

Introduction: how does structure influence agency?

How does structure influence agents? To ask the question invites social theorists to advance a process, that is a causal mechanism linking the two. On the whole, they have reached a negative consensus about what this process is *not*. It is not social determinism. Structural and cultural influences cannot be modelled on hydraulic pressures. If they cannot, then something else is involved in the process. That something could be the properties and powers of agents themselves, which is the thesis of this book.

How structures are variously held to influence agents is dependent upon what ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ are held to be. There is no ontological consensus whatsoever about what they are within social theory. The sole and slim agreement is that in *some* sense ‘structure’ is objective, whilst in *some* sense ‘agency’ entails subjectivity. Both logically and traditionally, this minimal accord was compatible with accounts of the process by which one influenced the other that are diametrically opposed. Either structure or agency could be held to be dominant, and the other element to be correspondingly weak, so weak that it was deprived of causal powers – such that structure melted into ‘constructs’ or agents faded into *träger*.

More recently, it has become popular to suggest that we abandon the quest for a causal mechanism linking structure and agency, in favour of ‘transcending’ the divide between objectivity and subjectivity altogether. Basically, this enterprise rests upon conceptualising ‘structures’ and ‘agents’ as ontologically inseparable because each enters into the other’s constitution.¹ Arguments ‘against transcendence’² protest that the *interplay* between the objective and the subjective can only be occluded by the attempt to transcend the difference between the two. Those who are ‘for transcendence’ are denying that objectivity and subjectivity refer to two causal powers that are irreducibly different in kind and make

¹ For a critique of such ‘central conflation’, see Margaret S. Archer, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, ch. 4.

² Nicos Mouzelis, ‘The Subjectivist–Objectivist Divide: Against Transcendence’, *Sociology*, 34: 4, 2000.

2 Introduction

relatively autonomous contributions to social outcomes. Moreover, the ‘duality’ of structure and agency (or arguments about the homology between the positional and the dispositional), which conceptualise them as inextricably intertwined, are both hostile to *the very differentiation of subject and object* that is indispensable to agential reflexivity towards society. Consequently, the potential of such reflexivity for mediating the influence of structure upon agency is lost in advance.

Realist social theory is obviously ‘against transcendence’ because it is ‘for emergence’. Ontologically, ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ are seen as distinct strata of reality, as the bearers of quite different properties and powers. Their irreducibility to one another *entails examining the interplay between them*. Hence the question has to be re-presented in this context – how do structures influence agents? In other words, how does objectivity affect subjectivity, and vice versa? Social realists have not given a fully satisfactory answer. We have advanced a rather vague process of ‘conditioning’³ – one that is far too imprecise to do service as a causal mechanism.

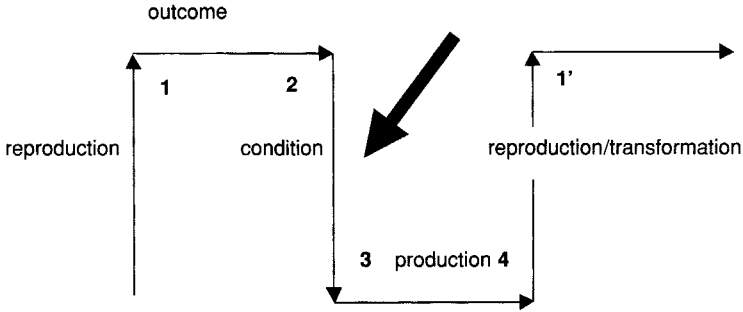
Central to realist social theory is the statement that ‘the causal power of social forms is mediated through social agency’.⁴ That is surely correct, because unless we accept that structural and cultural factors ultimately emerge from people and are efficacious only through people, then social forms are reified. However, what explanatory work does this statement do and what does it fail to accomplish?

Basically, it is little more than a condensed statement about realist social ontology. It refers to structural and cultural emergent properties, which are held to have temporal priority, relative autonomy and causal efficacy *vis à vis* members of society. Only because social forms do possess these three characteristics can they be held to exert an irreducible influence upon something different in kind and pertaining to a different level of stratified reality, namely people. Agents possess properties and powers distinct from those pertaining to social forms. Among them feature all those predicates, such as thinking, deliberating, believing, intending, loving and so forth, which are applicable to people, but never to social structures or cultural systems. Beyond that, the statement specifies only that the causal power of social forms ‘is mediated through agency’, but it does not tell us anything about the mediatory process involved. Obviously, the word ‘through’ requires unpacking before the process of mediation has begun to be conceptualised.

³ See Roy Bhaskar’s most developed diagram of his ‘Transformational Model of Social Action’, *Reclaiming Reality*, Verso, London, 1989, p. 94. Equally, see my own basic diagram of the ‘Morphogenetic Approach’, *Realist Social Theory*, p. 157. See figures 1.1 and 1.2.

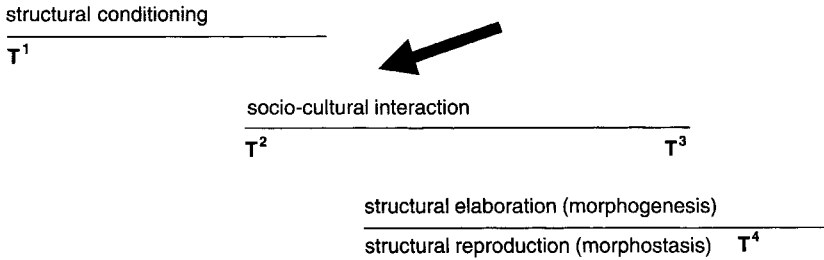
⁴ Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1989, p. 26.

How does structure influence agency?



Source. Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality*, Verso, London, 1989, p. 94

Figure 1.1 The place of conditioning in Bhaskar's transformational model of social action.



Source. Margaret S. Archer, *Realist Social Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 157

Figure 1.2 The place of social conditioning in Archer's morphogenetic approach.

However, the unpacking has been far from complete. Generically, it has consisted in replacing the word 'through' by the process of 'social conditioning'. Since to condition entails the existence of something that is conditioned, and because conditioning is not determinism, then this process necessarily involves the interplay between two different kinds of causal powers – those pertaining to structures and those belonging to agents. Therefore, an adequate conceptualisation of conditioning must deal with the interplay between these two powers. Firstly, this involves a specification of *how* structural and cultural powers impinge upon agents, and secondly of *how* agents use their own personal powers to act 'so rather than otherwise', in such situations.

Realist social theorising, like much other social theory, has been almost exclusively preoccupied with the first problem, which is why it is considered to be incomplete as yet. It has concentrated upon the question of

4 Introduction

transmission, or how it is that structural properties can impinge upon agents so as potentially to be able to condition their actions. Frequently, this has been answered by construing these influences as ‘constraints’ and ‘enablements’. They are transmitted to us by shaping the situations (structural or cultural) in which we find ourselves, such that some courses of action would be impeded and others would be facilitated.

However, it should be noted that these two very useful concepts *themselves* imply the exercise of agential powers. Constraints require something to constrain, and enablements something to enable. If, *per impossibile*, no agent ever entertained any course of action, they could neither be constrained nor enabled. Only because people envisage particular courses of action can one speak of their constraint or enablement, and only because they may pursue the same course of action from different social contexts can one talk of their being differentially constrained and enabled.

In other words, this preliminary unpacking of the word ‘through’ acknowledges that the two different causal powers of structural objectivity and agential subjectivity are *both* entailed by the concepts of ‘constraints’ and ‘enablements’. This is also the case for all other ways in which structures can be held to influence us as agents. Here, it could be objected that we sometimes talk of structural factors working upon us, without our awareness – as in the ‘unacknowledged conditions of action’. It might seem that if these are influential, but unacknowledged, then their effects must be independent of their subjective reception. Equally, references are also made to the influences of objective structural and cultural factors in creating vested interests and motivating us to defend them, or in reducing our aspirations by limiting our social horizons. In such cases, it might be thought that if objectivity shapes subjectivity in these ways, then the latter makes no independent contribution to outcomes. However, it would be erroneous, in all three instances, to believe that subjectivity has been banished from these processes of conditioning.

For example, where the unacknowledged conditions of action are concerned, a native English speaker may advance her academic career, thanks to the predominance of the English language, without any acknowledgement on her part that the conditions of her action are the heritage of British colonialism. That is perfectly correct, but what she is responding to, in pursuing her academic projects, is the ease and rewardingness of her situation. This is all she needs to know, and she will only know that under her own descriptions, for example, ‘I won’t have to wait long for that book to be translated’, or her presumption that English will always be an official language at conferences. Her subjective response, namely exerting her personal powers to write further articles and papers, does not depend upon her understanding the generative mechanisms that

structured the situations she encounters; it is enough that she is aware of her situation.

Similarly, a vested interest is an interest vested in a position, and for it to move an agent then it has to be found good by that person, under her own descriptions. Human subjectivity has not been eliminated, as is demonstrated when some people use their personal powers to renounce or repudiate their vested interests. Then again, the differential life-chances allocated to those differently situated in society are influential because they assign different opportunity costs to the same course of action (such as buying one's own house). Yet, it is agential deliberations that determine whether or not the price is deemed worth paying, even if its costs to them, in terms of saving, overtime and foregoing other things, are higher than to those who are better placed. Therefore, we can never explain who becomes a homeowner without consulting agents' subjectivity. Otherwise we would be confined to making empirical generalisations of the kind, 'the greater the costs of a project, the less likely are people to entertain it'. Yet, even there, subjectivity has not entirely made its exit.

Of course, if we did all respond to social forms in identical fashion, reference to 'personal powers' would not be redundant, but it would lose much of its interest. Instead, explaining what people do, in all of the above cases, involves reference to agents' subjective and reflexive formulation of personal projects – in the light of their objective circumstances. This being the case, then the influence of constraints and enablements will be taken as paradigmatic of how structure conditions agents – such conditioning being a process that involves both objective impingement and subjective reception.

Structural constraints or enablements and human projects

There are no constraints and enablements *per se*, that is as entities. These are the potential *causal powers* of structural emergent properties, such as distributions, roles, organisations, or institutions, and of cultural emergent properties, such as propositions, theories or doctrines. Yet, to constrain and to enable are transitive verbs; they have to impede or to facilitate something. As with all potential causal powers, they can remain unexercised because it is a wholly contingent matter whether they are activated. In other words, constraints and enablements do not possess an intrinsic capacity for constraining or enabling in abstraction. For anything to exert the power of a constraint or an enablement, it has to stand in a *relationship* such that it obstructs or aids the achievement of some specific agential enterprise. The generic name given to such enterprises

6 Introduction

is 'projects'. Obviously a project is a human device, be it individual or collective, because only people possess the intentionality to define and design courses of action in order to achieve their own ends. Animals, of course, have a limited intentionality when stalking prey, for example. But only the higher primates, who can use sticks to reach what is beyond their grasp, can be credited with primitive projects; tigers do not dig traps or lay snares for gazelles. In other words, a project involves an end that is desired, however tentatively or nebulously, and also some notion, however imprecise, of the course of action through which to accomplish it.

This is the reason why constraints and enablements are terms in social science, which refer to causal powers that can be exercised in society, but are not terms employed in natural science. Where chemical reactions are concerned, a different terminology would be used, for instance that of 'inhibitors', 'catalysts' and 'retarding agents'. Importantly, this recognises that simply by virtue of their composition, two substances will, *ceteris paribus*, necessarily interact in determinate ways. There is no entity involved which possesses the reflexivity to deliberate about how to respond to the causal power(s) which have been activated (apart, of course, from the experimenter). Consequently, terms are adopted which straightforwardly tell us how the reaction is necessarily blocked, speeded-up or slowed-down when other substances or processes (such as heating) intervene.⁵

The language of social constraints and enablements is entirely other because they work quite differently in relation to human projects. The first difference is that they can operate through anticipation. Reflexive agents can sometimes foresee the impediments that certain projects would encounter and thus be deterred from pursuing them. Equally, they may anticipate the ease with which other projects could be advanced, and the benefits that would accrue, and thus be encouraged to adopt them. This *sui generis* difference from inert matter does not depend upon human agents being correct in their forecasts and expectations; indeed they are not, but inert matter cannot anticipate at all.

The second difference is that when a project is constrained or enabled during its execution, agents can act strategically to try to discover ways around it or to define a second-best outcome (where constraints are concerned). Equally strategically, they can deliberate about how to get the most out of propitious circumstances, which may mean adopting a more ambitious goal, so that a good outcome is turned into a better one (where enablements are concerned). Thus, by their nature, humans have

⁵ The *ceteris paribus* clause has to be invoked again, but only to refer to further contingent intrusions in laboratory experiments, which are rarely perfectly closed.

degrees of freedom in determining their own courses of action. These certainly vary with the stringency of constraints and the strength of enablements, but agents enjoy their own powers of reflexive deliberation, in contrast with inert matter, which merely manifests indeterminacy or inertia if causal powers are weak (for example, if insufficient amounts of a substance are present).

In short, constraints and enablements derive from structural and cultural emergent properties. They have the generative power to impede or facilitate projects of different kinds from groups of agents who are differentially placed. However, the activation of their causal powers is contingent upon agents who conceive of and pursue projects upon which they would impinge. Otherwise, constraints and enablements remain unexercised. Because they are relatively enduring, structural and cultural emergent properties retain their generative potential to exert constraints and enablements *were* anyone or a group to adopt a project upon which they would impinge.

In other words, *it is essential to distinguish between the existence of structural properties and the exercise of their causal powers*. Properties pertain to structures and cultures; for example, science will always now contain the potential for the construction of nuclear bombs, regardless of a global prohibition upon their manufacture. Conversely, whether constraints and enablements are exercised as causal powers is contingent upon agency embracing the kinds of projects upon which they can impact. Moreover, the influences of constraints and enablements will only be tendential because of human reflexive abilities to withstand them and strategically to circumvent them. The effect of these structural and cultural causal powers is at the mercy of two open systems; the world and its contingencies and human agency's reflexive acuity, creativity and capacity for commitment.

In sum, the activation of the causal powers associated with constraints and enablements depends upon the use made of personal emergent properties to formulate agential projects. Thus, a top-heavy demographic structure simply cannot constrain a generous pension policy unless and until some group, which is in a position to introduce it, does in fact advocate such a policy. Similarly, the necessary contradiction⁶ between two sets of beliefs or theories remains a purely logical matter, which is without social consequence, unless there are people whose project it is to uphold one of these sets of ideas.

As these examples show, it is not the mere *co-existence* of structural and cultural properties with any kind of project held by agents that realises the

⁶ See Margaret S. Archer, *Culture and Agency*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 145f.

8 Introduction

powers of constraints and enablements. Instead, the projects have to be of such a nature that they activate particular causal powers. There is no necessity that this should always be the case. Certain intentional human activities, like private prayer, can never be the objects of structural or cultural constraints, though they may be socio-culturally discouraged. Conversely, private drinking may or may not be constrained according to variations in taxation, availability or legality.

The answer to the question, ‘what is required for structural and cultural factors to exercise their powers of constraint and enablement?’ can be summarised as follows. *Firstly*, such powers are dependent upon the existence of human projects; no projects mean no constraints and enablements. *Secondly*, to operate as either an enabling or a constraining influence, there has to be a relationship of congruence or incongruence respectively with particular agential projects. *Thirdly*, agents have to respond to these influences; which being conditional rather than deterministic, are subject to reflexive deliberation over the nature of the response. In sum, no structural or cultural emergent property is constraining or enabling *tout court*. To become constraints or enablements involves a relationship with the use made of personal emergent properties. *Whether or not* their causal power is to constrain or to enable is realised, and for *whom* they constitute constraints or enablements, depends upon the nature of the relationship between them and agential projects.

Until we understand this relationship, any account of ‘conditioning’ remains unilateral, since it concentrates exclusively upon how the situations and circumstances that we confront are structurally and culturally moulded for us. Conversely, specifying *how* structures and agents combine entails two stages. Firstly, it involves theorising about how structural and cultural forms can *impinge upon people*. This, realism is held to have conceptualised adequately when dealing with social forms as constraints and enablements, although it has underplayed the *indispensability of agential projects* to the activation of these social powers. Secondly, the specification of how social forms are influential *also* entails the *reception of these objective influences*, with their potential power to condition what people may do, by reflexive agents whose subjective powers ultimately determine what they do in fact do. Here, Hollis and Smith criticise social realism because ‘it does not make sense of how we *integrate* structures and agents in a *single story*’.⁷ In short, we realists have failed to ‘specify how structures and agency are to be combined’. If this criticism means that we have not theorised how ‘transmission’ and ‘reception’ come together

⁷ Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, ‘Two Stories about Structure and Agency’, *Review of International Studies*, 20, 1994, p. 250.

as two elements of a single mediatory process, then the point is well taken and this book is dedicated to producing the necessary account – which I believe is possible and they do not.

In brief, this book aims to replace the ‘inevitability of two stories’ (the ‘external’ and the ‘internal’) with the ‘tale of two powers’ – with a single account of the necessary interplay between objectivity and subjectivity. Without this, the realist proposition that the ‘causal power of social forms is mediated through social agency’ rightly repudiates reification, but it remains far too indefinite to give due recognition to the personal powers of human agents. That will be the case while ever we realists fail fully to theorise the mediatory process denoted by that word ‘through’.

Therefore, we need to be a good deal more precise about the agential process involved. After all, ‘constraints and enablements’ only indicate the difficulty or ease with which certain projects could be accomplished, *ceteris paribus*, by groups of people standing in given relations to (part of) society. They tell us absolutely nothing about which projects *are* entertained, even though they can inform us about who has an objective material or ideational interest in adopting a maintenance project rather than a transformatory one. Much more is involved; agents have to diagnose their situations, they have to identify their own interests and they must design projects they deem appropriate to attaining their ends. At all three points they are fallible: they can mis-diagnose their situations, mis-identify their interests, and mis-judge appropriate courses of action. However, the fundamental question is not whether they do all of this well, but how they do it at all. The answer to this is held to be ‘via the internal conversation’. This is the modality through which reflexivity towards self, society and the relationship between them is exercised. In itself it entails just such things as articulating to ourselves where we are placed, ascertaining where our interests lie and adumbrating schemes of future action.

Personal reflexivity: the missing link in mediation

The account of how structures influence agents, which will be developed throughout this book, is entirely dependent upon the proposition that our human powers of reflexivity have causal efficacy – towards ourselves, our society and relations between them. However, reflexivity, which is held to be one of the most important of personal emergent properties, is often denied to exert causal powers – in which case it becomes considerably less interesting or of no importance at all in accounting for any outcome. To revindicate the influential nature of reflexivity is thus essential to the present enterprise.

10 Introduction

The opposition to be overcome can be summarised by considering Graham's statement below and what he says about himself in relation to his actions, compared with how others would interpret his words.

I'm very cautious in what we spend – I like to be right if I'm going to do something out there. And the caution is don't jump straight in. Just stand back . . . and make plans. Stand back, don't stand forward. (Graham, 62-year-old construction site foreman)

The lay person's reaction would probably be that he is thinking about himself, his finances and his spending, and it is the fact that he dwells upon these relationships which makes Graham a cautious spender. If lay people are invited to be imaginative, they might also picture what he does when shopping. He 'stands back', meticulously aware of his income and expenditure; he knows what is within his means and what is beyond them; he is not an impulse buyer, but is alert to good value; he will be attentive to quality and so will shop around; and what he eventually purchases will be the closest approximation to what he set out to buy, at the best price available. In short, what Graham does in the marketplace cannot be explained without reference to Graham himself. Specifically, his *doings* are a product of how he thinks about himself and how he monitors his activities, 'out there' in the market.

A formal description of his statement would be that Graham is exercising his personal capacity for reflexivity to deliberate about himself in relation to his circumstances in order to plan his future actions. However, there would not be consensus upon that description, which is very close to the lay understanding. Instead, theorists would disagree amongst themselves about what part Graham's deliberations play in accounting for his actions. Their disagreement is firmly rooted in how Graham, the agent, is conceptualised. The disputants can be placed on a continuum, which ranges from those who maintain that 'Graham' is the proper name given to a particular neural network, to those who hold that he is a 'cultural artefact'.⁸ At the one extreme, his *thinking* explains nothing about his *doing*, because his thoughts have no independent power to affect his actions; at the opposite extreme, his *thoughts* may account for his deeds, but these are not *his* thoughts, since they have been internalised from society. In between these two poles are various concepts of the agent, which accord his thoughts different amounts of responsibility for his actions. Let us briefly characterise three theoretical positions whose protagonists would dispute what Graham says of himself.

(A) At one pole, neurological reductionists would not deny that Graham *felt* as if he were planning his budget carefully, but this feeling

⁸ Rom Harré, *Personal Being*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1983, p. 20.