Rational and moral action: a critical survey of rational choice theory

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CHAPTER XII

STRUCTURATION THEORY

1. Introduction

To explain Giddens’ background I shall describe two main approaches in sociological theory, the system approach and the social action approach. Giddens conception of social structure is an attempt to unite these approaches by replacing all kinds of dualisms (as between voluntarism and determinism or between individual and society) by dualities. After describing this background in sociological theory, I provide an overview of his structuration theory in section 3. In the following section I explain the ‘duality of structure’. In section 5, I summarize the criticism of structuration theory. Section 6 draws attention to empirical research and section 7 concludes this chapter with an appraisal of Giddens’s structuration theory.
2. Two sociologies

Within the science of sociology two perspectives stand out: the perspective of ‘man in Society’ and the perspective of ‘Man in society’. The first is the social system approach that emphasizes the social factors that condition individuals. The second is the social action approach that emphasizes the active role of man in constructing his environment. It is a remarkable thing that two of the founding fathers of (macro) sociology who both departed from the action perspective, ultimately ended up at the system perspective. The social action perspective was by that left to the micro-oriented approaches within sociology. (Dawe, 1971; 1978)

Weber and Parsons both departed from the social action perspective to end up by the system perspective, but they got there by quite different routes. Weber’s intellectual work was directed at the modernization of western society. He believed that the dominance of instrumentally rational thought would further the emergence of large-scale bureaucracies in all spheres of human existence. The acting agent therefore looses control over the environment and is constrained by all kinds of bureaucratic institutions and organizations that are part of a society characterized by control, conflict and classes.

The well-known American sociologist Parsons originally developed a theory of voluntary action. The human agent was in his opinion an active, creative being that acted to shape his environment in accordance with his goals, plans and ideals. But Parsons also came to undertake another task. He wanted to solve the “utilitarian dilemma”, the dilemma to combine the activities of selfish agents with social order. Utilitarianism reproduced, in his view, the Hobbesian problem by its instrumental view of the human subject. A society in which human action is seen as merely instrumentally rational (solely characterized by means-ends calculations) will end in chaos. In the absence of external constraints the pursuit of self-interest must inevitably end in a war of all against all. That is why society must define social relations and the social actions by means of a central value
system, as the ultimate source of moral authority. Central values define functional specific norms, and they structure the roles and institutions that are necessary for the reproduction of society.

The priority of a central value system means that the agent is confronted with a pre-given world of meaning. By means of socialization the central values, and the norms and ends that are derived from them, become internalized. The intentions of agents are derived from the central value system and do not need to be explained. The only thing that needs explanation is the process of internalization. But this is easy to explain, because people seek approval and avoid disapproval in accordance with standards derived from the central value system. Actors just become role-playing creatures, eagerly or anxiously responding to the expectations of other role players in the multiple group settings in which they find themselves. (see Wrong, 1961)

Along these lines Parsons developed a model of functional social integration, which is characterized by consensus, status and socialization. Parsons is the founding father of structural functionalism. An essential characteristic is that the existence of social phenomena is explained by their functional contribution to the system to which they belong. All functional needs are to be explained from the instinct for survival. Social phenomena that contribute to the chances of survival are reinforced, and dysfunctional phenomena are eliminated. The system perspective has dominated (macro) sociology for a long time.

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205 Parsons developed the view that social norms are constitutive rather than merely regulative of human nature before he was influenced by psychoanalytic theory. Freud’s theory of the superego became the source and model for the conceptualization of the internalization of social norms in structural functionalism. (Wrong, 1961, 186)

206 When a norm is said to be “internalized”, what is frequently meant is that a person habitually affirms it and conforms to it in his conduct. The presence of inner conflict drops out of the picture.
The action perspective is reencountered in ‘actor centered’ approaches such as phenomenology, ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism. These currents revive Weber’s ‘Verstehende’ or interpretative approach of social action. A common point of departure is that human agents are constantly trying to mold and construe their social world in interaction with others and that a special method has to be applied to study and understand these processes. The constructions of social scientists are, in terms of Schutz (1971), ‘constructions of a second order’, i.e., constructions of the constructions of the social actors. Two issues are paramount: insight into the (intersubjective) construction (knowledge) of daily life and/or insight into the motives and the ends of the acting actor and the connection which actors make between means and ends. The scientist is only able to explain the actions of people when he knows their motives, ends, choices and plans in connection with biographically induced circumstances. To prevent researchers projecting their own subjective ambitions onto the acting agent, it is necessary that “The scientific constructs formed at the second level, (.) are objective ideal typical constructs.” (Schutz, 1971, 498) In contrast to functionalism in which it is taken for granted that ends and motives are more or less individually invariant because people are bearers of roles which are functional within the given social system, these micro-sociological schools assume that social roles are not ready made but are continuously created and negotiated. Society is not a structure but a process. Some theorists conclude from this that reality is a social construction. The social construction approach requires that social reality must -in contrast to Schutz’ recommendation- be pictured as reality as people experience it, as a subjective and expressive entity.

Human beings are knowledgeable actors, with a profound practical knowledge of daily life. This knowledge is based on socialization processes and on learning by doing. The transfer of knowledge presupposes a certain kind of stability in daily activities, i.e., a certain routine. Each activity is tied to routine. Each activity that is repeated often enough will be cast in
patterns. Habituation precedes institutionalization. Habituation leads to role-formation; institutionalization emerges when agents mutually regulate their patterns of roles. Institutions are externalizations of human routines.

The advantage of an institutionalization of activities is that one does not need to define situations once again and that the behavior of other agents becomes predictable. For new generations these institutions appear as given, as objective realities. These institutions must be explained and justified, but above all what must be transferred to them is practical knowledge, knowledge about the way they operate, which behavioral rules are expected, which sanctions are applied. In this process of socialization knowledge about social reality is internalized. Thus, we can perceive of society as a continuous process of externalization, objectification and internalization. “Knowledge about society is thus a realization in the double sense of the word, in the sense of apprehending the objectivated social reality, and in the sense of ongoing producing this reality.” (Berger and Luckman, 1981, 84)

These micro-sociological approaches pay much attention to analyses of micro-situations (face to face contacts) and to the role of symbolic systems (language and rituals). The emphasis is on processes of social integration. As a consequence conflicts of power only manifest themselves at the symbolic and cultural level. Moreover, there is some functionalistic flavor. Deviance is often denoted as having the (latent) function to reconfirm central values.

3. Giddens’ structuration theory

Giddens’ structuration theory is characterized by the rejection of three dualisms, those between: 1e determinism and voluntarism, 2e subject and object, and 3e synchrony and diachrony. Structuration theory is concerned with dualities instead of dualisms. The notion of duality of structure must convey the message that structure must not be conceptualized as simply placing constraints upon human agency, but as enabling it at the same time. (Archer, 1982, 456/7)
The dualism between determinism and voluntarism refers to two viewpoints regarding social structures: as causes of actions (determinism) and as embodiments of actions (voluntarism). The statement that structures are the medium as well as the outcome of reproductive activities is Giddens' way of declaring how this dualism can be bridged. What he wants to show is that the active creation of social circumstances is inevitably conditioned by the necessity to use structural factors in the process. Giddens advances the proposition that when actors produce social practices they necessarily draw upon basic structural properties, these essential factors being viewed as a matrix of rules and resources.

The contradistinction between object and subject is the well-known problem concerning the relation between social reality as-it-is and our consciousness about it. The mediating concept is “practice”. Practice as the transformation of nature and the reproduction of material life, i.e., practice as intentional activity. In his rejection of the dualism of object and subject, Giddens main aim is to bring together the development of the individual as a social being and the making (the reproduction and transformation) of societies within one single theoretical framework.

The concept of structuration also breaks with the static/dynamic dichotomy. This dichotomy is often associated with the short or long period respectively and with the irreversible respectively the variable. Giddens, on the contrary, wants to emphasize the occurrence of change in the short period. Structuration theory denies the existence of stability and durability. "Structuration itself is always a process and never a product." (Archer, 1982, 457)

Structuration theory goes against two central ideas of the orthodox consensus: the postulate of naturalism and the thesis of functionalism.207 In the past it was argued in defense of naturalism that when it was appropriate to apply concepts

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207 This is not the kind of naturalism that is defended by Bhaskar, but the naturalism that fuelled structural functionalism.
of the natural sciences in the social sciences, then one could best consult biology. The concept of function was borrowed from biology. By analogy first with biology and later on with cybernetics, functionalism assumes that social systems tend to equilibrium, i.e., a certain degree of structural stability.

The central problem in a functionalistic analysis is the problem of social order, the tension between individual and collectivity. Functionalism tried to solve this problem by assuming that the values that shape the "consensus universel" are internalized in the socialization process and become motivating norms for action. Order is equated with moral consensus and the problem of order with the lack of social control. (about functionalism, see Giddens 1976)

The interpretative schools of thought were for a long time the main rivals of functionalism. In these approaches the social actor is a kind of social scientist who routinely interprets his own and other peoples' behavior. The social sciences cope with a pre-interpreted world, a reality in which meaning is created and reproduced. Action is a kind of meaning giving. The study of social behavior implies the use of concepts that allow the researcher to attribute meaning to the observed activities. Winch thought that what creates meaning is rule-led behavior. He showed how Wittgenstein’s analysis of the use of language as rule-led behavior could be applied to all kinds of human interactions. Thus, it is not implied that agents deliberately follow rules, but that they know the distinction between the right and the wrong way of doing things.

It has been suggested that the functional and the interpretative approaches could supplement each other, and that, in fact, there was a kind of division of labor between macro-social structural approaches and micro interpretative ones. But Giddens' ambition is to show that this idea is obsolete. Functionalism portrays agents as passive receptors of values and is unable to show how social life evolves and is transformed. Interpretative approaches do not pay sufficient attention to the intended and unintended consequences of actions. They restrict the attention to symbolic aspects of
actions. Giddens’ alternative is that society continues to exist through the production of social practices under conditions that often are unknown or scarcely known to human agents. Research into the structuration of social practices must: "...seek to explain how it comes about that structure is constituted through action, and reciprocally how action is constituted structurally." (Giddens, 1993 (1976), 169).

The point of departure of structuration theory is the human capacity to intervene in the course of events. The making of history is the subject of analysis, not those who make it. The making has ontological priority, and the analysis is focused on the mechanisms of social reproduction. This focus is accompanied by a decentring of the acting subject. In contrast to the system approach in which human action is constrained by forces which human beings neither completely control nor fathom, structuration theory emphasizes the active and reflexive character of human nature. Human agents have the capacity of learning by doing. Human beings are knowledgeable creatures. Their competence is part of their practical consciousness. Of course the competence of human actors is always restricted. Sometimes unconscious motives play a role, and the unintended consequences of action are simultaneously the unknown conditions of action. But these consequences and conditions should always be understood as products of intentional action.

Human activities are recursive, i.e., agents reproduce by their activities the conditions that made their activities possible. It is in particular the possibility of reflection that is involved in the recursive ordering of social practices, though routine is a basic element of daily practices. The recursive nature of social life is made possible by continuous repeated daily activities. The main concepts of structuration theory are the concepts of structure, system and duality of structure. Structure is often employed in an ‘explanatory way’, i.e., underlying or ‘deep’ structures are held to explain surface phenomena. In biology ‘structure’ refers to anatomical patterns, ‘functions’ to how those patterns operate and ‘system’ refers to the former two taken conjointly. Now, the
use of structure as anatomy can be defended in biology where organs are visible independently of their functioning. But this does not in fact apply at all to social life, where patterns exist only insofar as they are constantly produced and reproduced in human action.

In structuration theory, the concept of structure is used at different levels. Giddens makes a distinction between societal totalities, systems and (networks of) actors or collectivities. Societal totalities are characterized by structural principles as comprehensive principles of organizations (Giddens refers to such mechanisms as the market mechanism, the budget mechanism or the plan mechanism). These comprehensive structural principles determine the general institutional connectedness of societies.

Social systems comprise concrete patterns of interaction, i.e., connected and institutionalized social practices. Social systems are not structures, but they have structural features. Social structures are qualities of social systems. Social structures refer to rules and resources that are involved in the reproduction and transformation of social systems. In order to be able to reproduce social practices the actors involved need to have knowledge about rules and to have access to resources. Giddens distinguishes two aspects of rules: the semantic or expressive aspects and the regulative aspects. The first aspects refer to the execution of intentions in the form of practices and the interpretation of these practices; the second refer to the proper way to execute practices (by means of knowledge of expectations, duties and rights). Actors do not need to have knowledge of the formal definitions of rules to know how to apply them. Just as syntactic rules these structurating elements lead a virtual existence. They exist only at the moment that they are actualized in practices. Resources are divided in allocative and authoritative resources. Structures as coherent configurations of generic rules and resources connect the production of social practices with the reproduction of social systems: this is what the
duality of structures implies.  
Giddens’ interpretation of social systems gives a clear indication that he assumes that they refer to an empirical reality, but that they do not coincide with it. The concept of a social structure is meant as an explanatory construction that should be helpful to fathom the logic behind social reality. Three structural dimensions represent the structural qualities of social systems: dominance (the disposition over resources), signification (generative rules), and legitimation (regulating rules). These structural qualities form the institutionalized features of social systems. Structures of signification are included in institutions of symbolic order; structures of legitimation are to be found in institutions of legislation and law enforcement, while institutions of dominance are included in economic and political institutions. These structural dimensions can be distinguished only analytically. The extent of institutional differentiation and the way in which they are interwoven gives expression to the structural features of social systems. For brevity’s sake I shall define social structures just as rules and resources.

The way in which Giddens uses the terms ‘structure’ and ‘system’ requires the concept of structuration to connect the two. The process of structuration shows how systems, through the application of rules and resources, are produced and reproduced in social interaction.

4. The duality of action and structure

Structuration theory assumes a recursive reality, i.e., a reality that is reproduced by the actions that it makes possible. Social practices that once were original are repeated continuously and in the end become routines. Social structures as sets of rules and resources being the chief properties of social systems are activated when agents draw upon them as stocks of knowledge and means. Agents draw

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208 "The structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize". (Giddens, 1984, 25)
upon social structures to reproduce sets of specific practices that in turn contribute to the total constitution of society. The duality of action and structure has to be related to the concepts of unintended consequences and unacknowledged conditions. Individual agents are not always aware, certainly not discursively or self-consciously so, of the structures they draw upon. Agents draw upon existing structures as typically unacknowledged conditions for action. And social structures are typically unintentionally reproduced through the actions of many interdependent agents. The unintended consequences are often the unacknowledged conditions in the following period.

For interaction to make sense, we must assume 'mutual knowledge'. This mutual knowledge is background knowledge, which means that it is taken for granted. It is 'tacit' knowledge and exists on the level of practical consciousness (Taylor, 1993) It concerns apparently trivial codes that normal people have mastered - without effort it seems - and use in the same way as we can talk without being able to formulate the rules of grammar. Next to the discursive level and the level of practical consciousness, Giddens distinguishes a third level of subjectivity namely the level of unconsciousness. Unconscious motives urge agents to habitual action, for routine is known and reduces uncertainty. The unconscious level is the source of the basic need for security.

To act is a way to realize objectives by employing means. Power refers to the capacity of an actor to mobilize resources that deliver him the adequate means. In the view of Giddens the notion of action is logically related to that of power. In order to relate structure and action (social practices) we need to introduce some mediating concepts. Thrift suggests using

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Giddens makes a distinction between power as a transformative capacity and power as a relational concept (power as dominance). The first refers to the capacity of agents to intervene in the course of events; the second refers to the capacity to secure outcomes whose realization depends on the actions of other agents.
the concepts of system and institution (Thrift, 1983, fig. 1), but I prefer to use the concepts of social practice and social system, because in social practices rules and resources are

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employed (see figure 1). Institutions together with social practices make up social systems and form the main link between the structural reproduction of agency and the agent’s reproduction of structure. It is through institutions (collective routines) that social systems are integrated. The daily activities of agents are very important for the reproduction of institutionalized practices. But this does not imply that the daily activities construct, as it were, the micro-foundations of the macro-aspects of social life. Micro-macro relations can better be approached from the relation between social and system integration. (Giddens, 1984, 139ff) Social integration concerns the integration within systems of interaction, whereas system integration concerns the integration between systems of interaction. Integration should not be thought of as equivalent to ‘cohesion’, but should be used to indicate the degree to which each part of a social system has direct or indirect ties or interchange with every other part. In structural functionalism integration referred to the internalization of basic values, while in

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210 In Bhaskar ‘s theory the mediating concept is a position-practice system.
structuration theory social integration refers to the reciprocal character of practices of direct interacting agents. System integration refers to the degree in which practices of agents are tied up beyond the context of direct interaction.\textsuperscript{211} The fact that societies are clusters of institutions does not guarantee that it is a matter of integrated systems. There can be lots of contradictions and contrasts. Contradictions are defined in terms of the conditions of the reproduction of societies, and emerge when societies are based on multiple principles of organizations (structural principles). It is, for instance, possible that there is a certain tension between the market principle and the budget principle.

Structuration theory shows more affinity with the analysis of Weber than with that of Parsons. Power, social inequality, contradictions and conflicts are important concepts. Power does not denote a kind of behavior but is inherent in all behavior. Resources and rules are the medium through which power can be exercised. Power does not necessarily indicate conflict in terms of conflicts of interests and struggle; and power is not necessarily oppressive. Power does not always hold emancipation back; it is as much a medium to further emancipation. But there is no doubt that many social conflicts can be seen as conflicts of power. These conflicts often have to do with attempts to redistribute resources, which create modalities of control within social systems. All social systems are to a certain degree characterized by an unequal division of resources and thus by social inequality. Sometimes there even is exploitation. But exploitation does not necessarily end in struggle and confrontation.

\textsuperscript{211} Societal totalities (or societies) can be identified by means of the configuration of structural features (the structures of signification, domination and legitimation) or by means of the configuration of institutional orders (the symbolic, political, economic and legal order).
5. Comment on Giddens’ structuration theory

The criticism concentrates on three points:
1. the idea that structures only exist in the activities they generate
2. the idea of the duality of action and structure
3. the definition of structure as rules and resources

The question is posed whether structuration theory still has a place for the kind of structural constraints that follow from the fact that institutions exist before new generations of individuals are born. Giddens believes that this completely accords with structuration theory, since it says that social systems are not created but reproduced. Also the fact that the structural qualities of social systems are given to the agent does not create a problem for structuration theory, as long as it is accepted that they have a virtual existence until they are activated. The emphasis on the constraining effects of social structures creates the impression that social structures are like natural forces, but this is complete nonsense. Structural constraints follow from the contextuality of actions. (Giddens, 1984, 169 ff) Structural constraints define the feasible set of alternatives, and form and channel the system reproduction.

Great objections have been raised to the abandonment of the dualism of action and structure and its replacement by the duality of structure. In the opinion of Mouzelis (1989; 1995) one is justified to assume the duality of structure when the actors only need to have practical knowledge of the rules that are implied by the structure. Only in this case are rules (and resources) continuously reproduced by way of routine. When the orientation is not practical but strategic or theoretic, then rules become the object of interactions instead of mere means for interactions, and the scheme of the duality of structure no longer applies. For, when some rules become the object of interaction, this means that they are negotiated and could, as

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212 An accompanying criticism is the observation that Giddens has not conducted empirical research and merely on the basis of an argument disregards dualism.
a consequence, be transformed or even abandoned. Giddens' response is that in structuration theory two types of methodological bracketing are possible. In institutional analysis structural properties are treated as chronologically reproduced features of social systems. In the analysis of strategic conduct the focus is placed upon modes in which actors draw upon structural properties in the constitution of social relations. (Giddens, 1989, 288) The definition of structures as rules and resources is also criticized (see Callinicos, 1985; Urry, 1982; Thompson, 1989; Porpora, 1989). Callinicos, for instance, blames Giddens for generalizing a linguistic theory to the social domain. But Giddens pointed out that language is recursively implied in common practices and that the phenomenon of recursiveness and its theoretical consequences interests him and not language as such. (Giddens, 1985) Thompson believes that Giddens only creates confusion by defining structures as rules and resources. The approach of Giddens leads to equating social structures with institutions, whereas Thompson wants to maintain a distinction between them. Institutions are characterized by rules and one can imagine how, in social interactions, institutions are reproduced and transformed. But it requires a lot of imagination to believe that the same holds for structures, as for instance a mode of production. In reply, Giddens explains that in Thompson's view social structures are constructed around particular historical forms of organization of production, whereas social structures in structuration theory are the structural features of social systems. Thompson refers to the structural principles of societal totalities, whereas Giddens discusses structural properties of social systems. Giddens adds that he wants to avoid the term social structure as much as possible, because it seems to be something that is external to human action. But "...structure is what gives form and shape to social life, but is not itself that form and shape - nor should 'give' be understood in an active sense here, because structure exists in and through the activities of human agents.” (Giddens, 1989, 256) The reality of social structure is virtual not actual, for
only social practices are real as structuring forces.

Whereas Giddens explains that much of the criticism directed at his concept of social structure misses the point because his critics confuse his concept of social structure with his concept of social system, Mouzelis calls on him to explain the connection between structure on the one hand and system with structural features on the other hand much better than he has done so far.

Porpora’s criticism of Giddens’ conception of structure is essentially that what it identifies is cultural structuring rather than social structuring. It refers to the structuring of our behavior by culture as opposed to social relations. (Porpora, 1989, 209) Giddens’ rules are regulative rules, not the constitutive rules of society. And since social phenomena retain their identity under regulative rule violation, Giddens’s structuration theory only explains the reproduction of existing structures, not their transformation, and therefore, it cannot explain social change. Again, the accusation of Porpora is based on the confusion regarding Giddens’ concepts of social structure and social system.

This kind of criticism is also connected with Giddens’ emphasis on the importance of routine. Routine is in Giddens’ oeuvre a master key. It provides the ground for practical consciousness to develop. And it is the basis of the institutionalized features of social systems. Some critics think that the net result of Giddens’s stress on routine is that structuration theory comes close to a reproduction theory, one in which routine freezes social relations. (Thrift, 1985, 620) Archer complains that the combined accentuation of actors’ knowledgeability and the under-emphasis of how institutions work ‘behind our back’ produce a complementary neglect of institutional characteristics in their own right. "The voluntaristic bias means that institutions are what people produce, not what they confront.(..) For Giddens, institutional recursiveness never reflects the durability of constraint: it always represents the continuity of reproduction". (Archer, 1982, 463)
6. Structuration theory and empirical research

Giddens did not undertake any empirical research himself. The reason that he offers is that structuration theory offers an ontological framework, and is not meant to be a testable theory. Its concepts should be viewed as ‘sensitizing devices’. Structuration theory does not suggest ready-made concepts which can be transferred into an empirical setting and which can be modified in the course of such work. Instead it sensitizes empirical work to ontological concerns, by developing ontological arguments through illustration. 

In chapter VI of “The Constitution of Society” Giddens does refer to empirical research undertaken by other researchers, research which illustrates structuration theory. He refers for instance to the well-known study of Paul Willis, “Learning to Labour” (Willis, 1977). But Willis’ research project was not based on structuration theory, and also the other research projects were not informed by structuration theory. This suggests that the concepts applied in structuration theory are so general that they are compatible with several social theories.

In research that was undertaken in the spirit of structuration theory, it appeared to require a considerable degree of ingenuity and originality to transform the ontological arguments into empirical concepts and relations. Layder (et.al.) performed a research project on the transition from school to work in which they tried to test structuration theory and more in particular the thesis of the duality of structure by distinguishing structural variables (such as the situation in the labor market, region, class, sex) and individual variables (education, search activity and the like). The results of their

213 “The concepts of structuration theory, as with any competing theoretical perspective, should for many research purposes be regarded as sensitizing devices, nothing more. That is to say, they should be useful for thinking about research problems and the interpretation of research results.” (Giddens, 1984, 326/7).
research confirmed that agency and structure are mutually implicated. But Layder (c.s) also emphasize that though structures are instantiated in activity, they also form part of the institutional fabric that provides the ever-present backdrop to social activities. In the construction of their variables they distinguished between the ‘interactional’ aspects of rules and resources and the ‘distributional’ effects. In so doing they restored to the notion of rules and resources some sense of their implication in the pre-established, reproduced social relations that confront human agents in their everyday activities. They treated structural factors as separable from and thus as external to those activities of individuals that continuously intermesh with and reproduce them over time. In this way they wanted to avoid the conflation of structure with situated activity, which has the effect of dissolving the external and objectively constituted elements of social structure into the continuous flow of situated activity. (Layder et. al., 1991, 449) The consequence is that, after all, in this research it is not the duality of structure that is demonstrated but the interaction of structure and agency. This does not need to be seen as a falsification of the thesis of the duality of structure, but it indicates how difficult it is in an empirical project to take structural variables as internal to the agents’ activities. In Willis’ ethnographic study, on the other hand, based on participatory observation of the counter-school culture it was not difficult to demonstrate how ‘social forces’ operate through agency. 214

7. Conclusions

There are many correspondences between Bhaskar’s and Giddens’ approaches to the relation between action and social structure. Both stress the dual feature of social structure as

214 Though empirical research does not straightforwardly support structuration theory, I do not know of any empirical research undertaken to test transcendental realism.
both condition and consequence of action. But in contrast to the similarity of these concepts, Bhaskar (and his followers) seem also to be willing to give room to a kind of dualism of human action and social structure. There seems to be both an internal and an external relation between agency and structure. I shall return to this subject below. First I summarize Giddens’ main ideas.

What divides Bhaskar’s transcendental realism most from Giddens’ approach is his naturalism. Whereas Bhaskar pointed to the similarities between the natural and the social reality, Giddens begins from the opposing point of view, the enormous difference between the social and the natural world. In the natural sciences objects of knowledge function independently from the process of knowledge production. This is not the case in the social sciences. Social sciences cope with a pre-interpreted world. Therefore, they are confronted with the problem of a dual interpretation. The relation between the layperson interpretation and the scientific interpretation is the central methodological issue in the social sciences. It follows that folk psychology plays an important role in this approach.²¹⁵

Contrary to mainstream rational choice theory Giddens does not use a concept of action that coincides with isolated purposive action. Giddens begins with socially regulated action (praxis). He believes that this concept better than the (pure) concept of action represents the regulated and by that the context-framed character of human’s doings and goings. Moreover, it concerns actions that are oriented towards other agents. In Giddens’ view structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices, and “exists” in the generating moment of this constitution. Social structures are incarnated in the practices of persons because structures only exist in and through the activities of human agents. “(...) structure has no descriptive qualities of its own as a feature of social life, because it exists only in a virtual

²¹⁵ Bhaskar also refers to ‘the hermeneutic moment’, see note 193 in chapter XI
way, as memory traces and as the ‘instantiation’ of rules in situated activities of agents” (Giddens, 1989, 256) In Giddens’s view the concept of ‘agency’ should be regarded as more fundamental than that of the ‘individual’. The making is more important than the maker.

Structuration theory should be seen as a formal social theory, i.e., as a logical conceptual model of human action. It is not a formal theory in the sense of a hypothetical-deductive set of regularities. It has the status of an ontological or heuristic model. We should rather qualify it as a heuristic frame of concepts than as an explanatory theory. Just like transcendental realism we should approach structuration theory as a variant of individual institutionalism. The degree of routine behavior shows how the institutionalization of social life coordinates actions in a meaningful way.

Though Giddens does not refer to a layered social world, he does distinguish society as a social entity from the people who constitute that society and since he rejects reductionism we may assume that he refers to two distinct entities. Probably he would agree that the notion of supervenience is the appropriate term to describe the relationship between them. Archer, and critical realists, however, refer to ‘emergent powers’ or ‘properties’, that arise in a higher level (social structures, for instance), and whose presence cannot be fully explained by the activities at the lower level, in this case individuals. Thus, structures and individuals are located on different levels of social reality.

I think it is wise to accentuate the difference between the concepts of supervenience and emergence. Supervenience is a relation of dependence, that which is supervening is dependent on what it supervenes. Moreover, it is to be a non-reductive relation: supervening dependency does not entail the reducibility of the supervenient to its supervenient base. These two ideas, dependency and non-reductiveness, have become closely associated with supervenience. At the core of the idea of emergence is the thought that as systems acquire increasingly higher degrees of organizational complexity they begin to exhibit novel properties that in some sense transcend
the properties of their constituent parts. In this, the concept of emergent properties does not differ from the supervenience concept. There is, however, a stronger variant of emergent properties, in which they are thought to bring into the world new causal powers of their own, and, in particular that they have powers to control and influence the direction of the lower-level powers from which they emerge. (see Kim, 1999, 6)

The supervenience relation is sufficient to demonstrate that the relation of human agency and social structures is one of dependency but not reducibility. The stronger concept of emergent properties directs the attention to the need to penetrate behind the surface appearances of social phenomena to an ‘inner, or ‘deeper’ structure and to causal mechanisms. And it can be used to argue that, contrary to Giddens’ view; social structures and agency are separable. To proceed with this discussion I need to explain the concept of emergence; I will do this in the next chapter and complete the discussion about agency and structure there.

I want to conclude this chapter with a point of critique. What I found lacking in Giddens analysis is an explicit attention to the potential tensions between the comprehensive structural principles that determine the general institutional connectedness of society. These structural principles that define the principles of organization of the social totalities are referred to by Giddens as the market principle and the

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216 The similarity between the concept of supervenience and the weak concept of emergence explains why realists sometimes use the supervenience relation. When Lawson, for instance, argues that although “(...) it is clear that structure and human action presuppose each other it remains the case that they are different things; neither can be completely reduced to, identified with, or explained completely in terms of the other”, then he formulates a supervenience relation. (see Lawson, 1997a, 170) This can be confusing when he uses it to explain the separability of agents and structures, for the supervenience relation can be used to explain how social systems acquire structural properties, and this does not necessarily entail separability.
budget principle. We could also think of the relations between the economic system, the political system and the social system. Though Giddens discusses system integration when he mentions the possibility of frictions in a social system with multiple organizing structures, he is rather silent on the problem under which conditions the complex of social systems that make up society are merely reproduced or radically transformed. This is the basis of the critique of Archer, who thinks that structuration theory is conceptually handicapped to discuss this issue.

\[217\] Giddens does not use evolutionary theory to account for change. His argument is that evolution works blindly, which cannot be reconciled with purposeful intervention in the course of social development. Moreover, the relation of human society to its material environment is ill conceived as one of mere adaptation.