

Modern Social Theory

An Introduction

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Structure and Agency

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Structure and agency are key concepts in social theory. Structure refers to regular, relatively fixed, objective, and generalized features of social life. Structure usually refers to social institutions or 'systems', 'forces', or 'currents'. *Agency, on the other hand, refers to *action*. Social agency usually refers to the action of human individuals or groups of individuals. Social theorists generally argue that social structure is reproduced by the actions of individuals through the mediation of rules, roles, and other resources broadly referred to as 'culture'. In this sense, structure refers to social facts that are independent of the individual and are able to determine and constrain individual action. In contrast, agency refers to the observation that while constrained by the realities of their world, individuals are capable of choosing alternative courses of action. Individuals can choose what to do, even though their choices are restricted and shaped in various ways by structural realities.

This chapter discusses the strengths as well as some shortcomings of this general account of social life. We concentrate mainly on the work of two influential contemporary theorists: Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu. We also look more briefly at two other writers associated with a 'realist school' in British social theory who also employ the concepts of structure and agency. These are Roy Bhaskar and Margaret Archer. The chapter focuses particularly on Giddens's theory of 'structuration' and on Bourdieu's influential concepts of 'practice', 'habitus', and 'cultural capital'.

What are 'structure' and 'agency'?

The image of society as a dual reality of structure and agency appears to accord with everyday experience. It seems self-evident that human individuals are confronted by institutional realities over which they have no absolute or overall control. And it also seems self-evident that human individuals retain a degree of freedom to act as they wish or intend. The briefest consideration of personal experience seems to confirm this picture. On the one hand, I am constrained and conditioned to some extent in my life by the type of family, class, income bracket, culture, religious group, or region of the world in which I was born and brought up. I am deeply influenced by the society to which I belong, by its culture and politics. I cannot change these facts about my life overnight, and I cannot change the way the world is overnight. On the other hand, within these constraints, I can to some extent choose to follow what I want to do. I can form particular intentions and plans of action. I can choose to follow one career rather than another or to study one subject rather than another. I can to some extent resist the way the world is, and I can influence people or reach agreements with them about things that need to be done or changed.

For many social theorists, structure and agency are the premises from which all investigation of society needs to proceed. For example, Derek Layder declares that 'an adequate account must come to terms with the fact that "society" and its constituent elements are preconstituted and objective structures which constrain interaction' (Layder 1981: 1). Similarly, Alex Callinicos affirms that society consists of structure and agents and that the purpose of social theory is to reconcile these two distinct elements, that 'the explanatory autonomy of social structures is not inconsistent with the orthodox conception of agents' (Callinicos 1987: 38). Likewise, John Thompson underlines a concern 'to situate action within an overall context of social institutions and structural conditions' (1981: 141; see also Mouzelis 1995). Structure and agency are often described as the 'objective' and 'subjective' sides of social reality. The 'objective' elements refer to those aspects of society that are not reducible to individual knowledge or activity, while the 'subjective' aspects refer precisely to individuals and their personal capabilities.

In many discussions of structure and agency, the role of *culture* is often invoked as an important connecting concept. Culture is seen as ensuring that different individuals act in ways consistent with the reproduction of social structure as a whole. Culture ensures that individual actions are coordinated in ways that produce and reproduce social structures. It is argued that without culture individuals would act randomly, producing not a structured way of life but only chaos.

Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu: differences and similarities

Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu are two prominent figures in social theory who draw extensively in different ways and with different emphases on these twin concepts of structure and agency. Giddens made his career in the early 1970s through work on class structure, stratification, and Durkheim, developing a theory of 'structuration' in the 1980s. Bourdieu made his career initially as an anthropologist working on a study of the Kabyle tribe in Algeria in the 1960s. In the 1970s, his interests became more sociological, focusing especially on education, culture, and class in France.

Since his earliest writings, Bourdieu's leftist political orientation has been evident. After his anthropological work on the Kabyle, Bourdieu dedicated most of his research to the analysis and critique of French society. He has focused on the way in which the French class system is reproduced through institutional and cultural mechanisms. Although Bourdieu could not be described as Marxist, his interest in class reflects the concerns of 'structuralist Marxist' theorists such as Louis Althusser, Ralph Miliband, and Nicos Poulantzas who were dominant in the early part of Bourdieu's career. Bourdieu has remained oriented to rigorously empirical research throughout his work, focusing on the details of everyday life in different class fractions.

Giddens's work differs from Bourdieu's in notable respects. Giddens's early theoretical work was not directly concerned with empirical data, and his more recent work has been criticized for resting on rather thin sociological evidence. For many critics, Giddens's recent work is characterized by an excessively optimistic and 'individualistic' account of contemporary society under conditions of 'post-Fordist' employment practices. This view was also taken by Bourdieu. In one of his last publications, Bourdieu described Giddens as one half of 'a bicephalous Trojan horse' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001). In Bourdieu's view, the British Prime Minister Tony Blair was the other half of this miscegenation. Bourdieu saw Giddens and Blair as contributing to an undermining of social democracy through the surreptitious introduction of free-market values. Bourdieu became particularly suspicious of Giddens's later writings on the 'Third Way', which he saw as merely legitimizing the current social order, instead of criticizing it. Giddens's later work on the 'Third Way' and 'reflexivity' is discussed in Chapter 13 of this book (pp. 287–9).

However, Bourdieu's political disagreements with Giddens should not blind us to some notable similarities in their theoretical approaches. Bourdieu and Giddens follow comparable strategies in the way they deal with ideas about structure and agency. Although they employ different terminology, both seek to explain the reproduction of social structures through the agency of individuals acting in conformity with cultural rules and resources. In the following we deal first of all with Giddens's theory of 'structuration'.

Giddens's structuration theory

Giddens has always sought to produce new insights through syntheses of existing ideas. His work on social class from the 1970s was an attempt to reconcile Marxist and Weberian approaches in a theory of 'stratification adequate to contemporary conditions

(Giddens 1979). What Giddens came to call 'structuration' is another example of his synthetic approach. Giddens first developed the theory in the late 1970s in *New Rules of Sociological Method* (1976) and *Central Problems in Social Theory* (1979), and subsequently in its fully fledged form in *The Constitution of Society* (1984).

In part, structuration theory is a response to the shortcomings of Talcott *Parsons's conception of 'structural functionalism' (discussed in Chapter 4 of this book). In his middle period and later work, Parsons had proposed that the social system had certain functional requirements that were met insofar as individuals fulfilled certain roles. Parsons appeared to give the social system a determining power over individuals who merely internalized certain values allowing them to perform roles. For some critics, Parsons seemed to reduce individuals to mere 'cultural dupes' who were unwittingly determined by certain systemic needs. According to Giddens, the social system could only operate through the *knowledgeable activity* of individuals. Giddens wanted to produce a theory that avoided any 'derogation of the *lay actor', a theory that did not neglect the everyday competences and rational self-consciousness of individuals (Giddens 1979: 71). Giddens insisted that 'an adequate account of human agency must first be connected to a theory of the acting subject' (Giddens 1979: 2). In order to develop a theory of the acting subject, Giddens drew on the work of Erving *Goffman and Harold *Garfinkel (discussed in Chapter 5 of this book). Giddens emphasized the importance of individual agency while at the same time insisting that structuration theory amounted to 'a recovery of the subject without lapsing into *subjectivism' (Giddens 1979: 44).

Giddens was conscious that there are dimensions of society which cannot be reduced to the individual. While he was sympathetic to the emphasis on individual agency in interactionist sociology, he criticized Goffman and Garfinkel's work for not accounting adequately for institutional realities. He asserted that institutions are not reducible to individual subjects and that 'society is not the creation of individual subjects' (Giddens 1984: p. xxi). In this sense, structuration theory is ultimately a synthesis of *interactionist and *interpretive thinking on the one hand, with its emphasis on agency, understanding, and subjective meanings, and *functionalist and *structuralist thinking on the other hand, with its focus on the operation of social systems and the resilience of objective structures. Structuration theory is designed to explain the reproduction of institutional orders through the knowledgeable agency of individuals. It is a kind of fusion of the work of Durkheim and Parsons on the one hand and the work of Weber, *Schutz, *Mead, Goffman, and Garfinkel on the other.

Structure, system, and 'tacit knowledge'

Giddens developed an elaborate 'ontology to explain this active reproduction of the social system. He began by distinguishing between three basic levels of experience in the life courses of individual actors: a level of the 'unconscious', a level of 'discursive consciousness', and a level of 'practical consciousness'. The unconscious refers to subconscious motives, described by Freud in terms of psychoanalysis. *Discursive consciousness refers to those aspects of knowledge that individuals can describe reflectively and self-consciously. In between the unconscious and discursive consciousness stands the level of 'practical consciousness', which is crucial to structuration theory (Giddens 1979: 2). Giddens describes

what he calls practical consciousness or 'tacit knowledge' in terms of stocks of mutual understandings between individuals that are assumed in everyday interaction. These stocks of tacit knowledge are vital to social practice but are effectively invisible.

Giddens notes that the success of Garfinkel's 'ethnomethodology and Goffman's interactionism lay in uncovering these shared understandings that are taken for granted in social encounters (Giddens 1979: 80–1). Goffman and Garfinkel illuminated the background rules that remain invisible because humans never experience an ordinary social interaction without having already taken these rules for granted. Individuals only note what is natural when someone misjudges appropriate conduct or when a stranger does not know about these mutual stocks of knowledge. The purpose of Garfinkel's breaching experiments was to demonstrate the importance of background understandings to social life. Giddens's concept of 'tacit knowledge' thus seeks to capture this routine, pre-given and unthematized character of everyday knowledge in ongoing interaction. It refers ultimately to shared meanings which coordinate individual action and allow individuals to interact in mutually acceptable and predictable ways.

While 'practical consciousness' and 'tacit knowledge' are important to structuration theory, Giddens also posits three other decisive elements of analysis: the element of 'system', the element of 'structure', and the element of 'structuration'. The system refers to a society's major institutions, to its state and legal and administrative systems, to its social and class structure, and to its economy. Structuration refers to the process by which individuals reproduce these systems through their activities. In this analysis, the most decisive concept is that of 'structure'. According to Giddens, it is 'structure' rather than tacit knowledge which finally ensures that individuals act in a way that reproduces the social system as a whole. For Giddens, structure refers to rules and resources which exist only when they are employed in social practice (Giddens 1984: 25).

Borrowing a phrase from the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (discussed in Chapter 9 of this book), Giddens describes structure as 'a virtual order of difference' (Giddens 1979: 46). Structure is 'marked by the absence of the subject' (Giddens 1984: 25). In his theory of structural linguistics, Saussure had argued that *langue*, or language, consisted of a system of arbitrary 'signifiers'—sounds or inscriptions on a surface. The meaning of each signifier arose from its difference from other signifiers in that language; the meaning of each element was created by its non-identity with the others. By a 'virtual order of difference', Giddens means that structure is a system of rules of conduct, each of which differ from one another and imply one another. Like Saussure's concept of *langue*, structure is essential to any social act but is not immediately known to the agent. As *langue* frames everything that is said, limiting speech to certain comprehensible forms, so Giddens states that virtual rules of conduct 'structure' individual actions. They ensure that actions take a recognizable and predictable form. Structure for this reason has the aspect of *duality*. It is, Giddens says, both the *medium* of social action and the *outcome* of social action. Giddens illustrates this 'duality of structure' with a linguistic example: 'the duality of structure relates the smallest item of day-to-day behaviour to attributes of far more inclusive social systems; when I utter a grammatical English sentence in casual conversation, I contribute to the reproduction of the English language as a whole' (Giddens 1979: 77). In other words, social agents reaffirm and reproduce the rules on which they draw in their actions. Just as individuals necessarily draw on pre-given linguistic structures when they speak and

thereby contribute to reproducing the whole linguistic system, so individuals contribute to reproducing the whole system of social rules whenever they act. Structure underpins social practice to ensure that it takes a meaningful and relatively predictable form. Giddens's conception of structuration has been applied by a number of sociologists to concrete problems in social research. One interesting context of applications has been international relations research. This is discussed here in Box 25.

We shall shortly return to some problems with Giddens's use of the concepts of structure and agency. But first we move to some comparable ideas in the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

BOX 25. ANTHONY GIDDENS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

One among several contexts of application of Giddens's idea of structuration has been international relations research. In the 1980s, several reasearchers appealed to the concept of structuration in an effort to overcome the so-called *'realist' paradigm that had been dominant in international relations research since the Second World War (see further Wendt 1987). In drawing on the concept of structuration, these researchers showed how Giddens's theory could be applied not only at the level of the actions of individual persons but also at the macrological level of the agency of whole nation-states in a structural arena of global diplomacy.

Realism in international relations research has followed a different order of priorities from the ideas signified technically by realism in sociological theory. During the Cold War, international relations researchers in the realist school argued that international order consisted of strategies by individual nation-states aimed at a maximizing interests in power and advantage. The international order was seen as having a particular structure, resting on a 'balance of power'. A nation-state's position in this structure was seen as determining the strategies it was most rational for it to pursue.

Towards the end of the Cold War, several international relations theorists became dissatisfied with this realist approach. They gave more emphasis to the cultural aspects and differences of the actions of nation-states. They argued that important internal national norms affected the way a state interacted with other states, and consequently that the international system did not have the rigid structure affirmed by the realists. They developed a less deterministic account of the international order, describing their approach as 'constructivist' rather than realist. They appealed to Giddens's theory of structuration insofar as it seemed to allow for elements of both individual agency and structural constraint. Structuration theory allowed individual states more agency than under a realist paradigm, while at the same time recognizing the existence of a constraining context to which nation-states themselves contributed through their actions. The international order was a 'medium' of state action and an 'outcome' of state action. Individual states could transform the international order in certain ways, while at the same time remaining bound by its relatively intransigent structure. Their own transformative actions had the consequence of consolidating the structure, even as the structure underwent change.

In adapting Giddens's theory in this way, the international relations researchers sought to steer a middle path between both the *functionalist idea of an all-encompassing, all-determining global system and the *rational choice conception of advantage-maximizing actions by discrete nation-states. They saw themselves as bringing together the two sides of the dichotomy in a more satisfactory manner, emphasizing the interdependency of structure and agency and an interlacing of elements of fixity with elements of transformation.

Bourdieu and the idea of reflexive sociology

Like Giddens, Bourdieu also sought a way of reconciling objectivist tendencies in social theory with subjectivist tendencies. The 'objectivist' emphasis on structure is embodied for Bourdieu in French 'structuralist' theory, especially in the work of Lévi-Strauss (discussed in Chapter 9 of this book). The 'subjectivist' emphasis on agency is embodied for Bourdieu in 'phenomenological' and 'hermeneutical' philosophy, especially in the 'existentialism' of Jean-Paul Sartre.

When Bourdieu began propounding his theories in the 1970s, he rejected Sartre's 'existentialism' as untenable in terms of unique personal choices. But Lévi-Strauss's structuralism was equally problematic, because human culture could not be reduced to a product of universal 'cognitive' templates operating above the heads of individuals. Human agents had to be seen as capable of recognizing the significance of the cultural products they themselves create through their actions. Bourdieu therefore sought to develop a social theory that explained the institutional realities of modern society without either obliterating individual agency or relapsing into subjectivist individualism. Like Giddens's synthesis of functionalism and interactionism, Bourdieu wanted to rescue the positive aspects of the work of both Lévi-Strauss and Sartre, to find a critical middle way between structuralism and phenomenology.

We begin here by looking at Bourdieu's first systematic treatise from the early 1970s, his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972). This grew out of his anthropological studies of the Kabyle tribespeople in the 1960s and provided a theoretical basis for all his subsequent research. We then turn to his influential concepts of the 'habitus', 'field', and 'cultural capital'.

Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice*

Bourdieu considers that the social scientist's position as an ideally impartial observer who is an outsider to the social processes under observation creates a problem for sociology and anthropology. The 'objective' and external position of the social scientist can have the consequence that the social realities they are studying, they invariably construct maps, models, and rules by which they orient themselves around this strange cultural landscape. The observer 'compensates for lack of practical mastery, by creating a cultural map' (Bourdieu 1972: 2). In so doing, however, researchers run a risk of reducing cultural life to a wooden system of rules which imposes itself on the actors. They face a danger of imposing their own curious and contemplative relation to the culture in question onto the practices of the natives. They need to gain insight into the way ordinary actors engage in social relations with the skill of 'virtuosos', like accomplished musicians. Since the researchers, as visiting intellectuals, have to think of social life in terms of rules and principles (because they do not know it intimately), they assume that native agents share this curious intellectualizing position. Bourdieu consequently calls for a 'reflexive sociology' in which sociologists try to theorize rigorously their own position in relation to the practices of the participants of their studies (Bourdieu 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). A key requirement for such

a 'reflexive sociology' is a grasp of the agency of the participant actors under observation, and of the agency of the researchers who study them.

For Bourdieu, social agents are 'virtuosos' in the sense they are not dominated by abstract rules but rather know the script so well that they can elaborate and improvise on the themes it provides (1972: 79). Bourdieu describes social actors as having a 'sense of the game', referring to footballers and tennis players as examples of this virtuosic sense. These players do not apply a priori principles to their play—only beginners need to do that. Confronted with diverse situations, they have an automatic understanding of what is appropriate. They know, for instance, when they should run to the net (1980: 66–7, 81). This virtuosic 'sense of the game' is not individualistic. It arises in social relations and refers to the understanding that actors develop about what other group members regard as tolerable. Bourdieu's discussion of honour among the Kabyle highlights this intersubjective sense of the game:

The driving of the whole mechanism is not some abstract principle (principle of isotimy, equality in honour), still less the set of rules which can be derived from it but the sense of honour, a disposition inculcated in earlier years of life and constantly reinforced by calls to order from the group. (Bourdieu 1972: 14–15)

Kabyle men's sense of honour is a shifting agreement established and transformed through negotiation. Individuals do not solipsistically consult 'a priori' rules which determine their actions mechanically. As members of groups, individuals act according to a sense of practice which is established and judged by the group. The final determination of correct action is not whether an individual rigorously follows a rule but rather whether an individual's actions are interpreted as appropriate by others. Other members of a group decide whether an action is acceptable or sanctionable given their shared sense of honour, and they call those individuals to order who have acted against this socially agreed sense of rightness. It is in this sense that agents act within a fluid context of structure, marked by group expectations, norms of acceptable practice, sanctions, and relations of power.

The habitus and the field

In the *Outline* and other works from the 1970s and 1980s, Bourdieu developed a concept of the 'habitus' to overcome the impasse between excessively objectivist and excessively subjectivist approaches in social research (Bourdieu 1979, 1980, 1984). This term 'habitus' had also been used earlier in the twentieth century by Max Weber and Norbert Elias, with different meanings. In Bourdieu's use of the term, the habitus overcomes subject-object dualism by endowing subjective bodily actions with objective social force, so that the most apparently subjective individual acts necessarily assume broader social significance. Individuals have agency, but the kind of agency they have is prescribed by the culture of which they are members. Following Lévi-Strauss, Bourdieu insists that culture cannot be understood in individualistic or voluntaristic ways. Culture has an objectivity which precedes individual knowledge and understandings. The habitus comprises perceptual structures and embodied dispositions which organize the way individuals see the world and act in it. Bourdieu comments that 'the cognitive structures which social agents implement in their practical knowledge of the social world are internalized, embodied social structures' (Bourdieu 1979: 468).

The habitus derives from the structural socio-economic positions in which individuals find themselves. Individuals routinely internalize objective social conditions such as their economic class, with the result that they acquire the appropriate tastes and perform the appropriate practices for their social position. According to Bourdieu, the habitus facilitates the reproduction of social structure by imposing certain dispositions on the individual. Confronted by an autonomous social reality, individuals assume various cultural predispositions appropriate to their situation. Borrowing a phrase from Nietzsche, Bourdieu argues that individuals evince an 'amor fati' ('a love of destiny') in which they automatically fulfil the appropriate role for their objective situation (Bourdieu 1979: 244). Individuals display certain cultural tastes that reflect their structural situation. The habitus inscribes tastes into the very bodies of individuals. Bourdieu describes the way in which tastes imposed by social class are not intellectual judgements but instinctive bodily reactions against those things that do not fit that class's habitus (Bourdieu 1979: 486, 478). Actors feel intense embarrassment and even nausea when confronted with social practices that do not fit their habitus. The habitus even moulds the human physique. For instance, Bourdieu describes the bowed deportment of Kabylean women, which physically denotes their subordination in the tribal society (Bourdieu 1977).

Bourdieu's emphasis on the body in his discussion of the habitus is important. Corporeal human conduct is central to social life. The human body is an important signifier in social interaction, expressing social status and power as much as communicative intention. Above all, bodily conduct has to become second nature to be successful. If actors do not act 'naturally', their actions are likely to take on different meanings. They may be interpreted as untrustworthy or insincere and encounters may go awry. Bourdieu is right to emphasize the role of the body in social communication, interaction, and domination (see also the discussion of the body in Chapter 11 of this book on feminist social theory, pp. 236-7).

According to Bourdieu, the habitus operates in a wider institutional setting which Bourdieu calls the 'field'. The 'field' refers to the structure of social relations in which an individual is located. The structure pre-exists individuals and determines struggles between them. The habitus plays a crucial role because it effectively links individuals to their position in the field and ensures that they reproduce it by acting in appropriate ways. Bourdieu argues that 'to think in terms of a field is to think relationally' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 96). The field has an objective status, similar to Giddens's 'system'. Bourdieu stresses that

what exist in the social world are relations—not interactions between agents and *intersubjectivities between individuals but objective relations which exist 'independent of individual consciousness and will', as Marx says In analytic terms a field may be defined as a network, or a configuration of objective relations between positions. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 97)

Bourdieu's concept of the field is intended to enrich the concept of the habitus. Bourdieu shows how, in a field, groups struggle for supremacy and social distinctiveness. In particular, he notes how, in contrast to the middle classes, the working class tend to value functional clothing and food, making a cultural virtue out of an economic necessity. The economic position of the working class conditions them to view the elaborate habits of the bourgeoisie with disdain. Indulgence in certain tastes may come to seem repellent to the working class.

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Cultural capital

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Conversely, upper-class groups typically regard those beneath them in status as vulgar and uncultured. At the same time, while superior groups try to monopolize certain cultural practices, subordinate groups attempt to adopt these practices of superior groups, in order to subvert the status of superior groups. In adopting the practices of these groups, subordinate groups undermine the distinctiveness of these groups. We may think, for example, of the ways in which expensive fashion accessories come to be acquired by middle-income groups in a desire to imitate the rich and famous, and thereby gradually lose their distinctiveness.

The struggle for social distinction is an empirically verifiable process which Bourdieu usefully illuminates. One of his most revealing discussions appears in his influential book from 1979, *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. This is discussed

power.

However, in addition to this notion of economic determination, Bourdieu also develops a concept of 'cultural capital'. Through the habits, individuals and groups adopt certain cultural practices. These practices reflect people's economic position, but the habits and the culture it imparts do not passively transmit the prior economic position in which individuals find themselves. Through adopting certain kinds of cultural practices, individuals can earn cultural capital. They can attain a higher status in the social order than their purely economic position would allow by adopting and monopolizing cultural activities that are admired and envied. Individuals and groups can develop cultural knowledge which is arcane and which raises them above other groups, even above those more economically powerful than them.

Bourdieu argues that intellectuals and artists, while relatively poor, have a rich habitus that involves a commitment to difficult and time-consuming cultural forms. These groups may not have the wealth of private sector professionals but they have the time and leisure to be able to master respected cultural activities, to acquire 'refinement'. This is also true of the traditional aristocracy. In this way, at least in France—which may or may not be a special case—possession of cultural capital allows intellectuals and artists to achieve a social standing superior to their purely economic position.

In this sense Bourdieu's concept of the habitus suggests a formula for social 'status'. For Bourdieu, social 'status', defined as an individual's position in the social hierarchy, is a product of an individual's economic and cultural capital taken together. While financiers, stockbrokers, and bankers all have substantial economic capital, they are not automatically dominant in the social field because they are low in cultural capital. In contrast, skilled professionals such as doctors and teachers, as well as state employees such as police officers and

BOX 26. PIERRE BOURDIEU'S DISTINCTION: A SOCIAL CRITIQUE OF THE JUDGEMENT OF TASTE

In his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979) Bourdieu adopts a sociological perspective on questions of taste, aesthetic judgements, and preferences in cultural goods. He elucidates the social conditions that make people's different tastes in art and culture what they are. His approach can be described as a form of sociological *Kantianism* in the sense that his conception of the habitus functions in an analogous manner to Immanuel Kant's eighteenth-century philosophical conception of basic organizing *cognitive* categories of human intellectual life into three domains: the domain of theoretical reason (involved in science), the domain of practical reason (involved in morality), and the domain of aesthetic sensibility (involved in tastes about art). In each domain, Kant had sought to identify certain transcendental principles which make each of these aspects of human existence what they are. Kant had proposed that various cognitive categories precede human perception and make meaningfully ordered experience possible. These organizing categories essentially make the world what it is for human beings. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu seeks to show how these cognitive categories arise from prior socio-economic conditions, and that it is the socio-economic features of these categories that make the world what it is for human actors. He concentrates particularly on bringing to light the sociological dimensions of the categories involved in aesthetic sensibilities and cultural tastes in a given society. In this sense, his book can be seen as a sociological response to the last of Kant's three philosophical treatises, *The Critique of Judgement*, of 1790.

Elaborating the habitus empirically, Bourdieu carried out extensive quantitative and qualitative research into the habits and tastes of social classes in France in the 1970s. He divided French society into four main social classes: the working class, the petty bourgeoisie (the lower middle class) and the professional classes (the upper middle class), which he subdivided into private and public sector *fractions*. He called the private sector professionals the 'right bank', and the public sector professionals the 'left bank'. This was in reference to the River Seine in Paris. The north 'right' bank of the Seine has historically been associated with finance and government (the side of the Champs-Élysées). The south 'left' bank has historically been associated with art and culture (the side of the Latin Quarter and the University). The right-bank elite consisted of bankers, businessmen, lawyers, and brokers, while the left-bank elite referred to teachers, academics, intellectuals, artists, and writers. Bourdieu accepted that class positions in Paris were decisively determined by economic capital. Consequently, the right-bank elite were dominant. Nevertheless, cultural capital also played an important role in a class's social status. The right-bank elite possessed extensive economic capital but had little cultural capital. Cultural capital was substantially monopolized by the left-bank elite. The right-bank elite engaged in expensive foods and elaborate holidays in exclusive locations. The left bank, by contrast, chose activities which did not require significant economic capital but which demonstrated cultural sophistication and, above all, the time required to acquire these arcane tastes. In this way, the left bank distinguished itself from other groups. The left bank favoured difficult modern music and engaged in expensive but personally demanding sports such as cross-country skiing, mountaineering, and hill-walking. Although not without its problems, Bourdieu's analysis of the left- and right-bank professionals in a context of *post-Fordist* employment cultures. By contrast, his account of the working class and the petty bourgeoisie is less convincing, and has not been seen as providing an accurate sociology of these groups. It has been argued that Bourdieu exaggerates the extent to which the lower classes' lack of the economic and educational advantages of elites predestines them to particular ways of life. Nevertheless, Bourdieu's book remains one of the most important sociological analyses of class culture.

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government officials, and relatively impoverished intellectuals and artists are able to contest social dominance by the materially rich through their monopolization of cultural capital. The social hierarchy is thus a product of a struggle between groups on the basis of both economic capital and cultural capital. Cultural capital is conditioned by economic capital but is not predetermined by it. For example, a graduate of an elite university may have come from a wealthy family background, but if the graduate then makes a successful career in the business world, it is the graduate's cultural capital acquired at university which must be identified as the prime cause of the graduate's success, rather than the economic capital of the graduate's family. Another graduate from the same elite university but not from a wealthy family background might in principle have the same chance of success, on the strength of the university-acquired cultural capital alone. Bourdieu's conception of cultural capital is very clearly illuminated both in his book *Distinction* and in his study of the sociology of education, titled *Homo Academicus* (1984). The latter text is discussed in Box 27.

BOX 27. PIERRE BOURDIEU AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

In the field of education research, Bourdieu's concept of the habitus has been enduring. When the habitus refers not to static cultural templates arising automatically from a prior material reality but more dynamically to exclusive group culture, it is very illuminating. Employing the concept in this way, Bourdieu makes some interesting arguments about the reproduction of social inequality in schools and academies. In the postscript to *Homo Academicus* (1984), his study of the French educational system, Bourdieu contends that the examinations that students have to pass to receive their all-important diplomas are not judged purely on objective academic criteria but also to some extent on criteria of social fitness. In his provocative thesis, the French academy is founded on a system of cultural exclusion where the values of the middle classes are imposed in the examining procedure. The physical mannerisms and writing style of students become criteria for grading them, rather than purely impartial pedagogical judgements. In his analysis of marking schemes, Bourdieu notes that 'the most favourable epithets appear more and more frequently as the social origins of pupils rise' (Bourdieu 1984: 198). Consequently, the academy remains closed to the children of the working classes, while it is conveniently monopolized by the professional classes with the requisite cultural capital.

There are some problems with Bourdieu's argument insofar as he overemphasizes the closure of the academy to non-professional social groups. He allows for no flexibility in the process, just as his formal definition of the habitus similarly tends to rule out negotiation and transformation. His thesis about the social determination of educational aptitudes and attainments comes close to a form of reductionism. A statistical correlation between family income levels and student educational achievements cannot be taken to imply that students are graded simply on the basis of their social origins. Nevertheless, Bourdieu's concept of the habitus allows him to develop a genuinely critical sociology of education. Education is at least in part a process in which privileged social groups affirm their superiority in the social structure by monopolizing important cultural institutions and resources. Bourdieu here exposes assumptions that can be taken for granted in the examination process. The habitus is not simply a reflection of a prior economic base, but it reveals the shared common culture of particular groups who mobilize themselves and exclude others on the basis of that culture. A dominant group's material position in society is substantially a product of the culture on the basis of which it mobilizes itself to monopolize opportunities.

Both Bourdieu's and Giddens's reflections on structure and agency suffer from various problems to which we must turn in a moment. But before doing so, we move now to a third and last set of contributions to be found in the work of the British *realist theorists Roy

*Bhaskar and Margaret *Archer.

Realist social theory: Roy Bhaskar and Margaret Archer

After his seminal contributions to the philosophy of science in the early 1970s, Roy Bhaskar became a prominent figure in British social theory. In a similar fashion to Giddens and Bourdieu, Bhaskar understands society in terms of the reproduction of structure by individual agency through the mediation of culture. Bhaskar's realism claims that society consists of certain dimensions of reality which cannot be understood by reference to individual activity and belief alone. Social action has emergent properties which exceed consciousness of the individual. Although no institutions would exist without individuals to fulfil the roles that compose them, they have properties which transcend the individuals who create the institutions. For Bhaskar, society consists of irreducibly *real* social structures.

Bhaskar endorses Giddens's structuration theory and explicitly relates it to his own work of Social Action, and regards this as compatible with structuration. The transformational model of social action claims that society consists of structure and agency. Structure precedes individual agency but structure can only be reproduced and transformed through individual agency. Individuals are confronted by a social structure which constrains them but which does not finally determine them. In their actions, individuals can manipulate the structure by reinterpreting their situation and thus developing new forms of agency. In this way, individuals are able to transform the social structure.

In her 'morphogenetic social theory', Margaret Archer advocates a position close to Bhaskar's (Archer 1995). By 'morphogenetic' Archer refers to the process by which patterns or 'shapes' are generated in repeated social action. Like Bhaskar, Archer sees society as consisting of real social structures irreducible to individuals. Archer berates those social theorists who fail to recognize the dual nature of social reality, who either collapse structure into individuals or assimilate individuals to structure. For her, society consists *both* of objective structures *and* of individual agents. Neither of these two dimensions can be derived or reconstructed from each other.

Archer maintains that Giddens collapses the objective institutional fact of society into the individual. Unlike Bhaskar, she sees Giddens's structuration theory as a one-dimensional form of methodological individualism (Archer 1982: 458 ff., 1988: 72). In her book *Culture and Agency* (1988), Archer argues that culture emerges out of individual activity but that once it has been created, especially when it is embodied in physical artefacts, it has an objectivity which transcends the individual. Architecture, artworks, books, and mathematical formulas all attain an existence which is autonomous of everyday social intercourse. According to Archer, the autonomy of culture is decisive in explaining social reproduction and transformation. Individuals in a society are confronted by a cultural system which is independent of them. Often individuals draw automatically on the most obvious elements of this culture to perform regular practices which reproduce the system.

However, Archer also argues that the autonomous status of culture facilitates change. Since the cultural system does not depend merely on what people here and now believe, it can be drawn upon in different ways, or forgotten elements within it can be emphasized. In this way, individuals can develop new forms of practice and thereby transform the patterns of socio-cultural integration in their society. They can change the institutional structures of a society by developing new relations to the cultural system. Particular individuals may note and then eventually act upon potential contradictions between the cultural system and everyday practice. Individuals can draw on autonomous cultural resources to direct their everyday practice, producing either change or stasis. Archer's criticisms of Giddens are not without merit.

their everyday practice, producing either change or stasis. Archer's criticisms of Giddens are not without merit. However, it can be argued that her own 'morphogenetic social theory' in fact resembles Giddens's theory in certain respects and arguably shares some of its problems. Her lexicon differs from Giddens's but her description of the autonomy and function of the cultural system follows structuration theory quite closely. It can be argued that her idea of the 'cultural system' operates in the same way as Giddens's idea of 'structure'. Archer's 'cultural system' consists of diverse formulas, rules, and ideas which are autonomous of individuals but upon which individuals must draw if they are to act in a recognizable fashion. The cultural system mediates between the institutions of the social system and the individual. It channels individual practice so that structural reproduction can occur, but it also allows for the transformation of the social structure through the agency of individuals. Some of the most general problems with this way of theorizing are brought together in the next section. These problems can be described in terms of a basic dilemma of *determinism* and *individualism* in debates about structure and agency.

Some of the most general problems with this way of theorizing are brought together in the next section. These problems can be described in terms of a basic dilemma of *determinism and individualism* in debates about structure and agency.

Problems of determinism and individualism in structure-agency thinking

Writers on structure and agency such as Giddens, Bourdieu, Bhaskar, and Archer tend to face a rather difficult dilemma. This dilemma can be described as having the following two sides. On the one hand, there is a side of **individualism**. Let us look first at the determinist side. Giddens, Bourdieu, Bhaskar, and Archer argue that social life is to be explained by the postulate of rules which direct individual action. Bourdieu claims that the habitus imposes certain tastes on individuals so that they necessarily adopt social practices appropriate for their class position. In Giddens's picture, individuals seem to have a more active say in how they follow the rules of structure. But still, their practices are said necessarily to instantiate structure and thereby to reproduce the wider social system to which these rules are attached. In each of these writers, institutional forms are said to be reproduced in accordance with cultural rules. These rules—be they Bourdieu's 'habitus' or Giddens's 'structure'—are said to direct or to determine individual action. The danger here is that if it is said that individuals are directed by rules which impose on them and of which they are not fully aware, human agency tends to be denied.

It seems that individuals no longer consciously choose what to do but are merely directed by these prior rules. This determinism is clear in Bourdieu's writing. His concept of the habitus has a tendency to emasculate human agency, to reduce dynamic and uncertain social interaction to the inevitable reproduction of institutional structures. The habitus imposes certain forms of conduct on the individual. Individual agents reproduce the institutional structure of the field because they are determined by these unavoidable cultural predispositions.

The problem is similar for Giddens. Because of Giddens's emphasis on the creativity of the individual, the determinist implications of his structuration theory are less immediately apparent. But in fact, Giddens is not free from this problem either. Giddens emphasizes that structure is inexorably attached to the social system and therefore that for the most part individuals automatically reproduce the system. The implication of Giddens's theory is that structure ensures that individuals always act in a way which is compatible with that system. Although he does not explain this relationship, individuals necessarily act in a way which is consistent with social order.

Now let us look at the individualist side of the dilemma. Giddens and Bourdieu are right to want to reject determinism. Giddens is at pains to emphasize that his theory allows for the fact that individuals can always choose alternative courses of action and that whatever structural imperatives obtain, 'the individual could have acted otherwise' (Giddens 1984: 75). Similarly, Bourdieu asserts that his theory allows for the persistence of individual agency in the face of the objectivity of the habitus. Bourdieu has been incredulous at those critics of his work who have interpreted the habitus in a deterministic fashion (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 134). Bourdieu sees the habitus as allowing room for slip-page: individuals, he claims, are not completely determined by the habitus but can manipulate the cultural resources available to them to develop new social practices. He insists that individuals still have agency under the habitus.

Here the danger for Bourdieu and Giddens, however, is that if individuals are free at any moment to do otherwise, it is possible that structure or habitus *do not really constrain what they do*. It is possible that if individuals possess this freedom, structure or habitus are not really guaranteeing that individuals act in appropriate ways—because at any time, individuals could adopt new forms of action at random. And if individuals can do otherwise *some* of the time, they *could* do otherwise *all* of the time—so that neither structure nor habitus prevent them from acting randomly. Therefore the danger in Giddens's and Bourdieu's theory is that individuals only *choose* to follow structure or habitus. And if they only choose to follow structure or habitus, they could at any moment choose *not* to follow them. Regular social interaction here seems to be explained finally only by individual choice. The dilemma is thus this. *Either* structure-agency thinking tends to emasculate individual agency, claiming that individuals are determined externally by structures or habitus. Or structure-agency thinking tends to overassert the agency of individuals, leaving the persistence and resilience of regular social institutions impossible to explain and endowing individuals always with the possibility of acting otherwise. In this sense, structure-agency thinking tends toward a danger of determinism on the one hand and a danger of randomness of choices on the other hand. (For further discussions of this dilemma, see Sewell 1992, Schatzki 1987, 1997; Taylor 1993; King 2000a, 2000b, 2004).

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Resolving the dilemma

The dilemma presented here is a deliberately heightened formulation of some rather abstract theoretical difficulties that have repeatedly troubled contributors to social theory. It should be emphasized that these theoretical difficulties do not mean that the concepts of structure and agency are useless for pragmatic purposes. In any sociological study, the structure is plainly retrievable for examination have to be situated in a wider social and historic context. This background can usefully be called 'structure', with the proviso that 'structure' amounts to dynamic relations between actors in different times and places. Structure should not be seen as referring to any **metaphysical* entity which exists above and beyond all individuals and their relations. At their most sustainable, realist theorists such as Archer or Bhaskar use structure in a purely **heuristic* (non-metaphysical) way.

Social theory can avoid many difficulties with the concepts of structure and agency when it makes an effort to regard social life less in terms of individual agency 'reproducing' structure in any mechanical sense and more in terms of ongoing dynamic interrelations between actors. Human beings do not 'reproduce' structure 'by means of' culture. Rather, these interminable interactions, the social relations which compose a society are sustained and transformed. Thus a society should not be seen as consisting **ontologically* or metaphysically of two basic substances, one substance called 'structure' and one substance called 'agency'. Rather, it should be seen as consisting of social relations between individual actors, all of whom act under various constraints which we call 'institutions', 'forces', 'trends', 'power' or 'powers', and so on. In these webs of social relations, both the regularity and the creativity of individual action become more explicit. Together, individuals orient themselves towards shared goals, and together they are able to develop new forms of practice. The social reality of relations between human persons should not be reduced to a static and **dualistic* image of individuals confronting objective structures. Individual actors do not 'consult' cultural rules in their relationship to structures. Rather, they come to mutual understandings of what constitutes appropriate action, and are able to bind each other to these appropriate forms of conduct.

Conclusion

Structure and agency have been key concepts in social theory. In general, it is commonplace to argue that social structure is reproduced by means of the agency of individuals, through the mediation of cultural rules and resources. There are certain problematic tendencies in this way of thinking which may lead to an impasse between overly objectivist or *determinist* accounts and overly subjectivist or *individualist* accounts of the dynamics of social life. Structure-agency thinking either runs a risk of emasculating individual agency in order to explain structural reproduction, or it runs a risk of overemphasizing individual freedom and thereby leaving structural reproduction mysterious.

Nevertheless, the concepts of structure and agency continue to hold pragmatic value for empirical social research. The theoretical analyses of Giddens, Bhaskar, Archer, and especially Bourdieu have been fertile for sociologists, and the value of their work particularly comes into view when structure and agency are not thought of as rigid or static ontological poles but rather in terms of dynamic contexts of social relations between interacting individuals and groups. Human groups are not determined by rules which impose upon them, nor do they follow rules in private isolation. Individuals are able to act relatively predictably and to create social order because they routinely accept certain common understandings of what is appropriate, and these understandings become binding and constraining. It is the task of sociologists to analyse the historical significance of social processes that emerge from these dynamic relations.

■ QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 10

- 1 How useful are the concepts of structure and agency for social analysis?
- 2 How similar and how different are the social theories of Giddens and Bourdieu?
- 3 What is meant by an objectivist standpoint on social life? What is meant by a subjectivist standpoint? How are the problems of the two standpoints to be avoided?
- 4 How illuminating is Bourdieu's assertion that cultural tastes and educational achievements are functions of 'cultural capital'?
- 5 What differences are to be noted between the concept of class and the concept of habitus?
- 6 In what sense is socio-economic inequality a cultural phenomenon?

■ FURTHER READING

For useful introductions to the work of Giddens, see Lars Bo Kasperen's *Anthony Giddens: An Introduction to a Social Theorist* (Blackwell, 2000), Kenneth Tucker's *Anthony Giddens and Modern Social Theory* (Sage, 1998), Ira J. Cohen's *Structuration Theory* (Macmillan, 1989), and Ian Craib's *Anthony Giddens* (Routledge, 1992). For a good overall account of Giddens's theory of structuration, see John Parker's *Structuration* (Open University Press, 2000). The best collection of secondary work on structuration theory is David Held and John B. Thompson's edited *Social Theory of Modern Societies: Anthony Giddens and his Critics* (Cambridge University Press, 1989). See also Christopher Bryant and David Jary's edited *Anthony Giddens' Theory of Structuration* (Routledge, 1991) and J. Clark, C. Modgil, and S. Modgil's edited *Anthony Giddens: Consensus and Controversy* (Falmer Press, 1990). For a wide-ranging collection of essays, see Christopher Bryant and David Jary's edited four volumes *Anthony Giddens: Critical Assessments* (Routledge, 1996). The key texts for Giddens's theory of structuration are *The Constitution of Society* (Polity Press, 1984), *New Rules of Sociological Method* (Hutchinson, 1976), and *Central Problems in Social Theory* (Macmillan, 1979). For an incisive critique of Giddens, see Alex Callinicos's two articles 'Anthony Giddens: A Contemporary Critique', *Theory and Society*, 14 5 (1985), 133–66, and 'Social Theory Put to the Test of Practice: Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens', *New Left Review*, 236 (1999), 77–102.

Some good studies and guides to Bourdieu are Derek Robbins's two books *The Work of Pierre Bourdieu* (Open University Press, 1991) and *Bourdieu and Culture* (Sage, 2000), David Swartz's *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago University Press, 1997), Richard Jenkins's *Bourdieu and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Routledge, 1993), Bridget Fowler's *Pierre Bourdieu and Cultural Theory* (Sage, 1997), and Jen Webb, Tony Schirato, and Geoff Danaher's *Understanding Bourdieu* (Sage, 2002). An excellent advanced collection of essays on Bourdieu is C. Calhoun, E. LiPuma, and M. Postone's edited *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives* (Polity Press, 1993). In this collection, see especially the contribution by Charles Taylor, titled 'To Follow a Rule'. See also the discussion in Craig Calhoun's *Critical Social Theory* (Blackwell, 1995), as well as Richard Shusterman's edited *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader* (Blackwell, 1999) and Derek Robbins's edited four volumes *Pierre Bourdieu* (Sage, 2000). A useful selection from Bourdieu's works is John B. Thompson's edited *Language and Symbolic Power: Pierre Bourdieu* (Polity Press, 1991). A good place to begin reading Bourdieu is his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Routledge, 1984), as well as his co-written book with Loïc Wacquant *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Polity Press, 1992). For further developments in French and American sociology influenced by Bourdieu, see Michèle Lamont and Laurent Thévenot's edited *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

For a guide to British realist theory, see Andrew Collier's *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy* (Verso, 1994). Margaret Archer's key works are *Culture and Agency* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) and *Realist Social Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2000) and Charles López and John Scott's useful guide *Social Structure* (Open University Press, 1999). For a comparative critical study of Giddens, Bourdieu, Archer, and realist theory, see Anthony King's *The Structure of Contemporary Social Theory* (Routledge, 2004).

WEBSITES

Homepage of Anthony Giddens at www.lse.ac.uk/Giddens/ Includes a bibliography of key works and links to various lectures by Giddens.

Structuration Theory at www.class.ufl.edu/users/gthursby/mod/giddens.htm Contains an excerpt from a key text by Giddens dealing with structuration.

Roy Bhaskar at www.raggedclaws.com/criticalrealism/archive/rts/rts.html Provides an on-line transcription of a text of Bhaskar on realist theory of science.

Pierre Bourdieu at www.utu.fi/enil/RUSE/bink.html Contains links to sites on Bourdieu, with bibliographies, review articles, and excerpts from key works.

Bourdieu in Perspective at www.isj1text.bie.org.uk/pubs/isj87/wolffreys.htm Presents a lengthy article on Bourdieu's contributions to sociology and French intellectual life generally.