

THE DEEP QUESTIONS: STRUCTURE/AGENCY, MICRO/MACRO AND TIME/SPACE

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Summary

This introduction to the ‘deep questions’ in sociology begins by considering the contemporary structure-agency debate. The chapter describes how sociologists today are divided into two camps. On the one hand, there are a majority of sociologists, represented most forcefully by realism, who maintain that it is useful to understand society in terms of a structure-agency dichotomy. On the other, sociologists writing within the interactionist, interpretive or hermeneutic paradigm understand society not as a structure, which precedes individual agents, but as an interaction order. Society consists of a complex network of recurring social interactions and relations between participants. The merits of these two accounts of social reality are considered. The rest of the article is organized around this competition between these two sociological camps, the structuralists and interactionists. The issue of structure and agency is not only significant in and of itself but the position which sociologists adopt in relation to this fundamental ontological question often determines their position on the other deep questions. Sociological understanding of the macro-micro link and time and space typically follows logically on from ontological presumptions about structure and agency; the ontological position implies the latter concepts. The other two ‘deep questions’, the micro-macro link and time and space, are similarly considered from the perspectives of structuralist and interactionist sociology. In each case, the debate between them is described and the alternate interpretations of the micro-micro link and time and space considered.

1. Introduction

Sociology emerged as an academic discipline in the middle-decades of the nineteenth century, with Auguste Comte in France as one of its leading progenitors. Fusing philosophy, history and 'political economy' (economics), the new discipline addressed two fundamental questions. Sociologists were interested in the character of the modern, industrial and urban society which was beginning to appear in Europe and America. Comte's work itself can be interpreted as a grand and often abstract attempt to analyze this transformation. He comprehended human society as evolving from a theological stage, to a metaphysical phase finally to attain a scientific, 'positive' self conception. These three conceptual stages corresponded broadly with human social evolution from hunter-gathering and nomadic pastoralism through agrarian civilization to urban, industrial modernity. Although uninfluenced by Comte, Karl Marx similarly comprehended the material development of human society in broadly compatible terms; primitive communism gave way to agrarian civilization which was itself superseded by bourgeois capitalism.

Closely related to the investigation of modern society, sociologists were also concerned to explain the relationship between the individual and society and the way in which the rise of modern society re-configured this relationship. The nascent discipline was fundamentally interested in the question of the relationship between the individual and society. Emile Durkheim's work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries exemplifies the discipline. His writing was unified by the analysis of the relationship between the individual and society. *The Division of Labor in Society* and *Suicide*, in particular, illustrated how different social forms imposed upon the individual in different ways to facilitate quite diverse forms of human agency. It was not just Durkheim who regarded these issues as essential. Talcott Parsons' great early work *The Structure of Social Action* published in 1936, was specifically addressed the question of the relationship between individual and society and the enduring problem this issue had been for sociology: 'It is hoped, in transcending the positivist-idealist dilemma, to show a way of transcending also the old individualism-society organism or, as it is often called, social nominalism-realism dilemma which has plagued social theory to so little purpose for so long'.

Parsons was optimistic that his voluntary theory of social action had overcome the individual-society impasse. Despite his efforts, there is still no sign of the question of individual-society relationship being resolved. Indeed, today, the individual-society debate has been renewed with increased vigor. However, the language of the debate has changed. Substantially as a result of Anthony Giddens work on social theory in the 1970s and early 1980s, social theorists have been engaged in intense debates about the question of the relationship between individual and society. Partly following Giddens' utilization of a new continental vocabulary, these theorists increasingly wrote not of the individual-society divide but of structure and agency. The apparently more technical language of structure and agency seem to denote a difference. In fact, the two conceptual pairs have a very similar meaning. Structure refers to large-scale social institutions and realities which frame individual experience; in short, structure refers to society, though it may imply stronger and more static organizational patterns. In contemporary social theory, agency is specifically used to refer to the powers of

independent individuals. It is contrasted with the organizational capacities of structure. Consequently, the current concept of agency and the former concept of the individual are almost interchangeable. The structure-agency or individual-society issue is a recurring problem around which social scientists necessarily circle in the course of their work. Despite huge changes in the discipline since the publication of Comte's work, the relationship between the society and individual or structure and agency remain central to the discipline today.

2. Structure and Agency: Accounting for Institutions

2.1 The Realist Ontology

In his famous Preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx eloquently described an ontology of social reality which has attracted sociologists ever since.

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.

For Marx, society is irreducible to the concepts and actions of particular individuals. Arising from individual productive activity, society, as a grand structure of institutions and conventions, exceeds individuals, determining their understandings and activities. This concept of a social structure as a material base and institutional superstructure has been fundamental to Marxist sociology. Yet, it has had a manifest influence on sociologists who reject historical materialism. While many sociologists would not prioritize material production, they too understand society as a structure consisting of institutions which exceed and cannot be explained in terms of individual understanding or action. These structures substantially determine individual existence. Marx's 1859 ontology has transcended Marxist scholarship. The notion of society as an institutional structure which cannot be reduced to the individual is commonplace in sociology.

The work of Emile Durkheim has been a critical reference point for these debates about structure and agency since he seems to be most committed to an organicist approach in which society is independent of and superior to the individual. Famously, Durkheim stated: 'Social phenomena are things and ought to be treated as things'. Durkheim's aphorism has been frequently taken as evidence that his sociology is self-evidently dualistic; society is an independent entity – a thing - which confronts the individual. Indeed, the phrase has often been taken as clear evidence that Durkheim held a metaphysical conception of society. This interpretation of the phrase is certainly sustainable within the context of *The Rules of Sociological Method* from which it is taken. The central purpose of that book was to demonstrate the special status of society which could not be accounted for by references to the individuals of whom it consisted. Society was an irreducible reality. Durkheim described the social phenomena which

were to be treated as things as 'social facts' and these social facts took several different forms. For instance, he described customs as a social fact because 'such reality is still objective for I did not create them'.

Here then are ways of acting, thinking and feeling that present the noteworthy property of existing outside the individual consciousness. These types of conduct or thought are moreover not only external to the individual but endowed with coercive power, by virtue of which they impose themselves upon him, independent of his individual will.

Perhaps surprisingly, in *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim is explicit that these social currents and social customs as social facts are not simply external to each individual but are in fact external to all individuals in a society. The social fact is an identifiable entity which exists separately from individuals. A social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independently of its individual manifestations.

Durkheim notes that 'currents of opinion with an intensity ranging according to the time and place, impel certain groups to more marriage, for example, or to more suicides or to lower birth rates'. These social facts manifest themselves in particular individual cases which may very well take somewhat idiosyncratic forms but behind each embodiment, the fact exists as an independent reality. Social facts emanate from a prior, independent reality. It is difficult to read these passages of *The Rules of Sociological Method* without concluding that Durkheim has explicitly committed himself to a 'structure-agency' dichotomy. 'When the individual is eliminated, society alone remains. We must, then, seek explanation of social life in the nature of society itself'. This independent entity, society, apparently surpasses the individual to exert pressure on the individual. Durkheim has been understandably interpreted as an advocate of social emergentism; for him, society, although based on individual activity, transcends the individual. Many commentators have drawn upon this apparent dichotomy between society and the individual in Durkheim's work to advocate social dualism, or structure and agency, themselves.

In fact, although Durkheim's phrasing certainly implies this in places, it is not at all clear that he actually envisaged society in this way. Certainly, he rejected the notion that social dynamics could be understood in terms of the individual; it was precisely for this reason he rejected the inter-psychology of Gabriel Tarde. Rather, Durkheim recognized the potency of social interaction. Together, in associations the participants of social life created effects which transcended the individuals themselves. Society surpassed the individual in terms of whom it could not be understood. Rather, society consists of groups of participants' interaction with each other, mutually impelling each other to new forms of collective activity. A passage in *Suicide* usefully illustrates the point:

We think it a fertile idea that social life must be explained not by the conception of it created by those who participate in it but by profound causes which escape awareness; and we also think these causes must principally be sought in the way in which associated individuals are grouped.

The passage initially appears to be a standard (and dubious) claim about the emergent properties of society. Social forces operate independently of individual understanding.

However, in the final sentence, the apparently autonomous powers of society, while inexplicable in individual terms, are to be understood as the product of the association of *individuals* in groups. The way groups unite themselves (around collectively meaningful representations) exerts, often not fully acknowledged, pressures on group members and on interrelated groups alike. Durkheim was, in fact, committed to an interactionist account of social reality (which is why Goffman regarded his work as a development of Durkheimian sociology). Nevertheless, in almost all conventional accounts, it is assumed the Durkheim proposed a dualistic image of social reality in which society displaying emergent properties exceeded the individual.

This account of Durkheim has been widely seen as the origins of Talcott Parsons' functionalism in the middle of the twentieth century. Certainly, Parsons' structural-functionalism has been a frequent resource in debates about structure and agency. Although he initially rejected the dichotomy of individual and society, in his later work, Parsons advocated the notion of a social system irreducible to individuals. Individuals internalized social norms in order that they could fulfill roles which served to sustain the system's vital functions. Systemic functions existed independently of individual understanding or action. Similarly, Jurgen Habermas too has explicitly claimed that social structure exceeds individual understanding:

My guiding idea is that, on the one hand, the dynamics of development are steered by imperatives issuing from problems of self-maintenance, that is, problems of materially reproducing the lifeworld; but that, on the other hand, this societal development draws upon structural possibilities and is subject to structural limitations that, with the rationalization of the lifeworld, undergo systematic change in dependence upon corresponding learning process. A *verstehende* sociology that allows society to be wholly absorbed into the lifeworld ties itself to the perspective of self-interpretation of the culture under investigation; this internal perspective screens out everything that inconspicuously affects a socio-cultural lifeworld from the outside.

Although Habermas emphasizes the inter-subjectively meaningful dimension of social life, he dismisses the possibility that an interpretive sociology can account for the institutional realities of modern society. Institutions finally transcend the understandings and interpretations of individuals and must be analyzed by sociologists as terms which are independent of meaning. Niklas Luhmann has similarly argued that the social system cannot be comprehended merely by reference to individual understanding of it. The autopoiesis (self-reproduction) of social systems occurs independently of individual intent. In contemporary sociology, the appeal to ontological dualism – the claim that society consists of structure and agency - initially elaborated by Marx, is widely evident. The claim that society consists of structures which are irreducible to individual concept or action has become accepted as commonplace. Society is understood in terms of a dichotomy of structure and agency.

In current debates, ontological dualism is perhaps best represented by critical realism which has established itself as an important theoretical project in the last two decades. There are a number of important realist theorists arguing for a structural concept of society today. However, one of the most prominent figures in this movement has been Roy Bhaskar who has been instrumental in promoting a realist ontology. Significantly,

he regards his own critical realism as an elaboration of Marx's philosophy, although he does not emphasize economic factors to the degree to Marx. Bhaskar is catholic about the fundamental basis of social structure; a variety of social practices could create structural phenomena. However, in a clear echo of the 1859 *Preface*, Bhaskar comprehends social reality as an objective structure which exceeds individuals.

Bhaskar's critical realism emerged out of his earlier contributions to the philosophy of science (e.g. in his *A Realist Theory of Science*) in which he posited the existence of an intransitive 'real', dimension to the natural world where generative mechanisms exist that make 'actual' events and 'empirical' experiences possible. Following this differentiated natural ontology, Bhaskar has argued for a similar ontological stratification of social reality. Although Bhaskar recognizes the centrality of meaning to individual social practice, social, like natural, reality as a whole has an intransitive aspect which is irreducible to human understanding of it. Bhaskar insists upon a real dimension to social reality: 'the *conditions* for phenomena (namely social activities as conceptualized in experience) exist *intransitively* and may therefore exist independently of their appropriate conceptualization'. For Bhaskar, society as a whole and the institutions of which it is comprised properties which exceed those of the individuals in them. Society has an enduring existence independent of what participants in it do or believe; it has a structure. This leads Bhaskar to claim that human agency and society 'cannot be reduced to or re-constructed from one another' and that 'there is an ontological hiatus between society and people'. Society arises out of individual action but, in the end, society is ontologically irreducible to individuals. The question for Bhaskar is how are sociologists to conceive this structure?

Ever since Tarde's critique of Durkheim, the claim that society might consist of more than its members, as Durkheim seemed to imply, has been met with understandable derision. It is plainly false to claim that society can be independent of its members. Such an assertion immediately raises the specter of a metaphysical entity. Bhaskar is keenly aware of this danger of reification but he believes it is possible to avoid this accusation by appealing to the concept of emergence. Bhaskar defines emergence as 'a property possessed by an entity at a certain level of organization may be said to be emergent from some lower level insofar as it is not predictable from the properties found at that level'. Thus, water has emergent properties which are irreducible to its constituent molecules of hydrogen and oxygen. Analogously, in society, the accumulated activities and conceptions of individuals produce an effect which, although dependent upon individuals, is irreducible to any of those individuals' activities and conceptions. Society as a whole has features which are not predictable from the properties of individuals, even though, like the hydrogen and oxygen molecules in water, there could be no society without individuals; 'society, as a real object of possible scientific study, possesses properties irreducible to those of people'.

Certainly, Bhaskar's appeal to emergence is intuitively sensible. Although individuals contribute to society and there could be no society without them, society is plainly more than any individual. Moreover, it is self-evident that an individual's understanding of society is inadequate to social reality as a whole; society exists whether any particular individual understands it or not. Emergence seems to capture the complex fact that social reality, which precedes and is definitively more than the individual, is

simultaneously only the result of individual action. Consequently, a social structure arises out of the cumulative action of all individuals to confront each and every individual as an objective institutional reality. It is on this basis that Bhaskar is able to claim that there is more to institutions than participants. Society, as an emergent structural order, exceeds individual understanding and activity.

In his recent work on emergence, Keith Sawyer has developed traditional realism represented by theorists like Bhaskar and Margaret Archer in order to overcome the criticisms directed towards it. Drawing on recent developments in emergence and complexity theory, Sawyer re-affirms the central realist tenet that social phenomena always consist of individual actors and actions. However, taken together, these actions may produce a reality which transcends the individuals. Thus Sawyer states: 'A social property may be said to be emergent when it is multiply realized in wildly disjunctive complex systems of individuals'. The aggregate of individual action may be totally unpredictable from the constituent actions themselves, especially in a complex social network in which there are many actors. At that point, surprising structural effects may manifest themselves, which seem incompatible with the actions of contributing individuals.

At the same time, Sawyer seeks to connect current strands of realist thought with interactionist sociology which has sometimes been rejected by realists as individualists. For Sawyer, symbolic interactionism is essential to the development of realist social theory because interactionists 'emphasize interaction, process and mechanism'. In particular, interactionists recognize that in the dynamics of interaction, distinctively collective phenomena appear which cannot be produced by individuals alone; there are social processes or mechanisms at work which transcend the individual. Together participants are able to do things and create situations, impossible for the individual alone. Moreover, interactionists prioritize the role of shared understandings and symbols in all social relations. In order to co-ordinate their actions, participants mobilize shared concepts to which they collectively orient themselves. Since institutions and therefore emergent properties rely on the successful co-ordination of practice in order to sustain a configuration of relations, these collective understandings are central to any realist account of social reality. Emergent properties which supervene individual action depend in every instance on the shared understandings of participants in interaction. Without those common understandings there would be no coherent practice and therefore the great structure of institutions could not be produced and reproduced.

However, although society consists primarily of a complex web of meaningful interactions, Sawyer maintains that social reality as a whole transcends meaningful interaction. For Sawyer, interactionism is still not enough to explain structural properties. Thus, Sawyer posits a five level model of social reality.

Level E: Social Structure – written texts (procedures, laws, regulations); material systems and infrastructure (architecture, urban design, communication and transport networks)

Stable Emergents (Level D) Group Subcultures, group slang and catchphrases, conversational routines, shared social practices, collective memory

Ephemeral Emergents (Level C): Topic, Context, interactional frame, participation

structure, relative role and status assignments.

Interaction (Level B): Discourse patterns, symbolic interaction, collaboration, negotiation

Individual (Level A) Intention, agency, memory, personality, cognitive process.

The model is intriguing and it seems to provide a more nuanced realism than the blunt dualism found in Bhaskar et al's work. Nevertheless, despite the qualifying layers of evanescent emergent properties and the emphasis on interaction, Sawyer's model nevertheless revolves around the fundamental opposition of agency and structure. Crucially, the agents in Sawyer's model are individual and independent and Sawyer himself affirms methodological individualism as a theoretical approach; 'The Emergence Paradigm accepts an important role for methodological individualism in sociology; it can play an important role in identifying the mechanisms and processes of social emergence in specific token instances'. For Sawyer, individuals have their own independent properties prior to their interactions. The only problem with methodological individualism for Sawyer is that it is incapable of accounting for what emerges when autonomous actors interact. When individuals interact, they produce situations which are not reducible to the individuals on their own. Sawyer's realism, by contrast, recognizes that when independent individuals interact (on the basis of shared meanings) they are able produce structural phenomena. They create ephemeral, stable and structural emergent properties; particular situational roles, wider subcultures and, ultimately material systems. They generate sometimes lasting collective phenomena not predictable from their individual capabilities. 'The emergents at Level C and D are not structures in the traditional sociological sense of organizations and networks. They are emergent properties of sociological events and have an independent existence independent of any particular configuration of individuals'. These structures, especially at Levels D and E, then impose the kinds of action and interaction in which the individual can engage.

Sawyer believes he applies the concept of emergence more comprehensively and convincingly than some other realists: it refers to any collective phenomena not merely social institutions. His layered, five level ontology is designed to include emergent properties missed by more institutionally oriented realists. In addition, Sawyer considers the interactionist approach much more seriously than realists such as Bhaskar and Archer. However, it is very doubtful that his realism represents a profound break with the wider paradigm. Ultimately, he too replicates traditional realism. On this ontology, individuals are independent agents whose acts taken together constitute social structure. Once generated, these structures transcend agents' actions and understandings and are irreducible to them. They must be understood on their own terms.

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Biographical Sketch

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