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SOCIAL STRUCTURE: A HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT

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Abstract: The concept of social structure, present in social ontology since the 19th century, has been used in various, not always clearly specified, meanings. The present use of the concept has been decisively influenced by the elaborations in the hands of the so-called “new structuralists” of the 1970s: Pierre Bourdieu, Roy Bhaskar and Anthony Giddens. To understand the contemporary developments, it is necessary to be acquainted with its formative influences. In the paper, we compare the approaches of Bhaskar and Giddens, especially in the context of their mutual compatibility and the challenges facing anyone wanting to develop their own concept of social structure based on the elaborations of the concept by Bhaskar and Giddens. The most fundamental issues appear to be especially the mode of existence of social structures, the heterogeneous character of different kinds of social structures, and the transition from the ontology of the natural world to that of the social world by Bhaskar.

Keywords: social ontology; social structure; Roy Bhaskar; Anthony Giddens

Introduction

It was already in 1902 that some authors considered the notion of *social structure* to have been “overworked, abused, distorted, misrepresented, and misunderstood” (cf. Lizzardo 2010, 652); by 1957, the concept was observed to be “mostly used in a broad and almost blanket fashion, referring to any or all features contributing to the make-up of societies,” (Nadel 1957, 2) while in 2000 complaints were voiced that its meaning was “strikingly nebulous and diverse” (cf. Elder-Vass 2010, 1), and in 2012 it was remarked that “it is used in incredibly diverse ways by different theorists” (Elder-Vass 2012, 21).

A question thus stands whether the concept of social structure still has a place in contemporary social ontology, and, if so, what exact meaning it should (or does) acquire there. To appreciate the contemporary elaborations of the concept of social structure, as well as the role it plays within present social ontology, it is necessary to put it into context. To provide such a context is the aim of this paper. In doing so, we shall pay special attention to the two key figures of the 1970s agency-and-structure renaissance of structural approaches in social ontology, Roy Bhaskar and Anthony Giddens.

The influence of Bhaskar and Giddens on the contemporary social ontology has been so powerful that understanding particularly their elaborations of the social structure concept should constitute a basic prerequisite for studying most subsequent developments in this field. Since some contemporary social ontologists (such as for instance Tony Lawson of the Cambridge Social Ontology Group – cf. Lawson 1997, 2003, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2022) formed their approaches drawing on both Bhaskar and Giddens, the mutual compatibility of their

approaches (which has already been questioned) should be re-considered. Moreover, there are some challenges ahead for the prospective followers of Bhaskar and Giddens which I deem appropriate to appraise.

The structure of the paper is as follows: after briefly commenting on the introduction of the concept of social structure into theorising social phenomena, we shall investigate the treatment of the concept by Bhaskar and Giddens, especially in the context of their mutual compatibility and the potential challenges facing anyone wishing to build their own position drawing on the two approaches.

Early history of the social structure concept

There are many possible connotations associated with the concept of structure. At the most general level, structure is associated with order or organisation as contrasted with chaos and disarray. If science amounts to searching for regularity in the given field, then it is only to be expected that structural ideas will be turning up everywhere.

The use of structural concepts in social ontology has its own history. It was already Auguste Comte who, in the middle of the 19th century, thought about “spontaneous harmony between the whole and the parts of the social system, the elements of which must inevitably be, sooner or later, combined in a mode entirely conformable to their nature” (Comte 1893, 65).

Herbert Spencer, equating society to a kind of organism, explicitly works with the concept of *social structure*. He considers increasing structure to be a sign of progress. The reason is that he associates structure with the specialisation and cooperation of structural components and, thus, with functionality and efficiency.¹ Spencer distinguishes two types of *social structure* – directly organised (“militant”) and voluntarily cooperative (“industrial”): “the militant type of social structure is based on the principle of compulsory co-operation, while the industrial type of social structure is based on the principle of voluntary co-operation” (Spencer 1897, 690).

The idea of a society working as an organic whole composed of various components each fulfilling its designated task became a central vision for all the authors later branded as “structural functionalists”, or simply “functionalists”, such as Émile Durkheim, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, Bronisław Malinowski, or Talcott Parsons and his followers, such as Robert K. Merton (cf. Giddens 1993, 126). These authors paid special attention to the kinds of ways various elements composing a whole combined (Durkheim 1982, 39–40, 56, 128–129), and the role of relations among parts in determining not only the properties of the composite wholes, but that of their very parts as well (Parsons 1966, 31–32). *Social structure* consists, for them, mostly of relations of typified social interactions associated with social roles (Giddens 1993, 133–134).²

A separate structuralist strand emerged in the form of French structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss and his followers. Originating as an elaboration of de Saussure’s structural linguistics

¹ “It is also a character of social bodies, as of living bodies, that while they increase in size they increase in structure” (Spencer 1897, 449, cf. also Spencer 1897, 471, 473); “progressive differentiation of structures is accompanied by progressive differentiation of functions” (Spencer 1897, 450); “All kinds of creatures are alike in so far as each exhibits co-operation among its components for the benefit of the whole; and this trait, common to them, is a trait common also to societies. Further, among individual organisms, the degree of co-operation measures the degree of evolution; and this general truth, too, holds among social organisms” (Spencer 1897, 592).

² Cf. “The problem of order, and thus of the nature of the integration of stable systems of social interaction, that is, of social structure, thus focuses on the integration of the motivation of actors with the normative cultural standards which integrate the action system, in our context interpersonally.” (Parsons 1970, 36); “An institution will be said to be a complex of institutionalized role integrates which is of strategic structural significance in the social system in question. The institution should be considered to be a higher order unit of social structure than the role, and indeed it is made up of a plurality of interdependent role-patterns or components of them.” (Parsons 1970, 39)

(de Saussure 2015), under a partial influence of French mathematical structuralism of the Bourbaki group, French structuralism was interested in the application of general structural methods to many different areas. For Lévi-Strauss, structure was “a method”, which he, in social anthropology, directed at the search for the supposedly common “unconscious” shared by “all minds” (Lévi-Strauss 1977, 21).³

In social ontology, there has traditionally been recognised a dichotomy between (social) *structure* and (human) *agency*. In case social structure was the decisive factor in social ontology, what role would human agency be allowed to play in social development and change? Does not the acknowledgement of the decisive influence of social structure automatically lead to a form of social determinism where acting people couldn't influence the future? Wouldn't it also lead to ahistoricism (lack of evolution) and cultural universalism (lack of cultural differentiation)? These, indeed, were the main concerns which led to the downfall of French structuralism as a respectable strand in social ontology. It was not, to repeat, the use of structural approach in social ontology as such which was criticised, but rather the disproportional emphasis put upon the structure in relation to agency in such considerations (cf. Giddens 1993, 127; Menšík 2018).

The “new structuralists” of the 1970's

In the 1970s, three important attempts to reconcile the agency-structure controversy appeared: those of Bourdieu, Bhaskar, and Giddens, a trio labelled the “new structuralists” by Schatzki (1990, 281). Bhaskar and Giddens, whose influence on many contemporary approaches has been formative, we shall consider in more detail later on. Let us start chronologically, though, with Bourdieu.

Pierre Bourdieu built his “theory of practice” around his original concept of “habitus” – an internalised “structured structure predisposed to function as a structuring structure” – which provided the required bridge between social structure(s) and human agency:

The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g., the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively “regulated” and “regular” without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor. (Bourdieu 1977, 72)⁴

Bhaskar's transcendental realism

Roy Bhaskar's project originated as a critique of the “positivist” (empiricist) methodology of (natural) science. He strived to explain that strict empirical regularities (“constant conjunction of events”, strictly regular “patterns of events”) rarely happened, save for laboratory conditions, because the multiple “mechanisms” that generated the events combined and countervailed each other in various (often unpredictable) ways. It means that genuine regularity should be searched for not at the “actual level” of events but rather at the “real level” of generative mechanisms (Bhaskar 2008, 1–20). In this way, Bhaskar introduced, under the label of “transcendental realism,” a stratified ontology composed of two different levels, with

³ “The term ‘social structure’ has nothing to do with empirical reality but with models which are built up after it. ... It is rather a method to be applied to any kind of social studies, similar to the structural analysis current in other disciplines” (Lévi-Strauss 1977, 279); “If, as we believe to be the case, unconscious activity of the mind consists in imposing forms upon content, and if these forms are fundamentally the same for all minds – ancient and modern, primitive and civilized ... – it is necessary and sufficient to grasp the unconscious structure underlying each institution and each custom, in order to obtain a principle of interpretation valid for other institutions and customs, provided of course that the analysis is carried far enough” (Lévi-Strauss 1977, 21).

⁴ Cf. also Bourdieu (1990, 53).

the primacy of the deeper, “real level,” which is responsible for the generation of events at the surface, “actual level.”

The central notion for Bhaskar in this context is that of a “real thing,” with generative mechanisms being simply the “ways of acting of things” that should be “analysed as” “powers” (“potentials”) and “tendencies” of things. Moreover, since these powers of things are determined by their inner structural composition, it is these structures which are responsible for all the regularity in the final account. That is why, according to Bhaskar, the proper aim of any science should be to look for “structures and mechanisms that generate phenomena.” The terms “structures” and “generative mechanisms”, by the way, Bhaskar often uses interchangeably (cf. Bhaskar 2015, 170).

The real basis of causal laws are [sic] provided by the generative mechanisms of nature. Such generative mechanisms are, it is argued, nothing other than the ways of acting of things. And causal laws must be analysed as their tendencies. Tendencies may be regarded as powers or liabilities of a thing which may be exercised without being manifest in any particular outcome. (Bhaskar 2008, 14)

[S]cience, I will argue, is a social activity whose aim is the production of the knowledge of the kinds and ways of acting of independently existing and active things. (Bhaskar 2008, 24)

Scientists attempt to discover what kinds of things there are, as well as how the things there are behave; to capture the real essences of things in real definitions and to describe the ways they act in statements of causal laws. The real essences of things are their intrinsic structures, atomic constitutions and so on which constitute the real basis of their natural tendencies and causal powers. (Bhaskar 2008, 173–174)

Generative mechanisms, I have argued, must be analysed as the ways of acting of things; and their operations must be understood in terms of the exercise of tendencies and causal powers. (Bhaskar 2008, 184)

Mechanisms are enduring; they are nothing but the powers of things. Things, unlike events (which are changes in them), persist. (Bhaskar 2008, 221)

[T]ranscendental realism establishes an ontology of complex and active structures and things. (Bhaskar 2008, 222)

Although Bhaskar paid limited attention to social sciences in his *A Realist Theory of Science* (2008 [1975]), devoted mainly to (natural) science, there is still an important two-page-long passage present there, one which laid the basis for further elaborations of his account of the agency and structure mutual interconnection. The point is that for some (in fact most) types of social actions (such as speech acts), people need certain structures to pre-exist (e.g. the structure of language), yet, these structures exist only as long as they are exercised – utilised by people in actions, which actions not only serve to reproduce the structures, but often also to transform and change them in the process:

[W]hat must society be like if science (as a specific kind of social activity) is to be possible? It must satisfy the desiderata of being a structure irreducible to but present only in its effects. ... I do not have to know the laws of supply and demand to buy a mackintosh or to know the deep structure of language in order to use it. The deep structure of language may indeed impose limits (like natural structures) upon the kinds of speech acts I can perform but it does not determine what I say. This conception of social science thus preserves the status of human agency, but does away with the myth of creation (logical or historical), i.e. the possibility of a methodologically individualist reduction. It is not necessary that that society should continue. But if it is to do so then men must reproduce (or more or less transform) the structures (languages, forms of economic and political organization, systems of belief, cultural and ethical norms, etc.) that are given to them. The Newtonian revolution in sociology consists in coming to see that it is not necessary to explain society as such; but only the various structures responsible for different societies and their changes. ... As so conceived, society may be regarded as an ensemble of powers which exist, unlike other powers, only as long as they are

exercised; and are continually exercised via (i.e. in the last instance through) the intentional action of men. ... Men never create this language. For it always pre-exists them. But it exists as an actual, i.e. 'living', language only in virtue of, and changes with, their uses of it. Thus if society is represented by the model of a language it may be regarded as a structure which is always there; which men must reproduce or partially transform; but which would not exist without its 'functionaries'. (Bhaskar 2008, 195–197)

This view Bhaskar developed further, under the label “the transformational model of social activity” (TMSA), in his second book: *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences* (2015 [1979]). From this elaboration, it transpires that *social structures* for him meant both structures of “social products”, such as languages or systems of norms, as well as relational structures constituted of networks of positions to be occupied by actual people.

Moreover, in the social world, social structures play for Bhaskar the same role generating mechanisms played in the natural world. This means that social structures are, for him, the ultimate source of regularity and order in the social world, as well as the proper object of research in social sciences. Yet, these structures, being dependent on human actions, can be only relatively enduring, in contrast to natural structures.

The transformational model of social activity developed here will be seen to entail a relational conception of the subject-matter of social science. On this conception ‘society does not consist of individuals [or, we might add, groups], but expresses the sum of the relations within which individuals [and groups] stand’. (Bhaskar 2015, 26)⁵

Now if social activity consists, analytically, in production, that is in work on and the transformation of given objects, and if such work constitutes an analogue of natural events, then we need an analogue for the mechanisms that generate it. If social structures constitute the appropriate mechanism-analogue, then an important difference must be immediately registered – in that, unlike natural mechanisms, they exist only in virtue of the activities they govern and cannot be empirically identified independently of them. ... [S]ocial structures are themselves social products[.] (Bhaskar 2015, 37–38)

In social life only relations endure. Note also that such relations include relationships between people and nature and social products (such as machines and firms), as well as interpersonal ones. And that such relations include, but do not all consist in, ‘interactions’. (Bhaskar 2015, 41)

[S]ocial structures (a) [are] continually reproduced (or transformed) and (b) exist only in virtue of, and are exercised only in, human agency (in short, ... they require active ‘functionaries’). ... [W]e need a system of mediating concepts, encompassing both aspects of the duality of praxis, designating the ‘slots’, as it were, in the social structure into which active subjects must slip in order to reproduce it; that is, a system of concepts designating the ‘point of contact’ between human agency and social structures. Such a point, linking action to structure, must both endure and be immediately occupied by individuals. It is clear that the mediating system we need is that of the positions (places, functions, rules, tasks, duties, rights, etc.) occupied (filled, assumed, enacted, etc.) by individuals, and of the practices (activities, etc.) in which, in virtue of their occupancy of these positions (and vice versa), they engage. I shall call this mediating system the position-practice system. Now such positions and practices, if they are to be individuated at all, can only be done so relationally. (Bhaskar 2015, 40–41)

Giddens’s theory of structuration

What concerns the last member of the “new structuralists” trio, Anthony Giddens, in his “theory of structuration”, he, too, explains how structure and agency are mutually interdependent. To illustrate his point, he even uses the same example of language:

Interaction is constituted by and in the conduct of subjects; structuration, as the reproduction of practices, refers abstractly to the dynamic process whereby structures come into being. By

⁵ Bhaskar is quoting Marx here.

the duality of structure I mean that social structure is both constituted by human agency and yet is at the same time the very medium of this constitution. In sorting out the threads of how this happens, we can again profit initially by considering the case of language. Language exists as a 'structure', syntactical and semantic, only in so far as there are some kinds of traceable consistency in what people say, in the speech acts which they perform. From this aspect to refer to rules of syntax, for example, is to refer to the reproduction of 'like elements'; on the other hand, such rules also generate the totality of speech-acts which is the spoken language. It is this dual aspect of structure, as both inferred from observations of human doings and yet also operating as a medium whereby those doings are made possible, that has to be grasped through the notions of structuration and reproduction. (Giddens 1993, 128–129)

His definition of (social) structure is quite specific: *social structure* for Giddens means “generative rules and resources,” where rules are connected with norms and meanings, and resources with powers and rights over people and the material world:

By the term 'structure' I do not refer, as is conventional in functionalism, to the descriptive analysis of the relations of interaction which 'compose' organizations or collectivities, but to systems of generative rules and resources. (Giddens 1993, 133–134)

As I shall employ it, 'structure' refers to 'structural property', or more exactly, to 'structuring property', structuring properties providing the 'binding' of time and space in social systems. I argue that these properties can be understood as rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems. (Giddens 1979, 64)

In structuration theory 'structure' is regarded as rules and resources recursively implicated in social reproduction; institutionalized features of social systems have structural properties in the sense that relationships are stabilized across time and space. 'Structure' can be conceptualized abstractly as two aspects of rules – normative elements and codes of signification. Resources are also of two kinds: authoritative resources, which derive from the co-ordination of the activity of human agents, and allocative resources, which stem from control of material products or of aspects of the material world. (Giddens 1984, xxxi)

In distancing his conception from pattern-like structures of interactions of structural functionalists, Giddens maintains that his approach is closer to Lévi-Strauss.⁶

This distinction, though, is in part terminological only since Giddens actually also operates with “[r]eproduced relations between actors or collectives, organized as regular social practices” – suspiciously reminiscent of functionalists’ social structure understood as relational network of typified social interactions associated with social roles – only referred to by Giddens under a different label: that of “social systems” (Giddens 1984, 25; cf. also Porpora 1989, 201).

Social systems, being for Giddens situated in space and time, consist of actual processes of social interactions.⁷ To make the correspondence with the typified social interactions of the functionalists even more accurate, one should perhaps refer to the more stable structural features of social systems, called *institutions* by Giddens. They represent “[t]he most deeply-layered practices constitutive of social systems”, “standardised modes of behaviour”, or “practices

⁶ In functionalism, Giddens maintains, “[s]tructure is understood as referring to a ‘pattern’ of social relationships,” to “the patterning of interaction, as implying relations between actors or groups,” or “some kind of ‘patterning’ of social relations or social phenomena,” and “often naively conceived of in terms of visual imagery, akin to the skeleton or morphology of an organism or to the girders of a building” (Giddens 1979, 59–62; Giddens 1984, 16). In structuralism, on the other hand, “structural analysis” is supposed to “penetrate below the level of surface appearances,” here “the notion of structure is more interesting ... characteristically thought of not as a patterning of presences but as ... underlying codes [that] have to be inferred from surface manifestations” (Giddens 1979, 60; Giddens 1984, 16). “I do want to suggest a usage of ‘structure’ that is closer to that of Levi-Strauss than to functionalism.” (Giddens 1979, 63)

⁷ “Social systems only exist in and through the continuity of social practices, fading away in time,” (Giddens 1984, 83). Cf. Archer (1995, 93): “At the largest scale of interaction, the social system (defined by him as the visible pattern generated from agents transforming the modalities of structural properties to produce this patterning), Giddens is still not dealing with anything separable from action.”

which have the greatest time-space extension” (Giddens 1979, 65, 95–96, 117; Giddens 1984, xxi, 17, 23–24, 185).

The main difference between Giddens and structural-functionalism is that Giddens’s approach is more practice (and agency) oriented. Giddens resists describing the constitution of society in terms of roles understood as normative prescriptions of required behavioural patterns. By claiming that social systems are constituted out of “(reproduced) practices” instead of fixed-script roles, Giddens wants to underline the freedom of each agent to re-codify the behavioural practices attributed to any social role.

When analysing social systems in terms of *social roles*, it should be the roles defined in terms of “rules” and “resources”, and the “role-prescriptions have to be studied in their interrelation with the actual practices that are the ‘stuff’ of social life,” claims Giddens (1979, 117–118). Instead of social roles, however, Giddens prefers to describe social systems in terms of *social positions*, each having attached a specified range of “prerogatives and obligations”, with the positions occupants being able to use them at their discretion and according to their individual styles (Giddens 1979, 117–118; Giddens 1984, 83–84).

Bhaskar vs. Giddens: The mode of existence of structures

Obviously, when considering social structures from the ontological point of view, the fundamental question is that of their ontic status – of their mode and domain of existence. In the case of Bhaskar and Giddens, this is especially important since some concerns have already been voiced regarding the mutual compatibility of their answers to this question.

To start with similarity first, both Bhaskar and Giddens indicate they do not want to search for the social structure among the observable patterns of social interactions “at the level of the actual,” within “space and time:” on this they are (seemingly) in perfect agreement.⁸

Their general ontological approaches, however, seem to differ. In his *A Realist Theory of Science*, Bhaskar introduced a separate ontic domain – that of the “real” – for the structures to lurk behind and govern the actual phenomena. On the other hand, Giddens, for all his self-proclaimed affinity to the structuralists, whom he sees looking for hidden “underlying codes” (Giddens 1979, 60; Giddens 1984, 16), himself stops short of explicitly introducing another layer into his ontological picture. Some commentators, emphasising this distinction, went as far as calling this difference between Bhaskar and Giddens a “philosophical schism”.⁹

Yet, the picture is not as simple as it might seem at first sight. While the structures of the natural world exist in a “real” domain as separate from the “actual” domain for Bhaskar, the situation with social structures is more complex. Bhaskar is clear that the mode of existence of social structures is quite different from that of the structures of nature. Social structures are “social products”, “they exist only in virtue of the activities they govern”, and “they do not exist

⁸ Mind you, this is not automatic: there are still authors around who prefer to reserve the term social structure for empirical regularities in behavioural patterns. Cf., e.g., Martin (2009): “I propose that we begin by considering social structure simply as regular patterns of interaction, and leave to the side the question of why these patterns exist.” (Martin 2009, 7); “Social structure is here considered to refer to recurring patterns of social interaction,” (Martin 2009, 9).

⁹ “... philosophical schism dividing Bhaskar and Giddens concerns the mode of being of social structure. Bhaskar argues that reality is stratified: in addition to experiences and events, there also are structures and mechanisms. ... In Giddens, on the other hand, there is no ontological stratification. Social reality is the concrete world of social interaction. Rules and resources are not a distinct order of phenomena but something embedded in this world, which, when reconstructed and viewed as that which organizes this world is treated as its structure. Rules and resources are thus “aspects” of practices in being the reconstructable contents of the practical knowledge underlying patterned interactions. The structures they comprise, accordingly, are “aspects” of practices in being sets of reconstructable contents of knowledge. Notice that social structures are not themselves contents of knowledge. Only the rules and resources of which they are composed have this status. Structures are abstractions visible to the investigatory gaze of social scientists. And this is ultimately why Giddens writes that social structures are ‘virtual orders’ absent from concrete reality.” (Schatzki 1990, 286)

independently of the conceptions that the agents possess of what they are doing in their activity” (Bhaskar 2015, 38); social structures “exist only in virtue of, and are exercised only in, human agency,” (Bhaskar 2015, 40), “exist materially and are carried or transported from one space-time location to another only in or in virtue of human praxis,” (Bhaskar 2015, 174). Bhaskar agrees with Giddens on the interdependence of agency and structure, and social structures are for him – in contrast to the structures of nature – “only relatively enduring” (Bhaskar 2015, 38) exactly because of their existential dependence of agency. A “domain of social structures”, if conceivable at all, thus cannot, by Bhaskar, be conceived separately from agency.

The most explicit expression of an ontic separation of the domain of structures from other parts of the (social) world I have been able to identify in Bhaskar reads:

Thus what has been established, by conceptual analysis, as necessary for the phenomena may consist precisely in a level (or aspect) of reality which, although not existing independently of agents’ conceptions, may be inadequately conceptualized or even not conceptualized at all. Such a level may consist in a structural complex which is really generative of social life but unavailable to direct inspection by the senses or immediate intuition in the course of everyday life. It may be a tacit property of agents (such as knowledge of a grammar) utilized in their productions; or a property of the relationships in which agents stand to the conditions and means of their productions, of which they may be unaware. (Bhaskar 2015, 52)

You will notice that Bhaskar is calling the “level of reality” also an “aspect of reality”, arguably to soften the connotation of a separate domain of existence. To sum up: they being dependent upon agency, the ontic status of social structures cannot be one of eternal undisturbed persistence in a domain causally insulated from the effects from outside, as enjoyed by natural structures.

Yet, while it was only in brackets that Bhaskar considered social structures as aspects of reality, Giddens, on the other hand, is quite explicit in calling social structure “a property of social system” (Giddens 1984, 25, 170), and explaining that “[s]tructure only exists as ‘structural properties’” (Giddens 1979, 66), that “the concept of ‘structure’ presumes that of ‘system’” (Giddens 1993, 7). Social systems for Giddens “comprise the situated activities of human agents” (Giddens 1984, 25), “may be treated as systems of interaction” (Giddens 1979, 202), are constituted of “social practices” (Giddens 1979, 128), and “are located in time and space” (Giddens 1979, 117). As such, social systems consist of actual processes of social interactions. To recognise social structures as specific features of actual social processes¹⁰ amounts to reversing the order of dependence between the “actual domain” and structures from how Bhaskar saw it in his ontology of the natural world, where actual events depend on “real” natural structures.

I feel that even in the case of social structures, Bhaskar would want to grant them a somewhat more independent existence and ontic status than simply seeing them as a property of some actual process. I am encouraged in it by the account of Margareth Archer, another authority within the strand of “social realism” or “critical realism”, who, while criticising Giddens for a “conflation” of structure with agency (Archer 1996, 72–96; Archer 1995, 93–134) to the point of not seeing structure as “anything separable from action” (Archer 1995, 96), herself designates a more independent ontic position for structure. For Archer, structure, though “emergent” from agency, still exists as “distinct” from agency and “irreducible” to it, while “exerting causal influence” on it – with agency itself staying in a symmetric position towards structure (Archer 1995, 14–15).¹¹

Returning back to Bhaskar, for him, there exists some “structural complex” which is “generative of social life” (Bhaskar 2015, 52), something which sounds as being distinct from individual

¹⁰ Or “aspects of the concrete flux of social life”, as Schatzki (1990, 287) phrases it.

¹¹ Cf. also Bhaskar’s account of emergence and irreducibility – though in a different domain – in Bhaskar (2015, 97–107).

agents. On the other hand, if Schatzki (1990, 286) is right in his interpretation, for Giddens the regularity in social life is generated by “practical knowledge” (of rules and resources) on part of individual human agents, and Archer might be perhaps correct in seeing Giddens prioritising the individuals and agency over the structure in his picture.

Although always proclaiming the “duality” of agency and structure, there are indeed passages present in Giddens which indicate an actual primacy of practices over structures. Giddens definitely seems to give his agents much more freedom to (perhaps creatively) reconstruct the pattern of their practices. In the passage where Giddens argues against the usefulness of the concept of social roles (Giddens 1979, 116–118), he is unhappy with the connotations of normativity, rigid expectations, and the inability of the actor to change the roles themselves – as contrasted to choosing the specific ways in which they perform the unchanging role. He seems to indicate that everything originates in autonomous practice, with roles, institutions and structures being secondary, appearing as properties of autonomous practices of free human agents.

Similarly, all role-prescriptions are actualised, like any other components of social activity, through the utilisation of resources, and thus connect to structures of domination. Finally, role-prescriptions have to be studied in their interrelation with the actual practices that are the ‘stuff’ of social life; there may be various kinds of dislocation between what is enjoined in role-prescriptions and what actors typically do as the occupants of particular social positions. (Giddens 1979, 118)

In the quoted passage, Giddens not only claims that “the stuff of social life” is constituted by “actual practices”, but he also indicates that actors are rewriting their roles through the ways they perform these roles.¹² In a radical interpretation, it may entail that structural properties of whatever the agents actually did in the past became sedimented into social conditions, structuring their future behaviour. In this interpretation, the social structure would simply correspond to the structural properties of the past development of the actual social process – there would be no more to social structure than a property of (past) actualised agency.

I do not find such a strong accent on free and autonomous practice, and perhaps even the primacy of agency over structure, present in the approach advanced by Bhaskar. His view of social structures existing only “in virtue” of being used, “in virtue of the activities they govern” (viz. the quotation above), that is true, needs much unpacking.¹³ Yet, nothing points in the direction that Bhaskar would be ready to renounce his claim that it is structures that “really” exist and (at least partially) generate the “actual” phenomena of social life.

The two types of structures and Bhaskar’s vanishing things

When introducing social structures, Bhaskar, without any noticeable uneasiness, packs together “languages, forms of economic and political organization, systems of belief, cultural and ethical norms, etc.” (Bhaskar 2008, 196); he wants both to liken “the rules of grammar” to the “natural structures” (Bhaskar 2015, 36), as well as maintain, that “‘slots’ ... in the social structure” – called “positions” – are “immediately occupied by individuals,” who perform certain “practices”.

In short, Bhaskar wants his social structures to cover both networks of positions to be occupied by acting humans, as well as social structural products of the sort of languages or systems of

¹² On the difference between accounts of social constitution based on “roles” and based on “acts” see also Harré (2002, 114–116).

¹³ What concerns the need for clarification of Bhaskar’s position regarding the ontic status of structures, Schatzki (1990) comes to a similar conclusion. He is puzzled how Bhaskar could have elsewhere remarked that structures were “aspects” of concrete flux of social life and, at the same time, comprehend them as “real”. How could, indeed, “real be an aspect of the actual,” Schatzki asks. He concludes that Bhaskar is not clear here, and that there prevails uncertainty over the ontological status of structures in Bhaskar’s approach (Schatzki 1990, 286).

belief, complexes which, though perhaps structural, do not seem to be by Bhaskar interpreted as being constituted of networks of social positions to be occupied by acting humans.

One can populate their ontology with entities of various kinds, of course, but failing to differentiate those kinds and treating them carelessly as belonging to the same class amounts to nothing short of the dreaded category mistake. Bhaskar does not engage with this problem in his social ontology. Glossing over this fundamental distinction, he opens a gap in his social ontology waiting to be closed by his prospective followers.

This problem is also partially connected with another incoherence in Bhaskar's overall ontological story. In his ontology of the natural world, to remind you, the central concept for Bhaskar is that of "real things": It is those "things" which feature as bundles of "causal powers", themselves designating the "ways of acting" of things, which play the role of "generative mechanism", equated by him also to "structures", in terms of which Bhaskar wants to explain the whole ontology of nature. It is thus the "active", "real things" Bhaskar's whole natural world is composed of (cf. the exposition of Bhaskar's position above).

The central concept of Bhaskar's natural ontology – the "real things", though, is conspicuous by its complete absence from his explanation of the ontology of social reality. While social structures seemingly smoothly replaced the natural structures in their role of central generative mechanisms when moving from the natural world to the social one, the concept of real things did not transfer with them, being lost somewhere in transition.

The problem is not the lack of possible candidates for actively operating entities to replace Bhaskar's "real things" in the social context – namely, active human beings seem a natural choice – the problem is that human individuals do not feature in Bhaskar's story as "structures" or as "generative mechanisms" themselves. Bhaskar does not want to equate structures with individual human agents. For him, social structures must lie somewhere else. And so must the "real things", if he wants to keep them. If not, his social ontology does not match his natural ontology as closely as might have been implied.

We are back at the question of the mode of existence of structures: if Bhaskar wants to reify them – to, again, equate them with some kind of "real things" – he should point out where exactly they persist; if not, they will have to feature only as properties of something else – and here again, it has to be explained of what (assuming Giddens's answer of structure as a feature of social process does not satisfy Bhaskar).

Giddens's view of conceiving of social structures as "rules and resources" appears more elaborate in this context. It can cover both the rules of languages as well as positions (or roles) defined in terms of rules and resources (cf. Giddens 1979, 116–118). This position, though, poses its own questions regarding the modes of existence of such social structures: if they are simply structural features of actual past (inter-)actions, can they really be called "rules" or "powers" over others and over natural resources? Giddens is obviously aware that the crux of the theory is in the detailed account of how could aspects of past social processes inform the future human actions. If the relevant sediments of past social processes, that is social structure, consisted of "practical knowledge" of acting individuals, as suggested by Schatzki, does not it really mean that Giddens conflated agency with structure, as insisted by Archer? And if they consisted only of "practical knowledge", could they really also incorporate the networks of social positions, or are we back with the problem of heterogeneous kinds of structures as faced by Bhaskar?

In a nutshell, any prospective followers elaborating on the concept of social structure as developed by Bhaskar and Giddens may rest assured that they will not be lacking in opportunities to further clarify and expand the theory.

Conclusion

The use of structural ideas in social ontology has its own history. If searching for structure is tantamount to searching for order and regularity, it is not surprising structural approaches should abound in every field, social ontology not excluded. There has been a noticeable move from searching for regularity within empirical patterns to identifying sources of their generation in social ontology.

Present social ontology has been decisively influenced by the attempts at integration of both agency and structure into one ontological picture by the “new structuralists” of the 1970’s, namely Pierre Bourdieu, Roy Bhaskar and Anthony Giddens. Their elaboration of the concept of social structure, though, still left some gaps to be filled in by their followers.

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