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### Social causation: between social constructionism and critical realism

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# Social Causation: between Social Constructionism and Critical Realism

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This paper takes a middle position on the ongoing debate in social theory between social constructionists and critical realists. Both accept that social structures are symbolically constructed and that they are real. They differ however on how they conceptualise the impact that structures have on social practices. Against social constructionists I argue that not only actors but also structures have causal powers. Against critical realists I argue that the causal powers of actors are different from those of structures; and that in order to understand how the two causalities relate to each other one has to focus on processes of intra and inter-action.

## 1. Introduction

It must be pointed at the very start that the terms used to define the debate between social constructionists and critical realists are often misleading. They seem to imply that the differences between the two sides have to do with whether such phenomena as social structures are real or mere fictions in the minds of social scientists. In fact, the actual debate is concerned less with the 'reality' of structures than with how real social structures are constructed and what exactly they do, what kind of impact they have on social stability and change.

If we take, for instance, the exchange of views between Rom Harré and Bob Carter in a symposium published in the *European Journal of Social Theory*<sup>1</sup> it is not only the critical realist Bob Carter who believes in the real existence of structures; Harré also states emphatically that social structures, although discursively constructed, are the real products of acting agents. They both, therefore, start by accepting, ontologically speaking, the real ex-

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istence of structures. They differ, however, on the way in which real structures impact on social action and interaction.

For Bob Carter (following Bhaskar 1978, 1989 and Archer 2000), social structures have 'causal powers', whereas for Harré only human agents have such powers. Social structures can in themselves cause nothing:

At the end of the day I hope to show that such referents [i.e. referents of social structure expressions -NM] are not the kind of entities that could be causally efficacious. I am not saying that there are no such things as social structures, but they are not the right kind of thing to do the sort of work that some people [i.e. the critical realists -NM] would like them to do (Harré 2002: 112).

Some pages further on in the same text Harré makes his position clearer by arguing that if critical realists, when referring to social structures, were merely content with the notion 'of patterns that might emerge in the flow of discursive acts as constraints on the actions of individuals, we would hardly have a dispute' (Harré 2002: 147). It is plain from the above that if not all, at least some constructionists are realists in the sense that they believe in the real existence of structures and more generally in the real existence of a symbolically constructed social world.

This preliminary clearing of the ground will now allow us to focus on one of the key issues dividing the two opposing camps; the 'causal efficacy' of social structures. On this level I discern three positions, all of which seem to me problematic:

- a) the 'Harré thesis', which focuses on 'people' rather than 'structures' when reference is made to social causation;
- b) Giddens' structuration theory, which conflates agency and structure in a way that does not allow for the idea of actors being constrained to varied degrees by structures external to them; and
- c) Archer's critical-realist thesis, which in criticizing Giddens' conflationist strategy tries to distinguish 'the causal powers of people' from 'the causal powers of structures'.

## 2. THE HARRÉ THESIS

According to Rom Harré, as already mentioned, it is only people, not structures, that can constitute, reproduce, and transform social reality. To speak about structures having causal powers is to reify social phenomena, to

transform symbolic constructs into anthropomorphic entities 'doing' things. The problem with this position is that if structures cannot cause anything, neither can actors in the absence of structures. In other words, the argument that I shall develop in this article is that social causation always entails actors as well as internalized and external-to-a-specific-actor structures –but this entailment, *contra* Giddens, does not have to lead to an actor-structure conflation. Moreover if one accepts, as Archer does, that both people/actors and structures have causal powers, it is important to stress that the causal powers of people are radically different from those of structures. It is crucial to take this difference into account if one wants to show how the two types of causal powers articulate to produce social practices.

Given that the concept of social structure has several meanings, it is necessary to spell out some of the ways in which the notion is used. Harré mainly, but not exclusively, links social structures to roles and rules. He makes a clear distinction between roles/rules and people:

Rules and narrative conventions are not causes of human action, not even formal causes. They are amongst the *tools or means* that people use to create and maintain order in their joint productions (Harré, 1993: 56, italics mine).

However, the distinction of people as agents and roles/rules as means becomes problematic when Bourdieu's notion of the habitus (1977, 1990) is introduced as a set of motor, cognitive, evaluative, generative schemata or dispositions which, in quasi-automatic fashion, are activated in specific social contexts. Bourdieu's habitus/dispositions are distinct from role structures (*positions*, in Bourdieu's terminology), as well as from what Harré calls people's 'personal identities'. For Harré, personal identity refers to 'the basis of the individuality and uniqueness of existence of a single human being', whereas social identity refers to 'the type of role they (people, individuals) occupy or the job they do' (Harré 1993: 52).

Now Bourdieu's habitus as a set of dispositions is clearly distinct from both social-identity characteristics (since the latter are linked to role structures) and Harré's personal-identity characteristics (linked to the 'uniqueness' of a human being). Dispositions as 'internalized social structures' (Bourdieu 1990: 54) are not unique but are shared by actors who have gone through similar socialization processes. In the light of the above, Harré's distinction of people as agents and role structures as means falls apart. Social

actors are not only followers of rules/roles but also carriers of dispositions that are distinct from both the normative requirements of their roles and the unique features of their personal identity. To put it differently, the social games that people play do not only have a role/positional but also a dispositional dimension –both dimensions being crucial for understanding the orderly or disorderly production of game outcomes. I shall make the above argument more concrete by using an example: the rugby game to which Harré refers (2002: 114).

In the course of a particular rugby match the players can carry on with the game only if they follow the basic normative expectations/rules entailed in their roles, which roles constitute the institutional structure of the game. This is to say that the rugby game has a role-institutional dimension (e.g. the specific rugby rules) which, on the paradigmatic level, players take into account when they play. As interpretative micro sociologists have pointed out, the basic norms or rules entailed in rugby roles, *contra* Parsons, are not, of course, followed by the players automatically, in puppet-like fashion. Players use rules creatively in their interaction with other players. But as Parsons (1957) has pointed out, rules, in the form of roles/normative expectations (the institutional structure of the game), are necessary prerequisites for the realization of the game as an ongoing social whole. The complete absence of such roles/norms would make the game impossible. Therefore, in this specific example, social causation (the realization and actualization of the game, the achievement of the players' aims such as scoring a goal) is inconceivable without the entailment of both actors and institutional structures.

The rugby game has not only a *role/institutional* but also a *dispositional* dimension. As already mentioned, each player unavoidably brings to it the set of generative schemata that Bourdieu calls habitus. These schemata (in so far as those involved are socialized in different class, educational, cultural contexts) vary from one player to another. In this way, understanding the 'actualization' or 'causation' of a specific game and its varied outcomes will have to take into account not only its institutional structure (the set of roles/rules it entails), but also the 'internalized social structures' that players carry within them (Bourdieu 1977: 80).

To be more concrete, player A, given his/her specific dispositions (linked, let's say, to a middle-class upbringing) may adopt a more cautious, 'cerebral'

approach to the game than player B, whose working-class socialization predisposes him/her to a more impulsive or aggressive style. Now just as the game rules are not followed automatically but are strategically handled by the players as required by the situational interactive context, so are player's dispositions. Player B, given the coach's instructions or the reactions of team-mates, might try to control or attenuate his/her aggressive style.<sup>2</sup> But the fact that an agent is not passive *vis-à-vis* either rules or his/her dispositions does not mean that the game can be played without taking roles/rules and dispositions into account. To put this differently, institutional and dispositional structures are not mere means or tools but *constitutive* elements of social causation. To repeat: social causation necessarily entails both actors and structures; it is inconceivable without actors embodying dispositions as well as following institutionalized rules/norms (McIver 1942).

There is a third fundamental dimension of any social game (in so far as the latter is not solitary). As Harré, following the symbolic interactionist and ethnomethodological tradition (1993: 25), has repeatedly pointed out, it is impossible to understand social reality in general, and social games in particular, without putting symbolic/discursive interaction at the center of the analysis. It is by means of the interactive dimension that one moves from the paradigmatic sphere (as a virtual order of rules and dispositions) to the syntagmatic one, the latter entailing the actualization of rules and dispositions in time and space (Mouzelis 1995: 104-8). As we have seen, players do not follow game rules or even their own dispositions in puppet-like fashion; they handle them in the light of the syntagmatically unfolding interactive process. To return to our rugby example, in response to an opponent's successful strategy a player (or a team) can adopt a counter-strategy actualizing alternative opportunities offered by the game's normative repertoire and/or the player's (or players') dispositional repertoire. In other words, the same player in different interactive situational conditions might handle both rules and his/her dispositions quite differently.

Finally, in the same way that a game's rule/role dimension entails institutional structures (as well as the players' varied internalized dispositional structures), the interactive dimension entails *relational* or *figurational* structures.<sup>3</sup> Here the elements or constitutive parts of structures are not rules/roles/institutions but agents; and the linkages between elemental parts

are not logical/virtual (as in the case of institutional structures), but actual relations unfolding in time and space.<sup>4</sup>

So if institutional structures show us how in a specific game role A relates to role B on the paradigmatic level (e.g. how, in football, the role of the goalkeeper relates to that of the centre-back), relational structures show us how a specific player, A, relates to player B (e.g. their actual relation may, within limits, be different from their normative one). This means that relational or figurational structures can vary independently from institutional structures. Moreover, the institutional structure of a game can allow for the emergence (on the syntagmatic level) of varied relational structures. For instance, a team can adopt a strategy based on a centralized, 'authoritarian', star-dominated figuration of players, whereas the opposing team (or the same one on a different occasion) can opt for a participative, 'democratic' strategy leading to more decentralized relational arrangements.

A last point about the three dimensions of social games. Whereas institutional and dispositional structures are constitutive elements of all 'social-causation' processes, relational structures are not. For instance, in the pursuit of solitary games or sports (e.g. cycling, jogging etc.) we have only *intra*-active processes; *interactive processes* leading to stable relational structures are absent, but institutional and dispositional structures (i.e. rules and the actors' habitus) are always, unavoidably present.

To conclude this section, Harré, in dealing with the social causation of such social phenomena as game outcomes takes into account the role/institutional and the discourse/interactive dimension. The fact that discursively interacting players are not only rule/norm followers but also disposition/habitus carriers is ignored. This underemphasis of internalized dispositional structures can be explained by the fact that Harré's constructionist predilections make him view any 'internal state of mind' as neo-Cartesian essentialism (Archer 2000: 89-117). Therefore, dispositions as internalized social structures have no autonomy *vis-à-vis* role structures or discursive interactions. This extreme anti-essentialist position, however, leads him to the erroneous conclusion that social causation entails only 'people' rather than, as I argue, people *and* structures (internalized and 'external' to specific actors).

### 3. GIDDENS' CONFLATIONIST STRATEGY

Although Giddens' structuration theory does not deal with the agency-structure relationship in the context of the realist-constructionist debate, there is no doubt that for him social causation entails both agency and structure. The way, however, that he brings together these two fundamental dimensions of social causation leads to a type of conflation that makes it impossible to theorize degrees of 'distance' or 'external constraint' between actors and structures.

Giddens, influenced by linguistic structuralism, conceptualizes structures as rules and resources existing on a virtual plane (paradigmatic dimension); they are actualized, 'instantiated' when people draw on them in order to act or interact in time/space (syntagmatic dimension). In the above sense, structure is both means and outcome. It is means in that subjects use it to carry on with their daily activities, and it is outcome because each time rules and resources are actualized they are reproduced (Giddens 1984: 169-71).

It is on the basis of this conceptualization that Giddens rejects the agency-structure dualism that is so common in conventional sociological analysis – a dualism which leads the researcher to view actors as being constrained by structures external to them. For the author of structuration theory the actor-structure linkage entails not *dualism* but *duality*. It entails the elimination of any 'externality', any distance between actor and structure. Structure as both means (subjective dimension) and outcome (objective dimension) is 'internal' to the actor; it constitutes the two sides of the same coin. In this way the duality-of-structure schema helps us to understand the process of structuration that links *structure* (as a virtual order of rules and resources on the paradigmatic level) with the *social system* (as a set of patterned interactions on the syntagmatic level) (Giddens 1984: 376).

Although Giddens himself does not do so, we may easily equate structuration here with the social-causation process. It is via structuration that the production and reproduction of social systems is 'caused' or actualized/'instantiated'. To take a concrete example again, institutional wholes such as rugby rules are reproduced via the duality of structure: via the fact that thousands of individual players in a routine, taken-for-granted manner use rugby rules to play their regular game. Each time they do so they reproduce and therefore strengthen this particular institutional complex.



This way of linking actors to structures is highly problematic however. It fails to consider that actors are capable of relating to rules not only in a practical, taken-for-granted fashion but also theoretically and/or strategically. To put it in Giddens' terminology, actors can and do relate to rules not only in terms of duality but also in terms of dualism. Very frequently actors take distance from structures (i.e. rules and resources) in order to acquire theoretical knowledge of them, or in order to construct strategies for changing or defending specific rules. Whether we look at rugby or any other institutionalized rules, these institutional complexes are not only reproduced, as implied in Giddens' structuration theory, via the actor-structure duality schema – i.e. by the fact that millions of laypersons, in taken-for-granted manner, use such rules in their everyday existence. They are also reproduced via agents (usually powerful 'macro' actors) who take distance from them in order to study, transform, or defend the institutional complex to which these rules belong (Mouzelis 1995: 119–24).

Rugby rules, for instance, are studied by sociologists of sport. They are also the objects of strategic interventions by 'reformers' who want to change them in a 'civilizing' direction, or by traditionalists who want to maintain the status quo (Dunning and Rojek 1992; Dunning and Sheard 1979). Therefore, an explanation of the constitution, reproduction, and transformation of rugby rules must take into account both the relevant agents' taken-for-granted, practical routine orientation to the rules (the duality-of-structure mode), and those orientations that have a theoretical and/or strategic intent (the dualism mode).

To conclude, it is one thing to argue that social causation entails both agency and structure, and quite another to conflate the two in a way that excludes the possibility of conceptualizing agents as taking distance from structures (as rules) in their attempt to understand them better, to change them, or to defend the status quo. Because Giddens' structuration theory eliminates the above possibility, it fails to give us a convincing account of how, in actual social contexts, institutionalized structures are created, reproduced, or transformed. It is not therefore surprising that Giddens' structuration theory is incompatible with certain aspects of his work (for example, his theory of reflexive modernization) which focus on the capacity of agents for reflexivity and for theoretical knowledge of rules (Parker 2000).

#### 4. ARCHER'S ANTI-CONFLATIONIST STRATEGY

Margaret Archer starts by rejecting Giddens' conceptualization of structure. She argues that Giddens conflates agency and structure in such a way that it is impossible to deal with the fundamental problem of structural constraints/enablers, and with the obvious existence of varying degrees of constraint and freedom. Because of this structures portray no 'externality', no properties that make them distinct from those of actors/people. It is because of this conflation that Giddens cannot deal in theoretically congruent manner with the familiar notion that people tend to create social arrangements which were not anticipated and which frequently evade their control (Archer 1982, 1990, 2000).

##### *a) From structuration to morphogenesis*

Archer puts historical time at the center of her analysis. What she calls morphogenesis entails an initial stage, t1, where interacting agents, in pursuing their own preferences and interests, create systems (social and cultural structures) which, beyond a certain developmental threshold, t2, acquire properties and powers distinct from those of their initial creators. 'Cultural and structural emergent properties are held to have temporal priority, relative autonomy and causal efficacy *vis-à-vis* members of society' (Archer 2003: 2). Therefore the move from t1 to t2 is a process of structural elaboration and emergence which leads (at least analytically) to a clear separation of agency and structure, a separation between actor's emergent properties' and a system's emergent properties ('structural emergent properties' and 'cultural emergent properties') (Archer 1982).<sup>5</sup>

Systemic emergent properties condition, but do not entirely determine social practices. *Contra* Althusser, actors in the morphogenetic process are not mere 'carriers of structures'. In this way the reification of structures is avoided, as is its extreme opposite seen in the interpretative micro-sociological tradition: the reduction of structures to the interactive processes between laypersons. M. Archer seeks, therefore to avoid three types of reductionism:

- 'downward' reductionism (the reification of structures);
- 'upward' reductionism (the reduction of structure to interaction);

- 'middle' reductionism (Giddens' conflation of agency and structure (2000: 5-10)).

### *b) A critique of morphogenesis*

In Archer's writings, structures are relatively autonomous from agents in two different ways.

1. In contrast to social constructionism, social structures have a reality that is not entirely based on or exhausted by discourse. Following the Marxist tradition Archer believes that there is, or might be, a discrepancy between, for instance, actual structures of domination or exploitation and people's perceptions, discourses, beliefs about them. Since structures pertain not merely to a discursive but also to a 'practical' world (Archer 2000: 154-93), they can have an impact on social practices, irrespective of whether people do or do not talk, know or do not know about them.
2. Social structures portray characteristics or properties different from those of actors. For instance, one can clearly distinguish the structural characteristics of a role from the way an actor, having been socialized in a specific way, handles the role's normative expectations. Therefore, the features of an institutional role structure are not only real but also different from the features of the actors who play them. To use the distinction I developed in section 2, a social game has a positional/role dimension that is distinct from and *irreducible* to the dispositional and/or the action-interaction dimension.

It is at this point that Archer's anti-conflationist strategy becomes problematic. Archer is right in distinguishing actors' causal powers from those of structures. She is also right in pointing out that actors, analytically speaking, have different properties from those of structures — i.e. that structures are independent from agents in the sense of (1) and (2) above. There are two problems with her morphogenetic approach, however:

- She fails to point out that the 'externality' of structures is a function not only of historical time but also of *hierarchically organized social space*.
- In linking, in her recent work (Archer 2003), the causal powers of people with those of structures she overemphasizes intra-action (the 'internal

conversation' of actors) and underemphasizes interaction (the 'external conversation' among actors).

When Archer tries to avoid agency-structure conflation by introducing a time-historical dimension into her analysis, the system created by agents in t1 eventually reaches a certain threshold in t2 and acquires autonomy from the initial creators. This autonomy expresses 'unanticipated consequences' and/or the inability of the initial actors to control or shape the structural emergent in t2 in a way that will make it compatible with their own preferences and interests. When assessing the structure's autonomy from agents it is not enough, however, to focus on the linkage between the initial creators at t1 and the emergent structural product at t2. One should further consider how structure at t2 links up with sets of *interacting* agents also at t2 – interacting agents who may be different to but are also related to the 'initial creators'.

Let me illustrate this point by taking a classical example of the 'unanticipated-consequences' syndrome: Moore's (1967) analysis of the peasantry's role in the creation of post-traditional, modern political structures. He has argued, very convincingly I think, that peasants played a crucial role in the shaping of early modernity. Whether one looks at the bourgeois democratic, the fascist, or the communist route to the creation of modern political institutions, peasant mobilization was at the center of the revolutionary process that destroyed the *ancien régime* of the societies Moore examined. On the other hand, in stark contrast to peasants' expectations and hopes, the institutional structures that eventually emerged out of the various revolutionary struggles were inimical to peasant interests. In England, Germany, Russia, and China it was always the rural producers who were the major victims of the modernization process.

In terms of Archer's morphogenetic paradigm, therefore, in t1 we have actors (more or less 'corporate') whose intra- and inter-class interactions led in t2 to an emergent system that was 'autonomous' from its initial creators by portraying features (e.g. the distribution of resources between rural and urban elites, etc.) incompatible with the rural cultivators' interests and hardly changeable or manipulable by them. Now it is important to note that if the emergent modern institutional structures acquired a high degree of autonomy from the peasants who contributed considerably to their creation,

they portrayed a lesser autonomy *vis-à-vis* non-peasant collective actors who were more successful in creating (intentionally or not) structural outcomes more in line with their own interests. In the English and French cases, for instance, what B. Moore calls bourgeois classes were in this more fortunate position. To put it in Archers' terminology, in t2 the emergent system of modernity was more autonomous *vis-à-vis* the dominated, peripheralized peasantry and much less so with regard to the dominant bourgeoisie. In t2, rural cultivators play a lesser role in the reproduction and management of modern political structures than do the bourgeois classes: the post-revolutionary, post *ancien régime* structures were less manipulable from the point of view of the rural 'losers' and more manipulable, less autonomous from the point of view of the urban 'winners'.

If the above macro-historical example, with its references to classes as collective actors seems too vague, the same point can be made by looking more modestly at a formal organization such as a business enterprise, focusing for simplicity's sake on institutional structures. The manager of the sales department – in pursuing the desired goal of increasing sales – is faced with both manipulable/changeable and non-manipulable rules. The latter may consist for example of a strict prohibition about pursuing sales tactics that would undermine the status or performance of other departments. Within the limits created by such rules that the sales manager is unable to change, s/he can choose from a repertoire of institutionalized sales techniques (which are the manipulable structural features of the situation) such as door-to-door promotion, television advertising, increasing sales via price reductions, etc.

Now, always in relation to the realization of the same goal, let us consider a hierarchically superior manager who, unlike the subordinate one, does have the power to change the present balance between departments by allocating more resources to sales and less to production or research and development. In that case what was non-manipulable for the sales manager becomes manipulable for his or her superior. The articulation between changeable and non-changeable structural features, between 'means' and 'conditions' in Parsonian terminology,<sup>6</sup> changes as we move up the corporation's formal or informal power hierarchy.

This *perspectival* approach, which leads to the serious consideration of not only *historical time* but also *hierarchized space*, is missing from Archer's

morphogenetic model. Her emphasis on the historical-time dimension is at the expense of that of social space. When she examines the agency-structure relationship, she constantly refers in undifferentiated manner to the actor(s), not to *interacting* actors or to *hierarchically-placed* actors.

### *c) Perspectival or methodological dualism*

Let me at this point bring together the various threads of my argument against morphogenesis, by putting forward a somewhat different account of agency-structure linkage, an account based on what one may call *perspectival dualism*.

As I mentioned in Section 1, all non-solitary games entail actors as well as three types of structure: internalized *dispositional* structures (Bourdieu's habitus), *institutional* structures (sets of interrelated norms/roles), relational or *figurational* structures (sets of interrelated actors). All structures entail features, some of which are and some of which are not manipulable by situated actors.<sup>7</sup> From this perspective the externality of structures must be seen within a space-time matrix.

#### *Externality in terms of historical time*

To begin with we have the distinction between internalized/dispositional structures and structures more external to a specific situated actor (institutional and figurational structures). Whereas the first are part and parcel of an agent's socio-psychological make-up, the latter are 'external' in two ways:

- (i) In terms of 'unintended consequences'. As Archer has argued, interacting actors may produce structural outcomes that acquire autonomy from their creators, in the sense that the latter have not intended them and/or cannot at a subsequent stage control the emergent properties of such outcomes.
- (ii) In terms of the existence of social structures, before an actor enters the context that entails them, and after s/he leaves this context. For instance, the role structure of the rugby game existed before a specific actor became a player and remains after s/he ceased to play the game.

Needless to say, externality of social structures in terms of (i) and (ii) does not mean that such structures are external to or autonomous from *all*

actors. They are external or relatively autonomous from *specific* actors operating in specific space-time contexts.

*Externality in terms of hierarchized space*

If we bracket the time dimension in order to focus on hierarchically organized social space, we have to take into account that agent X, in pursuing specific goals, is faced with external institutional and figurational structures which, from his/her perspective, present a mix of manipulable and non-manipulable features or properties. This structural mix is both real and external to agent X. But despite this reality and externality, structural features change from the perspective of a more powerful agent Y who is also involved in the same space-time matrix. For actor Y, the structural mix of changeable and non-changeable features is transformed: what was non-changeable for X becomes changeable for Y.

It is precisely this type of variability that Archer does not take seriously into account. In so far as she underemphasizes it, she ascribes to the properties of structures a *fixity*, an *intransitivity* which they do not possess. This underemphasis leads to a partial hypostasization and reification of structural features, since the relation between agent and structure is examined in a hierarchic vacuum.<sup>8</sup>

I call the above approach, which tries to establish the relative autonomy of structures *vis à vis* actors, *perspectival* or *methodological* dualism in order to distinguish it from *philosophical* or *ontological* dualism – the latter implying that the autonomy of structures from actors has not only a methodological but also an ontological basis. *Contra* Archer and Bhaskar I think it is preferable to bracket the philosophical/ontological issue of whether actors and structures constitute one or two distinct realities and simply stress that it is methodologically useful:

- to avoid the actor-structure conflation which aims at the transcendence of the subjectivist-objectivist divide
- to avoid reducing structures to actors or vice versa
- to view social reality or social practices *both* from an actor's 'internalist' perspective and from a system's 'externalist' one. Ignoring the former leads to essentialism and ignoring the latter leads to various forms of reductionism.<sup>9</sup>

## 5. ARTICULATION OF AGENTIC AND STRUCTURAL PROPERTIES

In *Being Human* (2000) Archer, as already mentioned, differentiates the causal powers of structures from those of people – but in doing so she says very little about how the two causalities articulate to produce actual practices. In *Structure, Agency, and the Internal Conversation* she clearly admits this omission:

Ontologically, ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ are seen as distinct strata of social reality, as the bearers of quite different properties and powers. Their irreducibility to one another entails *examining the interplay between them*. Hence the question has to be re-presented in this context – how do structures influence agents? In other words, how does objectivity affect subjectivity, and vice versa? Social realists have not given a fully satisfactory answer (Archer 2003: 2).

### a) *The internal conversation*

M. Archer tries to fill the gap, so to speak, by pointing out that the missing link between structural and agentic causality is the reflexive process of ‘internal conversation’. Actors have to face external situations that entail real structural and cultural constraints and enablements. The way, however, in which these constraints and enablements impinge on an actor depends on his/her internal dialogue. In the light of her/his major concerns, the actor will try to find what course of action to take. More specifically, through a process of ‘internal turn-taking’ in which there is continuous intra-action between an ‘objective’ and a ‘subjective’ self, the actor tries to *discern* the possible courses of action the situation offers; and then *deliberates* on the advantages or benefits and disadvantages or costs of each of them. Finally, as a result of such ‘thought experiments’, a mental balance sheet is drawn up on the basis of which the actor makes a decision that may or may not consist of activating the constraints and/or enablements the situation offers (this third phase Archer calls *dedication*). The actor may also change his/her mind about the decision taken – in which case the agentic processes of discernment, deliberation, dedication, (‘the 3 Ds’) start all over again.

Archer stresses that ‘people with different identities will evaluate the same situations quite differently and their responses will vary accordingly’ (2003: 139). This does not mean, however, that one should conflate the situa-



tion with the ways in which actors perceive, evaluate, and/or respond to it. *Contra* social constructionism, Archer rightly points out that the situation, as objectively shaped by cultural and structural enablements/constraints, constitutes an objective reality and, as such, should be clearly distinguished from the varied ways in which actors view it:

Objective situations as shaped by socio-cultural properties are real; we cannot make what we will of them with impunity. If the descriptions under which they are known are wildly divergent from reality, then reality will have revenge, because the strategy for pursuing a project will be defective (Archer 2003: 139-40).

### *b) Three types of reflexivity*

In *Structure, Agency, and the Internal Conversation* M. Archer tries to account systematically for the actors' different responses to the constraints and enablements with which their situation presents them by constructing, on the base of a series of in-depth interviews, a three-fold typology of reflexive conduct: *communicative*, *autonomous*, and the *meta-reflexive*.

The communicative-reflexive individual portrays a type of internal dialogue that gives priority to stable personal relationships in the family, neighbourhood, and local community, and so avoids projects that undermine this kind of social arrangements. In Archer's terminology, the communicative-reflexive person will not activate but rather evades enablements and constraints entailing geographical and/or social mobility, being content to 'stay put'. The autonomous-reflexive, on the other hand, emphasizes in his/her internal deliberations goal achievement rather than maintenance of stable personal relationships. Instead therefore of evading, s/he activates constraints and enablements, trying to diminish the former and strengthen the latter. Finally the meta-reflexive's internal dialogue is shaped by the fact that s/he is permanently critical of both the self and the external situation. As a result s/he is engaged in an internal process of continuous subversion, moving from one situation to the next – in this way diminishing the chances for both upward mobility and for stable social relationships.

### c) *Some critical comments*

In so far as social realists stress more how actual structures condition agents, rather than how agents handle structural constraints and enablements, there is no doubt that Archer's theorization of the internal conversation as a reflexive mechanism linking the causal powers of actors and those of structures constitutes a definitive advance. Her recent theory presents some further difficulties, however.

#### *The externality and internality of enablements/constraints*

The first difficulty has to do with the fact that the actor must face not only external but also *internal* constraints and enablements. Following Bourdieu (1990), the dispositions the subject carries are 'internalized social structures' and the result of his/her previous socializations. The French sociologist thinks that in normal conditions such dispositions operate quasi-automatically: the actor mobilizes his/her habitus in non-reflexive manner in order to act in a specific field. It is only when these dispositions clash with a field's positions that 'internal' reflexivity comes into play.

I think that Bourdieu in this context is wrong. An actor evinces significant degrees of reflexivity irrespective of whether there is compatibility or incompatibility between dispositions and positions. If certain dispositions are quasi-unconscious (e.g. how one perceives certain objects), others are certainly conscious and can be manipulated by their carriers (e.g. table manners. See Sweetmann 2003:536) In such cases the actor, by discerning, deliberating, and eventually committing him/herself to a certain course of action activates not only external but also internal constraints and enablements. To use J. Alexander's terminology, actors are constantly confronted with both external and internal *environments of action*. Both internal and external environments create opportunities and limitations for situated subjects (Alexander 1998: 214ff).

#### *Interaction as a second mediating mechanism between agency and structure*

Archer not only neglects internalized constraints/enablements, she equally fails to take seriously into account that the structure-agency mediating mechanisms are not only internal but *external* as well. In other words, we

have not only internal but also 'external conversations', intra-active as well as interactive processes which, by activating constraints and enablements, link structure with agency (see Craib 1998: 4ff)

If J. Alexander's work helps us to distinguish internal from external environments of action, Joas' *Creativity of Action* (1996) helps us realize the extent to which interaction is central for understanding how agents relate to external structural limitations and possibilities. According to Joas, while rational-choice theory emphasizes the *utilitarian* dimension of social action and Parsons the *normative*, they both neglect a third, *creative* dimension. The reason for this is that both, though in very different ways, fail to realize what a crucial role interaction plays in the production of social practices.

For the author of the *Creativity of Action*, whether one considers the utilitarian means-end schemata of the rational-choice approach, or the values, normative requirements and internalized needs/dispositions of Parsonian functionalism, both models give us a very static view of social reality. They do not consider sufficiently that means and goals, values and norms are in constant flux, in constant negotiation as *interacting* actors attempt to cope with each other's strategies and counter-strategies. To take goals as an example: even when they do not emerge within the interactive situation (being given in advance), they change as the interactive process unfolds and as the actors try to adapt and readapt means to ever-changing ends. As symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists have pointed out, the interactive situation presents actors with problems whose solution has to be *invented* in the here and now.

Even if plans have been drawn up, the concrete course which the action takes has to be determined constructively from situation to situation and is open to continuous revision. Plans may place us in situations, but do not in themselves provide a comprehensive answer to the challenges of these situations (Joas 1996: 161).

What I would add to Joas' argument is that, as Archer has convincingly shown, it is not only the interactive but also the *intra-active* situation that has to be taken into account in exploring the creativity of action. If plans and projects, norms, values etc. are constantly negotiated, this is due not only to interactive but also to intra-active processes. Both must be granted full consideration if we wish to understand the problem-solving dimension of

social conduct. Both processes contribute to the 'invention' of solutions to the problems constantly generated by social intercourse.

### *Linking agency and structure*

With the conceptual tools Alexander and Joas offer us it is possible, I think, both to distinguish more precisely the difference between the causal powers of people and of structures, and to show how the two causalities articulate with each other. Concerning structure, this refers to cultural, institutional, figurational, and internalized dispositional environments of action that provide limits and opportunities for situated subjects. Concerning agency (to use Archer's terminology), this entails processes of discernment, deliberation, and dedication (2003:102-3) that activate or 'deactivate' internal and external constraints and enablements. What links the two causalities, what makes them a *unitary process*, is the continuous flow of intra- and interaction, of internal and external 'conversations' that lead to specific decisions and to practical outcomes.

If this conceptual framework is accepted, a major task for an anti-conflationist, 'agency-structure' theory would be to explore the connections between intra- and interaction. If, for instance, 'autonomous reflexivity' entails a highly disciplined, strict relationship of the 'subject self' with the 'object self', does this lead to a similarly disciplined and strict relationship between the agent and his/her children or colleagues? Is it possible to be strict with oneself and highly indulgent of one's children, spouse, or neighbours? What are the conditions when there is symmetry or homology between intra- and interaction, and when are intra- and interaction asymmetrical?

Questions like this, crucial for understanding agency-structure linkages, are not being asked in Archer's work. I think the main reason for this is that the interactive dimension plays a rather subsidiary role in her conceptual framework. This marked peripheralization of interaction in her earlier writings (1982, 1990, 2000) takes the form of neglecting the social space of hierarchically-placed interacting agents; in her more recent work (2003) it shows itself by the overemphasis of intra-action and underemphasis of interaction as the mediating mechanisms between agency and structure.<sup>10</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

- a) Cultural, institutional, and figural structures entail constraints and enablements that are real and external to situated actors. *Contra* social constructionism, the 'externality' thesis does not lead to a reification of structures if actors are located within a *space-time* matrix:
- in terms of *historical time*, as Archer's morphogenetic theory states, actors may produce structural outcomes that subsequently acquire autonomy from them (via the emergence of unintended consequences or other mechanisms). The same autonomy/externality obtains whenever the structures (cultural, institutional, figural) of a social whole exist before an agent's entrance into it, and may persist after her/his exit.
  - in terms of *hierarchized social space*, following what I have termed *methodological or perspectival dualism*, what is external/autonomous for an actor who can only mobilize meagre resources, can be less external/autonomous for one who, when involved in the same context or game, is able to mobilize more resources. Therefore, the 'externality' of structures is a function not only of historical time (e.g. the emergence of 'uncontrollable' structural outcomes as we move from  $t_1$  to  $t_2$ ), but also of hierarchized social space (e.g. non-manipulability of a game's structures as we move from 'high' to 'low' hierarchical positions).
- b) Both Harré and Archer, for different reasons, do not sufficiently take into account the *dispositional* dimension of social games: the fact that actors are carriers of internalized structures that present them with *internal* constraints and enablements. Harré, because of his extreme anti-essentialism, does not allow for any autonomy of dispositional structures from ongoing discursive interactions. Archer on the other hand under-emphasizes dispositions because, for her, structural constraints/ enablements are always external to the actor.
- c) Archer, *contra* Giddens' conflationist strategy, rightly points out that people's causal powers are distinct from those of structures (analytical dualism). However, whereas in her early work she does not show how the two causalities are linked, in her late work she focuses only on intra-active mediating mechanisms (on the 'internal conversation' of agents). She does not, therefore, seriously consider the interactive dimension (i.e.

'external' conversations) as the other major mediating link between agency and structure.

- d) The structure-agency controversy can be settled neither by conflating *à la* Giddens the two dimensions, nor by examining the linkages between agents and structures in a hierarchical vacuum. The neglect of interactions between hierarchically placed agents, i.e. the neglect of the fact that social outcomes result from the strategies of interacting actors who often possess different amounts of economic, political, social, or symbolic capital leads either to reductionism, or to the partial hypostatization of structures. If social constructionists, as Archer has pointed out, tend to reduce structures to the discursive practices of interacting agents, social realists, by neglecting the hierarchical dimension of social life, ascribe to social structures a fixity which they do not possess – and in that respect reify them.<sup>11</sup>

The necessary preconditions for a theoretically congruent linkage of agency to structure are:

- to bracket the philosophical/ontological issue of dualism and to stress more methodological or perspectival dualism
- *to distinguish clearly between the external and internal environments of action (i.e. between external and internal structural constraints/enablers actors have to face);*
- to stress, *contra* Giddens, that actors can relate to structures (internal and external) both in a taken-for-granted (duality) and in a more reflexive, strategic manner (dualism);
- *to see both intra- and interaction as mediating mechanisms between agentic and structural causal powers;*
- to relate social structures not to 'the actor' or 'actors', but to *hierarchically placed interacting actors* (past and present).

In brief: social causation as a unitary process entails the articulation via mediating mechanisms of intra- and interaction, of the causal powers of agents (discernment, deliberation, dedication) and those of structures (internal and external constraints/enablers).

## Notes

1. The symposium 'Rom Harré on social structure and social change' included articles by Harré (2002), Strydom (2002) and Carter (2002), all focusing on the realism-constructionism debate.

2. Some interpreters of Bourdieu's habitus argue that it entails a deterministic view of human conduct. The embodied, dispositional structures lead in a rigid, predictable, mechanistic way to specific practices that reproduce the culture and social structures internalized via socialization (Jenkins 1992, 2000). Although Bourdieu's underemphasis of the rational-choice, voluntaristic aspects of human action make him portray actors as passive (see Mouzelis 1995: 104-16), I do not think his notion of habitus is deterministic in the strict sense of the term (see Ostrow 2000). Bourdieu has repeatedly stressed the 'polythetic', flexible, practical character of the habitus. This enables an actor to mobilize his/her stable set of dispositions in order to improvise, to play a game in a highly inventive manner (Bourdieu 1990: 55).

It is true however that for the French sociologist, in *normal conditions* an actor's dispositions are quasi-unconscious. An actor entering a specific field or game mobilizes his/her set of dispositions in a taken-for-granted, non-reflexive manner. It is only in exceptional, 'crisis' situations (i.e. when there is a clash between dispositions and a field's positions/roles) that actors become reflexive and the voluntaristic, rational-choice dimension enters the scene. As Sweetman (2003) has recently argued, however, in late modernity it is not only in crisis situations but on a routine basis that individuals handle their habitus reflexively when they attempt to cope with constantly changing circumstances. Moreover, 'while we may not think about such things most of the time, it is possible to change the way we walk and talk, for example, as Bourdieu himself acknowledges in his brief discussion of 'charm schools' (Sweetman 2003: 536). According to Sweetman, in late modernity this type of self-management becomes routine, particularly among social strata anxious to construct lifestyles compatible with changing fashions or market requirements.

My position on the above argument is that one should distinguish between easily changeable and non-changeable aspects of an actor's habitus. It is obvious that the way we walk or talk are manipulable aspects of the habitus but, for example, the basic ways in which we perceive or experience certain social phenomena may be rather less manipulable -either because we are not conscious of such dispositions, or because, even when we do become aware of them, we are unable to change them. This type of 'deep' dispositional structures may set strict limits to social action.

3. For the concept of figuration see Elias (1978 and 1991) and Mouzelis (1993).

4. For a theoretical discussion of the positional, dispositional, and interactive dimensions of games see Mouzelis (1995: 100-18).

5. For the sake of simplicity, the focus will be on structural rather than cultural properties.

6. Parsons in his means-end schema distinguishes clearly the *conditions* of action, which the actor cannot change, and the *means* which are changeable (Parsons 1937: 44ff).

7. To take institutional structures as an example, an ordinary player has to accept the basic rules of the game as unchangeable, non-manipulable. Within the limits imposed by the basic rules there is a repertoire of techniques from which the player can choose - these techniques constituting the structure's manipulable features. The same is true about figurational structures. From the point of view of a specific player, certain relational arrangements are changeable whereas other are not.

8. Realists argue that the distinction between agentic and structural powers is only analytic (analytic dualism). Still, one has to show how the two types of causal powers articulate with each other. As I shall argue in Section 5, Archer in her early work has failed to establish any linkages between the two causalities. In her more recent work (2003) there are serious problems with the way in which such linkages are conceptualized.

9. Anthony King (1999) criticized Archer's ontological dualism by arguing that there are not two distinct realities (actors and structures) but one: people past and present and their interrelationships. I think that the shift from methodology to ontology creates more problems than it solves. If one is interested in the type of theory which provides conceptual tools (Generalities II in Althusserian terminology) useful for the empirical exploration of the social world, one should stress *methodological* rather than *ontological* dualism or monism.

To be more specific: it is much less important to decide whether structures constitute a reality different from actors; and more to stress, that actors' causal powers (in the form of a subject's decision-making, *agentic* powers) is different from structural causality which takes the form of constraints and enablements that an actor faces in specific social contexts.

Finally, I think that a more useful distinction, as far as different social 'realities' are concerned, is that between *virtual realities* on the paradigmatic level (e.g. relations between rules) and *actual* or 'instiated' realities on the syntagmatic level (e.g. relations between actors). For the argument that social theory should focus less on epistemological (as in the '70s and '80s) or ontological issues (as in the '90s onwards) and more on methodological ones see Mouzelis 1991.

10. I shall try to make the above critical point more specific by taking an example from Archer's *Agency, Structure and the Internal Conversation*. In this book (which, as already mentioned, is based on a number of in-depth interviews), one of the subjects questioned was Eliot Wilson: a former university lecturer who changed career in mid-course by moving from academia to the antiquarian book trade, an activity he performs solo from his home. Archer, quite correctly, classified him as typically 'autonomous-reflexive' who portrays such typical features as contextual discontinuity (moving from one career to another), thinking and making up his mind on his own, flexible and accommodative ethics of fairness and decency *vis-à-vis* family and friends, etc.

In deciding to move from the academic to the antiquarian field, Eliot had to consider not only the, to him, 'external' environments of action (e.g. the institutional/role structure of the university, the figuration of the organization's power relationship, the culture and philosophy of the teaching profession, etc.), but also his own internalized dispositional environment of action - an environment which also presents the actor with enablements/constraints. For in-



stance, Archer tells us that, before taking up the antiquarian book trade, Eliot taught first at Oxbridge and then moved to a red-brick university. It is not clear from Archer's account whether Eliot simply disliked teaching and the academic environment, or whether he made the move to the antiquarian book trade because of failure to move up in the academic hierarchy. If the latter is true, his decision to change career might be related to dispositions such as cognitive schemata inimical to abstract thinking, or emotive schemata encouraging aloofness, rather than the kind of sociability entailed in teaching. This type of dispositions or habitus constitutes *internal* constraints/enablers which, together with the *external* ones (related to the university's cultural, institutional and figurational structures), are always taken into account by agents trying to make up their minds about a radical change in their life course.

Archer rightly points out that 'The lives of 'autonomous reflexives' tend to move through a variety of *modi vivendi* as a result of learning about themselves and their society, whilst also coping with the inevitable quota of intervening contingencies' (2003: 244).

Learning about oneself means of course being reflexive about one's own dispositions. It means taking into account the internalized constraints and opportunities of our dispositional make-up.

Another point it is important to stress here is that being autonomous-reflexive does not mean that only intra-active processes mediate between agency and structure. Unless one is autistic, interactive as well as intra-active mechanisms will always mediate between agentic capacities and structural constraints/enablers. Moreover, this is true whether one considers macro or micro time. Whether one looks at long-term processes leading to decisions fundamental for one's life-course or at routine, day-to-day ones, both intra- and interactions, internal and external conversations mediate between agency and structure. This is too obvious to need further development.

11. For another kind of intermediate position between realism and constructionism see Burkitt, 1999: 88ff. Sayer (1997) distinguishes between strong/unacceptable and weak/acceptable forms of constructionism. I think that, in the light of my critique of Archer, one can make a similar distinction between weak/legitimate and strong/methodologically illegitimate forms of realism.

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