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978-0-521-19445-7 - The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency
Dave Elder-Vass
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1 *Introduction*

This book offers a solution to the problem of structure and agency: a new solution, but one that draws on a number of existing traditions of thought, most significantly philosophical theories of emergence and causality, and the sociological debates around structuration theory. This introductory chapter sets the context by explaining the problem of structure and agency and its significance for sociology, and outlines some of the key points of my argument. It also offers the reader some hints on different ways to read the rest of the book and briefly locates it with respect to critical realism, the main philosophical tradition on which I draw.

The problem of structure and agency

Sociology is founded on the belief that our behaviour is causally influenced and in particular that there are *social* factors that influence our behaviour. Karl Marx, for example, famously wrote 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness' (Marx 1978 [1859]: 4). Émile Durkheim, similarly, argued that 'the individual is dominated by a moral reality greater than himself: namely, collective reality' (Durkheim 1952 [1897]: 38). Conventionally, the social factors that are held to influence our behaviour are known as *social structure*, a concept that even today remains implicit in, and indeed essential to, much of the work done in the social sciences.

Yet there is also widespread disagreement about what social structure really is and how it could affect us. One recent text described the meanings ascribed to *social structure* as 'strikingly nebulous and diverse' (Lopez and Scott 2000: 1). Furthermore, many sociologists mistrust the existing theoretical accounts of its role. Structure, it sometimes seems, is taken for granted, not because the concept is clearly understood and uncontroversial, but because addressing the theoretical issues seems so

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problematic (see Crothers 1996: 21). This has led some to challenge the very concept of social structure, questioning whether social factors can have a causal effect on our behaviour at all.

Such challenges constitute the core problem of structure and agency: is there something *social* that can be causally effective in its own right and not just as a side-effect of the behaviour of individual people? For *methodological individualists*, the answer is 'no'. For them, there is no place in sociology for explanations of social action that ascribe causal power to social structure. If methodological individualists are correct, then the social sciences cannot study what Durkheim called social facts, nor can they invoke structural forces like Marx's social relations of production. Instead, they can only explain social effects on the basis of the actions of the individuals who make up society. Some sociologists, indeed, give up the attempt to offer causal explanations entirely and concentrate instead on investigating the meanings that are implicit in our actions. Others examine how 'rational' individual responses to different types of situation aggregate up to produce social phenomena.

Individualist accounts like these, in denigrating the role of social structure, privilege instead the role of *human agency* in explaining social behaviour – the capabilities that humans have to act in their own right. Yet agency too is a problematic concept. Some, at least, of the problems are reflections of the problem of structure: some more *voluntarist* thinkers see agency as the exercise of human reflexivity, of conscious decision making about our actions, while other, more *determinist* authors see it as flowing unthinkingly from sets of dispositions that are acquired, equally unthinkingly, from our social context. Individualists about structure, it would seem, must be voluntarists about agency, while it is often believed that those who attribute causal significance to social structure must be determinists about agency. Furthermore, just as there is a tension between explaining social phenomena in terms of social forces or individual ones, there is also a similar tension between explaining individual behaviour in terms of individual agency or forces at a still lower level. Some thinkers – *biological reductionists* – have started to argue that human action is really a product of the neural networks in our brains, for example, or of our genetic make-up, thus introducing an entirely different dimension to the explanation of social behaviour that sometimes seeks to render *both* individualist and structural approaches redundant.

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These disagreements over the role of social structure are nothing less than a battle for the heart and soul of sociology; and indeed of the social sciences more generally, since just the same issues arise in *any* discipline that seeks to examine what happens in the social world. The social sciences look completely different through structuralist and individualist spectacles. Are they to be concerned with explaining social phenomena purely in terms of the contributions of individuals, or are there characteristically social forces that affect social phenomena?

Many contemporary authors, however, reject the implication that structure and agency represent a binary choice: that *either* social behaviour is determined by structural forces *or* it is determined by the free choices of human individuals. Indeed, if we look more closely, it is striking that many apparently structuralist thinkers have been unable or unwilling in practice to dispense with agency and apparently individualist thinkers have been unable or unwilling in practice to dispense with structure.

In another famous quote from Marx, for example, he tells us that 'men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past' (Marx 1978 [1852]: 595). Here, the circumstances represent the structural influences on action; yet Marx is at pains to point out that within these constraints, people do indeed make their own history. Indeed, as a communist activist, he was actively involved in inciting them to do so. Though he is often accused of determinism, it seems that for Marx both structure and agency matter. Similarly, although Durkheim may be best known for his advocacy of sociology as a science of social facts, he also insisted on the capacity of the individual to resist collective pressures: 'in so far as we are solidary with the group and share its life, we are exposed to [the influence of collective tendencies]; but so far as we have a distinct personality of our own we rebel against and try to escape them' (Durkheim 1952 [1897]: 318–19). And although Weber is generally known as an individualist, his most famous work theorises the impact of social forces – the protestant ethic and the iron cage of the capitalist market – on social behaviour (Weber 2001 [1930]).

The most characteristic move in recent work on structure and agency has been to recognise that there are good reasons for these apparent ambiguities: they arise because we cannot successfully theorise the

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social world without recognising and reconciling the roles of *both* structure and agency. Broadly speaking, there have been two alternative ways of reconciling the two: *structurationist* and *post-structurationist* theories (Parker 2000). On the structurationist side, we find most prominently Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, who have stressed the importance of both structure and agency, but see structure as something that resides at least in part *within* human individuals – a move that Margaret Archer has criticised as 'central conflation' of structure and agency. On the post-structurationist side, Parker picks out Nicos Mouzelis and Margaret Archer as theorists who also stress the importance of *both* structure and agency, but insist that the two must be understood as analytically distinct: that structure exists *outside* individuals in some sense. The debate between the two schools turns primarily, then, on questions of *social ontology*: the study of what sorts of things exist in the social world and how they relate to each other. I shall be arguing that both structurationists and post-structurationists have something useful to contribute to its resolution, though in ontological terms I shall come down firmly on the side of the post-structurationists.

This book is both a contribution to, and a critique of, this debate. Drawing on the theory of emergence, it argues that instead of ascribing causal significance to an abstract notion of social structure or a monolithic concept of society, we must recognise that it is specific groups of people that have social structural power. As I understand it, the social world is composed of many overlapping and intersecting groups, each of which has the causal power to influence human individuals. But in each case these powers depend on interactions between individual members of the group, and this argument thus depends in turn on the claim that human individuals themselves also possess causal powers – human agency. Social events, then, are produced by the interaction of *both* structural and agential causal power.

Emergence and social structure

The solution that this book offers to the problem of structure and agency is built using the concept of *emergence*. This concept expresses the idea that a thing – sometimes I will say 'an entity' or 'a whole' – can have properties or capabilities that are not possessed by its parts. Such properties are called *emergent properties*. We can illustrate the

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argument using the case of water – which has been used to make this point since the time of John Stuart Mill (Mill 1900: 243). The properties of water are clearly very different from those of its components, oxygen and hydrogen, when these are not combined with each other in the specific form that constitutes water. We can, for example, put out a fire with water, but the outcome would be very different if we tried to do the same with oxygen and hydrogen (Mihata 1997: 31; Sayer 1992: 119). Similarly, water freezes at zero degrees centigrade, but hydrogen and oxygen would both be gases at this temperature. Water, then, has emergent properties.[1]

The value of the concept of emergence lies in its potential to explain how an entity can have a causal impact on the world in its own right: a causal impact that is not just the sum of the impacts its parts would have if they were not organised into this kind of whole. I shall call the capability of having such an impact a *causal power* of the entity concerned. This is a term that has been developed by a number of realist philosophers in recent times, most notably Rom Harré and Roy Bhaskar (Bhaskar 1975; Harré and Madden 1975).

It is important to distinguish this concept of emergence from the more familiar *temporal* definition of emergence. When we talk about the emergence of something in everyday life, we are not usually referring to emergent properties as they have been introduced above. Instead, the temporal sense of emergence refers to the first appearance of a thing, or its development over a period of time. Anything that exists (unless it has always existed) must have emerged at some time in this temporal sense; but this does not necessarily mean that it possesses emergent properties. Usually in this book, the word *emergence* does not refer to temporal emergence; instead it refers to what we might call *synchronic* emergence, which is a relationship between the properties of a whole and its parts at a particular moment in time.

As we shall see in chapter 2, not all emergence theorists use the concept in the same way, even when they are all talking about synchronic emergence. This book develops a *relational* version of the theory of synchronic emergence. Its value is that it shows how it is possible to reconcile two claims that some thinkers have thought to be in tension: the claim that a whole possesses a causal power in its

[1] Advocates of the 'strong' version of the concept of emergence would disagree. See chapter 2.

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own right and the claim that we can explain how this causal power works. *Reductionist* thinkers have argued that if we can explain how a causal power works in terms of lower-level forces, the original power itself becomes redundant to any explanation of its effects. By contrast, I argue in chapter 3 that when we explain a causal power, we do not explain it *away*. Emergent powers only exist when the parts concerned are organised into the type of whole that has these powers and hence they are powers of the whole and not of the parts. One implication of this argument is that explaining the *mechanism* behind a causal power does not explain away the power. On the contrary, it may help to justify our belief that it is causally significant.

Chapter 4 offers a method for applying this framework to the social world, preparing the way for the main argument of the book: that there are social entities with emergent causal powers that have the effects commonly attributed to *social structure*. I shall argue that these social entities are causally effective in their own right, with causal powers that are distinct from those of human individuals. But I shall also examine the mechanisms that underpin these causal powers, thus recognising the contributory role that human individuals make to the functioning of social structures. In a parallel argument, chapter 5 develops a theory of human action or agency that shows how human individuals themselves can be causally effective in their own right, with powers that are distinct from those of both their biological parts and their social context. But this also entails recognising the roles of our biological parts in the *mechanisms* that underpin human powers.

While it is relatively easy to accept the argument that human beings are entities with causal powers in their own right – powers that are not possessed by their parts – the claim that there are analogous social powers is more contentious. One reason for this is that discussions of social structure are rarely conducted in terms of entities with powers and hence it is rarely asked what the entity might be that has any particular structural power. The background assumption of many of those who write about structure is that if there is an entity that corresponds in some way to social structural power, then it is *society* as a whole. But the concept of a society has always been rather vague and the implicit assumption that the boundaries of societies map onto those of nation-states makes the concept even less plausible in today's globalising world.

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This book argues that there *are* social entities that possess causal powers, but that these entities are *not* whole societies. Instead, there are many different social entities, and indeed a number of different kinds of social entities, that possess social powers. What they have in common is that they are groups of people: people are their parts.[2] This book illustrates the argument by focusing on two kinds of entities with social powers: organisations and *normative circles*. Perhaps the argument is easiest to accept for organisations, as most of us (perhaps even methodological individualists, in their less theoretical moments) are accustomed to thinking of, for example, 'the government' or 'the bank' as social actors in their own right with impacts on the world that are not purely attributable to the personal agency of their employees. I formalise this claim in chapter 7, by showing why it is valid to treat the causal powers of organisations as emergent and how this can be made consistent with explaining the mechanisms by which those causal powers arise from the interactions between their members.

The case of normative circles may be less familiar, but in some ways it is simpler and so it is covered first (in chapter 6). Here the challenge is to explain the power of social norms or rules. In the social structure literature, this power is commonly seen as the product of *social institutions*, but it is rarely clear what a social institution actually is, unless it is the norm itself, or the behaviour produced by it. This book argues that the social power that tends to encourage us to conform to any given social norm is in fact an emergent causal power of a specific social entity, a specific group of people: a normative circle. In order to sustain this claim, I shall be examining the mechanisms by which the members of such groups produce the social power of the group as a whole to affect the beliefs and dispositions – and thus the behaviour – of their members.

If we wish to explain social events, however, it is not enough to isolate particular causal powers, whether human or social. In the realist understanding of cause (elaborated in chapter 3, and based on the work of Roy Bhaskar), actual events are the outcome of interactions

[2] More philosophically oriented varieties of this argument have been developed recently by David Weissman and Paul Sheehy (Sheehy 2006; Weissman 2000). I shall suggest that non-human objects may also be parts of some kinds of social structures.

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between a variety of causal powers. When a leaf falls from a tree, for example, its path will be influenced by the power of gravity, the power of the wind and perhaps by the power of some animal that interferes with its progress towards the ground. This is what Bhaskar calls multiple determination. Chapter 8 argues that social events are also multiply determined and that in order to offer plausible explanations of them, we need to identify the multiple causal powers that are interacting to produce them, and indeed how those powers interact – how they interfere with each other or reinforce each other, for example. Equally challenging, we must get to grips with the question of how to distinguish different powers empirically, which I will argue is complicated by the fact that human individuals can act as the implementers of both human and social powers. Indeed sometimes both are implemented simultaneously in the very same action, yet despite this I shall argue that we can distinguish between them and, having done so, go on to analyse how they interact to produce social events and larger patterns of such events.

This emergentist solution to the problem of structure and agency, then, recognises the contributions of both social structure and human agency to explaining social events, and also the complexity of the interactions between them. It is therefore distinct from methodological individualist positions, which deny causal effectiveness to social structure, and from methodological collectivist positions, which deny causal effectiveness (at least as regards the causation of social facts) to human individuals. It is also distinct from 'central conflationist' positions, such as that of Giddens, which seek to bridge these other two positions by treating structure and agency as ontologically inseparable. In some respects it leads us to treat the ontology of the social world in similar terms to the ontology of the natural world, with a broad range of causal powers interacting to produce events. But there remain substantial differences between the natural and social worlds. In summing up the argument of the book, chapter 9 looks at some of the similarities and differences between its accounts of the natural and social worlds.

Like Archer's work, this book offers an emergentist account of social structure from a critical realist perspective. Its examination of the nature of emergence, however, leads to the methodological argument that when we postulate emergent causal powers, we must identify the entities that possess them and the mechanisms that produce

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them. It is primarily in identifying such entities and mechanisms that the book goes beyond Archer's work. In doing so, I have found that despite their ontological weaknesses, structurationist thinkers have done valuable work that can help us understand these mechanisms. This recognition may contribute to the kind of *rapprochement* between structurationist and post-structurationist thinkers that has been advocated by authors such as Rob Stones and Nicos Mouzelis (Mouzelis 2000; Stones 2001, 2005).

How to read this book

Readers of academic books are often in a hurry. They often read introductions to help them decide which other chapters they can omit without missing the main argument. In this book the different steps of the argument are closely interconnected, so anyone dipping in to the book is in danger of misunderstanding, as a result of missing out on a previous step. The best strategy is to read the whole book. However, many readers will not need to, or be able to, so this section provides some signposts for different sorts of readers, pointing the way to potentially viable paths through the book.

The book has two main parts. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the theory of emergence in terms that are rarely directly related to sociological issues. Indeed they avoid the use of sociological examples to illustrate their argument. Instead, simple and accessible examples from the natural sciences are used, in order to establish the principles of emergence and causal powers without confusing the issue from the outset by introducing the additional difficulties that arise in the social world. This enables them to develop a set of tools that is then applied in chapters 5 to 8 to explain structure, agency and how they interact in the social world. Chapter 4 provides a bridge between the two halves, showing how the argument of chapters 2 and 3 provides a framework that can be applied to the question of social structure. If there is one thing you learn from this section, let it be this: you cannot make sense of the second half without making sense of the first half beforehand. The early chapters provide the foundations upon which the later chapters are built and any effort you make to understand them will be repaid when you get to the later chapters.

The best way to come to terms with the argument of the first half is to read all of chapters 2 to 4, and I would recommend this path

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to most readers. If emergence as such is of little interest to you and you are prepared to take what I say about it for granted in the later chapters, an alternative is to read only chapter 4. Readers who take this path, however, may find themselves confused about the argument later on, or doubting it, and in such cases I would recommend going back to the early chapters and reading them thoroughly.

It is possible, however, to be more flexible in your approach to the second half. If you are interested primarily in social structure, you could skip chapter 5. If you are interested primarily in agency, you could omit chapters 6 and 7 and read chapters 5 and 8. Readers from outside the social sciences who are interested in this as an application of the theory of emergence will need to read the first half in full, but could then take the 'agency' path or the 'structure' path.

Students might be interested in how the argument here relates to the work of specific thinkers in the structurationist and post-structurationist traditions. Again, reading the first half will help to make clear how my argument differs from others. Beyond this, Bourdieu and Archer are dealt with primarily in chapter 5, while Giddens and Stones are covered primarily in chapter 6.

Inevitably, readers will find that there are important exclusions from the scope of the book. Most significantly, it has not been possible to examine in depth the inter-relationships between issues of structure and agency on the one hand, and the roles of language, discourse and culture on the other, with the consequence that the contribution of post-structuralism to this debate is largely neglected, along with the relationship between realist and social constructionist accounts of the social world. This important set of issues (touched on in chapter 9) is the primary focus of a further research project of mine and hence I hope the subject of a future book.

It has also been necessary to restrict the range of social structures covered to normative institutions and organisations, and I hope in future work to extend this range, perhaps, for example, to more systemic structures such as markets and capitalism. Though these other structures are also important to sociological theory, it is not necessary to consider all kinds of social structure in order to establish the value of the emergentist account of the relationship between structure and agency that is offered here.

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