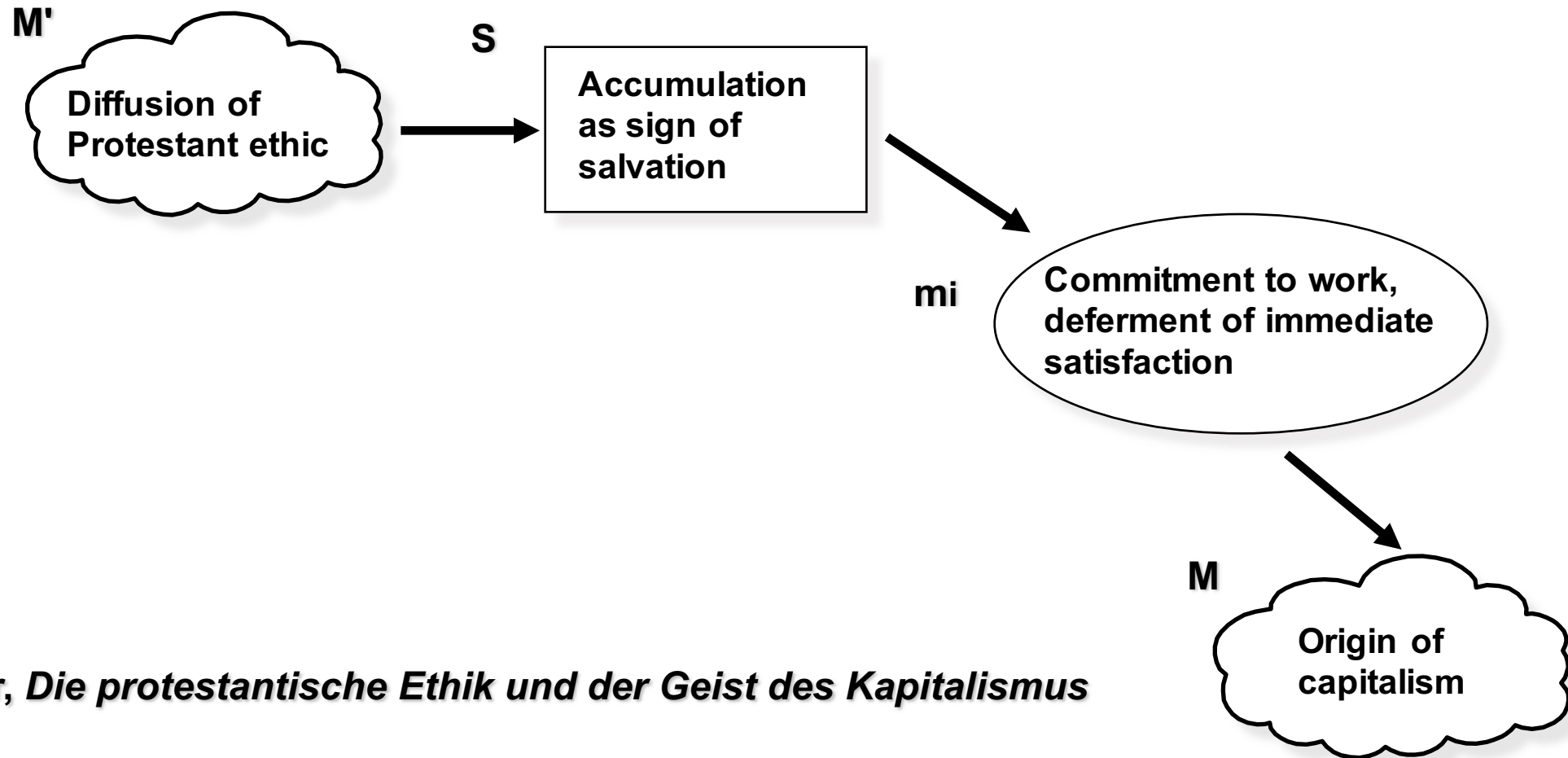
Desires, opportunities, beliefs, and institutions



The process social change and individual action

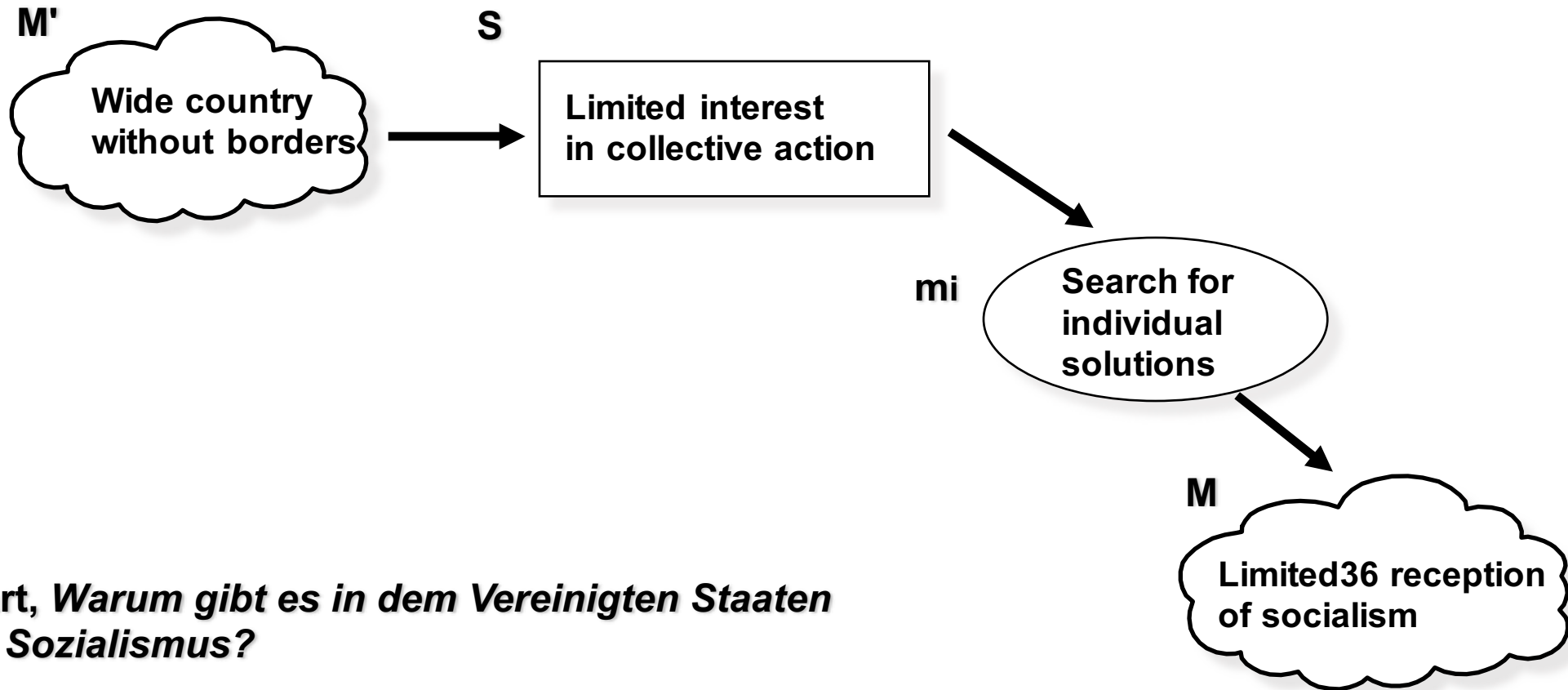


Protestant ethic and capitalism



Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*

Because in the United States there is no socialism?



Sombart, *Warum gibt es in dem Vereinigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus?*