



The Theory of Structuration and Multidimensional Theory: New Classics?*

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Few would challenge the notion that social reality is created by human agents operating in the pre-existing social structure. However, social theorists are divided over how structure and agencies are related. Anthony Giddens' structuration theory and Jeffrey Alexander's multidimensional theory represent efforts to overcome the basic dualism of "interpretative" and "structural" sociology. Both theories attempt to explain the historical processes engendering the structures that mold human social life and strive to overcome the problem of dualism between structure and agency. In this paper, Giddens' structuration theory and Alexander's multidimensional theory are assessed in light of the question of whether they have contributed any insights not already anticipated in the classical tradition of sociological thinking. The paper argues that both Giddens and Alexander largely fail to accomplish this task of convergence. It is also argued that while Giddens work shows an inclination toward a micro direction, Alexander ultimately leans toward an extreme macro level of social reality.

Keywords: Giddens, structuration theory, Alexander, multidimensional theory, agency, structure

INTRODUCTION

A central problem in sociological theory has been the study of the relationship between microscopic and macroscopic levels of social reality. The dualism of traditional approaches is manifested in social theory by the opposed schools of "interpretative" and "structural" sociology, as represented by micro/macro, action/structure, interpretivist/positivist, synchrony/diachrony, change/stability and other dichotomies. For example, the positivistic

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approach views social structures to be beyond the realm of human control, while the interpretivist approach emphasizes the role of human action in the creation of social structures. To supersede this dualism, there have been many efforts at synthesis, trying not only to explain the historical processes engendering the structures that shape human social life but also to overcome the problem of dualism between structure and agency, determinism and voluntarism, and structure and process. One need only reflect on the “synthesis” found in Anthony Giddens’ (1979; 1984) work on structuration theory, Jurgen Habermas’ (1984) integration of action and systems theory, Randall Collins’ (1981) effort to explore the micro foundations of macro-level phenomena, Jeffrey Alexander’s (1982; 1983a-c) work on multidimensional theory of action, and Raymond Boudon’s (1981) “methodological individualism” to get a sense of the centrality of the problem of dualism in sociological theory. However, while there is a broad consensus on the micro-macro problematic, there are a number of different ways of theorizing about this problem. There is also a problem of division “within”: some of the sociologists who articulate a macro-micro link ultimately lean toward either an extreme macro (Alexander) or an extreme micro (Collins) direction.

Out of the large number of works on the discussion of the micro-macro link, Giddens’ theory of structuration and Alexander’s multidimensional theory are now generally regarded as two of the most important developments in contemporary sociological theory. Both theories attempt to reconcile theoretical dichotomies of social systems such as subjective and objective, agency and structure, and micro and macro perspectives. The focus of the structuration theory, for example, is not on the individual actor or societal totality “but social practices ordered across space and time” (Giddens 1984: 2). The proponents of the two theories embrace this balanced perspective, treating the influence of agency and structure, including culture, equally. These theories aim to avoid the extremes of agent or structural determinism, arguing that while social structures make social action possible, those very structures are created by social action. Social life is thus not solely the sum of all micro-level activity, just as social activity cannot be entirely explained from a macro perspective only. In view of this, this paper examines the contribution and importance of structuration theory and multidimensional theory to contemporary theory. Special attention is given to the question of whether they have contributed any insights not already anticipated in the classical tradition of sociological thinking. The paper argues that both Giddens and Alexander have largely failed to accomplish this task of convergence. The paper also argues that while Giddens’ work shows an inclination toward a micro direction, Alexander ultimately leans toward an extreme macro level of social reality.

ANTHONY GIDDENS: STRUCTURATION THEORY

Anthony Giddens is an internationally renowned British sociologist who has written extensively on a wide array of topics. In his early work in the 1970s and 1980s, Giddens made seminal contributions to the interpretation of the classical sociological texts, publishing books on Durkheim, Weber, social class, and historical materialism. It was during this period that he came up with a social theory of his own—the structuration theory. In the 1990s, he published major works on the late modernity, globalization and politics, analyzing the impact of modernity on social and personal life and examining the life experiences and main institutional forces of what he calls the “runaway world.” Accordingly, his publications during this period are highlighted by the critique of postmodernity and discussions of a “third way” in politics, as in the *Consequence of Modernity* (1990), *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), *Beyond Left and Right* (1994) and *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (1998). The third way, in particular, deserves further remarks, for it entails many resemblances to the concept of structuration. As in the theory, the third way represents a synthesis of the competing viewpoints or dualism of capitalism and socialism, market liberalism and democratic socialism, and left-wing and right-wing politics. His attempts at a synthesis are also evident in his latest works, as he analyzes the interdependence of the individual and social structure by examining the dual themes of trust and risk and of security and danger. Although life in the early twenty-first century is becoming increasingly insecure, the individual, as Giddens argues, is not a mere victim of circumstances (structure), for he/she can reflect on them and aims to escape from the “trap” of high modernity.

Among many of Giddens’ seminal contributions to social theory, the theory of structuration remains his crowning achievement. Since first introducing his theory of structuration in 1976, Giddens has been trying to construct a theoretical system which overcomes the subject/object dualism of traditional approaches in social theory (1976; 1977; 1978; 1981; 1982; 1984). For Giddens, this dualism is manifested in social theory by the opposed schools of “interpretative” sociology (i.e., Garfinkel 1967; Schutz 1972) and “institutional” or “structural” sociology (i.e., Parsons 1951; Levi-Strauss 1968; Althusser 1969). This basic dualism, Giddens argues, is responsible for the construction of other “false oppositions” such as macro/micro, action/structure, synchrony/diachrony, stability/change and other dichotomies. By using the conceptual apparatus of structuration theory, Giddens aims to not only overcome these misleading dichotomies but also show that the “opposing” ideas of the dualism are in fact not in opposition but “implicated” in each other in an organic, synthetic manner (see Stones 2005; Parker 2000; Tucker 1998; Bryant and Jary 1990; Cohen 1989).

Giddens starts out by rejecting what he calls “the orthodox consensus” which has dominated sociology. In his *Central Problems in Social Theory*, Giddens (1979: 234-60) lists

the following shortcomings of mainstream sociology: the “mistaken self-interpretation of its origins *vis-a-vis* the natural sciences”; its “reliance upon a now outmoded and defective philosophy of language”; its reliance on an “oversimple revelatory model of social science, based on naturalistic presumptions”; and its lack of a theory of action. The most pressing problem, however, is the dualism of agency and structure. A variety of intellectual traditions, including hermeneutics, phenomenology and ethnomethodology, have developed sophisticated theories which view human conduct as intentional action and which accord the knowledge, desires and intentions of the agents the central place in social reality. However, they have paid scant attention to conceptions of social causation or structural explanation. In contrast, those philosophical traditions that have developed structural explanations, such as functionalism and structuralism, have ignored the subject (Giddens 1976: 93-8, 126; 1977: 167; 1979: 49-53, 253-57). For example, as Giddens (1979: 112) writes:

in both Althusserian Marxism and Parsonian sociology the reproduction of society occurs “behind the backs” of the agents whose conduct constitutes that society. The involvement of actors’ own purposive conduct with the rationalization of action is lacking in each case ... hence the teleology of the system either governs ... or supplants ... that of the actors themselves.

Giddens attempts to remedy these shortcomings as well as to overcome this dualism of agency and structure through his theory of structuration. First, he conceives of individuals as active, knowledgeable agents who actually produce, sustain and transform social reality. Second, in departing from the “orthodox” objectivist use of the notion of structure, he markedly reduces its determining effect and sees it largely as means or resources. Third, Giddens integrates action and structure by recognizing their interdependence in the production and reproduction of structure in their interaction. In this way the dualism of face-to-face interaction and the constraining properties of structure are replaced by the “duality” of structure, which is simultaneously both the means and the consequence of action, linking action and structure as integral parts of each other.

Agency

Giddens’ theory of action or agency is greatly influenced by not only phenomenology, the philosophy of hermeneutics and language but also is closely related to Marxian *praxis* (i.e., Marx’s contention that “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please”). What Giddens derives from interpretative social theory is the notion that what constitutes knowledge are the interpretations we place upon events and objects through the exercise of our consciousness. The knowledge that we create can, in turn, be recreated and transformed, giving human beings a degree of freedom in making and remaking the social

world. Giddens (1976: 15-6) also agrees that social reality is not “given” as nature is, but brought about by actors endowed with language, consciousness and a body of collective lay knowledge.

The difference between society and nature is that nature is ... not produced by man ... While not made by any single person, society is created and recreated afresh, if not *ex nihilo*, by the participants in every social encounter. The production of society is a skilled performance, sustained and “made to happen” by human beings (Giddens 1976: 15).

For Giddens, however, these elements—reflexive consciousness, language and collective lay knowledge—which are held together by the inclusive concept of *Verstehen* become the very preconditions of any kind of social interaction. Calling it “mutual knowledge,” Giddens (1976: 151) sees a competent understanding of it as “the ontological condition of human society as it is produced and reproduced by its members.”

Giddens, however, departs from phenomenology and hermeneutics in defining action as a “stream of actual or contemplated causal interventions of corporeal beings in the ongoing process of events in the world” (Giddens 1979: 55); and as “the practical realization of interests, including the material transformation of nature through human activity” (Giddens 1976: 53). In this sense, Giddens’ theory of action opposes the breaking up of action into abstract and non-contextual acts as analytical philosophers do. Furthermore, it not only emphasizes the practical nature of action but also restores the notion of interests, establishing the voluntaristic capacity of actors. Second, Giddens departs from interpretative theory in including and insisting on the need to take into account the difference of power in social relationships. For Giddens (1984: 14), power is the capacity of agents to “act otherwise” or to “‘make a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs or a course of events.” Third, Giddens (1984: 4-7, 9-14) reformulates the hermeneutic theory of action by considering the constraining conditions of action—unconscious (or unacknowledged) sources of action, and unintended consequences of action.

Structure

Having reinstated agency in his theory of action as the active, knowledgeable agents who, within limits, create, maintain and transform social practices, Giddens provides a compatible conceptualization of structure. In his reformulation of the concept of structure, structure and system are separated, and the notion of temporality is introduced (Giddens 1979: 198; 1984: 34-7, 83-92). According to Giddens (1979: 66), social systems:

involve regularised relations of interdependence between individuals or groups, that

typically can be best analysed as recurrent social practices. Social systems are systems of social interactions: as such ... exist syntagmatically in the flow of time.

What distinguishes structure from system is that the former is an “absent” or “virtual order” of rules and resources which are “temporally ‘present’ only in their instantiation, in the constituting moments of social systems” (Giddens 1976: 128). Structure itself is “non-temporal and non-spatial” and is “produced and reproduced in social interaction as its medium and outcome” (Giddens 1979: 3). Giddens (1984: 18) conceptualizes structure as rules and resources used by actors in interaction and as existing only in space and time in its instantiations “in (reproduced) practices and as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents.”

Rules are generalizable procedures and methodologies that reflexive agents possess in their stocks of knowledge and that they use as “formulas” for action in social systems (Giddens 1984: 17-25). These rules of structure are informal, tacitly known, frequently invoked and widely sanctioned, and are used in conversations, daily routines, and interaction rituals. They operate in interaction situations by providing “interpretative schemes” and stocks of knowledge that are necessary for effective communication. They also specify rights and obligations that are the foundations for sanctions. Resources, on the other hand, refer to the material equipment and organizational capacities that agents possess to get things done (Giddens 1984: 31, 33, 258-62). They operate in situations of interaction by providing “allocative” (material) and “authoritative” (politico-ideological) facilities for mobilizing power. Rules and resources are thus “transformational,” for they can be created, transformed, and recombined into many different forms, and they are also “mediating” in that they are used by social agents to tie social relations together. In this way, rules and resources are transformed into sanctions, power, communication among actors in interaction, and ultimately, mediators of social relations. For Giddens, therefore, structure refers to the rules and resources utilized by actors in pursuit of their interests and intentions in the production and reproduction of social practices. In this sense, structural analysis is “to study the ways in which that system, via the application of generative rules and resources, and in the context of unintended outcomes, is produced and reproduced in interaction” (Giddens 1979: 66).

Structuration Theory: Convergence of Agency and Structure

Such conceptualizations of agency and structure culminate in the theory of structuration. In structuration theory, the notion of structure as external to, and constraining of, social activity is discarded. Human agents are agents only to the extent that they are capable of “making a difference” and exercising a degree of power (Giddens 1984: 14). Giddens thus rejects the idea that is implicit in all objectivist forms of social analysis—that the activities of human agents are entirely determined by external constraints. Giddens (1984: 25) writes:

Structure is not “external” to individuals; as memory traces, and as instantiated in social practices, it is in a certain sense more “internal” than exterior to their activities in a Durkheimian sense. Structure is not to be equated with constraint but is always both constraining and enabling.

Central to the theory of structuration is the concept of the duality of structure: “The constitution of agents and structures are not two independently given sets of phenomena, a dualism, but represent a duality” (Giddens 1984: 25). According to Giddens (1979: 4; see also 1976: 121; 1979: 69; 1984: 25), the duality of structure refers to:

the essential recursiveness of social life as constituted in social practices. Structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of social practices, and “exists” in the generating moments of this constitution.

In this sense, structural (macro) features and interactional (micro) features are not independently constituted phenomena, but they are implicated in each other. The term structuration thus refers to the reproduction of social relations across time and space as transacted in the duality of structure. This duality has three important consequences. First, it reveals and emphasizes the essential recursiveness of social life as a series of reproduced social practices brought about by the interaction of actors equipped with “practical consciousness.” Second, it sees structure as both enabling as well as constraining. Norms, meanings and power in regularized social practices not only constrain human conduct but also enable social agents to produce and reproduce as well as to transform social practices. Third, the duality of structure “expresses the mutual dependence of structure and agency” (Giddens 1979: 69). These consequences imply that social theory “must be founded neither in the consciousness or activities of the subject, nor in the characteristics of the object (society), but in the duality of structure” (Giddens 1979: 120). Drawing on the structuration theme, Giddens (1984) put forth some more substantial observations on the structure of modern life, including commodification of time, urbanism and the “created space,” routinization of everyday life, and state, surveillance and integration.

The Time-Space in Theory of Structuration

Time and space constitutes an important element in Giddens’ theory of structuration. Like many other writers, Giddens has treated time and temporality as important elements in the investigation of other phenomena. Giddens emphasizes that all social systems, which comprise of social practices, are embedded in time and space. To explain how time and space are constitutive of our being, he draws upon the ideas of Martin Heidegger and Torsten

Hägerstrand. Inspired by Heidegger, Giddens argues that time-space relation “expresses the nature of what objects are” (1981: 30-34). Time not only expresses the nature of human beings but also reveals that there is an irreducibly temporal quality to human existence. From Hägerstrand’s time-geography, Giddens (1984: 111-2) borrows five basic spatial-temporal constraints or boundaries limiting human behavior across time and space:

1. The indivisibility of the human body, and of other living and inorganic entities in the milieu of human existence. Corporeality imposes strict limitations upon the capabilities of movement and perception of the human agent.
2. The finitude of the life span of the human agent as a ‘being towards death.’ This essential element of the human condition gives rise to certain inescapable demographic parameters of interaction across time-space. For this reason if no other, time is a scarce resource for the individual actor.
3. The limited capability of human beings to participate in more than one task at once, coupled with the fact that every task has a duration. Turn-taking exemplifies the implications of this sort of constraint.
4. The fact that movement in space is also movement in time.
5. The limited ‘packing capacity’ of time-space. No two human bodies can occupy the same space at the same time; physical objects have the same characteristics. Therefore any zone of time-space can be analyzed in terms of constraints over the two types of objects which can be accommodated within it [*Italic in the original*].

Social systems, including the reflexive self and enduring social institutions, are subject to, and constitutive of, social temporality. Three forms of temporality are key here. First is the *durée* of daily life, which operates in “reversible time” and in which events, practices and routines of daily life are repeated: “Daily life has a duration, a flow, but it does not lead anywhere ... time here is constituted only in repetition” (Giddens 1984: 35). Second is the *durée* of day-to-day life. The life of the individual and the day-to-day flow of intentional action are not only finite but irreversible. This “being towards death” is an experience of finitude. These two forms of temporality are interrelated in the third form of *durée*: the *longue durée* of institutions, which is the “‘supra-individual’ *durée* of the long term existence of institutions” as well as the reproduction of institutions (Giddens 1984: 35). The *longue durée* is reversible time, and as Giddens (1984: 36) states:

The reversible time of institutions is both the condition and the outcome of the practices organized in the continuity of daily life, the main substantive form of the duality of structure. It would not be true ... to say that the routines of daily life are the foundation upon which institutional forms of societal organization are built in time-space. Rather,

each enters into the constitution of the other, as they both do into the constitution of the acting self. All social systems, no matter how grand or far-flung, both express and are expressed in the routines of daily social life, mediating the physical and sensory properties of the human body.

These times and their parallel structures and practices are not hierarchical; rather they are always co-constitutive. Also, social systems are time-space constitutive and are both spatially and temporally binding. The actions that constitute, and are constituted by, the social system engender the space where social practices occur. At the same time, the social system also binds the actions to a specific temporal-spatial context. All types of interaction involve either presence or absence in a variety of combinations. In every face-to-face interaction, for example, the agents are positioned at the same place and time. Taking insights from Goffmann, Giddens calls this form of interaction “co-presence.” The action happens at a specific locale and in a specific, delimited time period. With what Giddens calls “time-space distanciation,” moreover, social relationships are becoming stretched across time and space, i.e., social interactions occur in the same “space,” but not necessarily in the same geographical setting. The sophistication of communication methods and technologies, such as fax and the Internet, have made it possible for individuals to interact simultaneously in spite of their distant geographical separations.

Time-space situated practices that constitute society are closely interconnected with Giddens’ notion of the human agent. The human agent is purposeful, is part of the “continuous present” and is characterized by “enabling presences” and “constraining absences.” Giddens views the agent as a continuous being. He also sees agency and action not as single sequences but rather as a flow of being, with their intentions and practices interactively emerging out of and into one another. The time-space categories are thus vital to Giddens’ conceptualization of social systems; society cannot be properly understood without the time-space dimension.

The Linguistic Turn and Double Hermeneutic

Another key idea in Giddens’ structuration theory is the “linguistic turn.” What Giddens means by the linguistic turn is philosophy’s increasing concern with language in the twentieth century. For many philosophers, the basic concepts of language provide modes of analysis that are applicable to all other human activities. In linguistics, especially structural linguistics, it has become common to see social relations and social life as being constituted in and by language.

Against this notion that all social relations can be wholly reduced to language, Giddens insists that there are social practices that are not merely constituted in language. Giddens is particularly critical of Saussure’s version of linguistics as well as practically all forms of structural linguistics. Giddens takes issue with their inclination to view language in isolation from the social milieu of the language use and to emphasize only the basic features of the

structure and properties of language. Also, Giddens criticizes structural linguistics for its ahistorical nature and its emphasis on the deterministic structural forces over the capability of individuals to make conscious choices and act. Structural linguistics may recognize the creative quality of human subjects in language use, but such capability is attributed only to features of the human mind, not to conscious and intentional agents conducting their day-to-day activities within the environ of social institutions.

The concept of the “double hermeneutic” also figures prominently in Giddens’ works (Giddens 1987; see also Kim 2004). The theory holds that everyday “lay” concepts and the concepts of the social sciences have a two-way relationship. For example, the idea of social class, a social-scientific category which was originally coined by the founder of sociology, August Comte, has entered into a wide, popular use in society. In delineating his notion of the double hermeneutic, Giddens (1987: 20) maintains that most social scientists have been solely concerned with the way in which lay, ordinary concepts infringe upon the specialized discourse of social science, while not paying enough attention to how things can work the other way around. Giddens (1982) holds that the double hermeneutic is a unique feature of the social sciences distinguishing the latter from the natural sciences. The natural sciences are characterized by what he calls the “single hermeneutic” or one-way interpretation or understanding. Scientists try to comprehend and theorize about the structure and workings of the natural world, but the understanding is one-way since the objects of their study, e.g., minerals or chemicals, do not seek to develop an understanding of human beings. The social sciences, on the other hand, are engaged in the double hermeneutic, i.e., every action has two interpretations—one from the actor himself and the other from the investigator who gives meaning to the action he/she is observing. For example, sociology studies what people do, but people can change their own interpretation or courses of action once they get to know the interpretation of the investigator. That is because people are agents who can think, make choices, and use the insights of social science to change their own interpretation of reality and their course of action. Accordingly, Giddens argues that positive science is never possible in the social sciences: each time an investigator tries to understand causal sequences of action, the actor can change his/her actions. He thus holds that “the concepts of the social sciences are not produced about an independently constituted subject-matter, which continues regardless of what these concepts are,” and that the “findings of the social sciences very often enter constitutively into the world they describe” (Giddens 1987: 20).

Critical Assessment

The question is whether Giddens’ contribution adds anything substantial or new to the classical tradition of sociological thinking. This is best answered by critically assessing his work, as well as by seeing if he is successful in accomplishing what he set out to do. The most important contribution of the theory of structuration is its attempt to link different levels of analysis,

which means integrating elements from diverse theoretical perspectives, including psychoanalysis, phenomenology, ethnomethodology and the dramaturgical approach as well as structural and functional theories. Also of importance is Giddens' emphasis on the need for sociological theory to be interdependent with history and geography. Giddens' insistence on the importance of conceiving social life in terms of time-space relations is also innovative. Furthermore, the discussion of routinization is significant because it applies institutional analysis to the interactions among social actors.

Giddens' approach, however, is not without flaws. The most pressing problem is the fact that Giddens cannot ultimately do away with the dualism of agency and structure. Although Giddens has attempted to supersede the subject-object dichotomy, he reverts "to the subject-object dualism of actors constituting and being constituted" (Dallmayr 1982: 27). That there is a persisting dualism of agency and structure in Giddens' writing has been demonstrated on two fronts (Callinicos 1985: 140-4). The first is the issue of resistance by subordinate groups. Giddens (1981: 171) criticizes Foucault's notions of "history without a subject" and "archaeology" (Foucault 1979), which treat human beings as not making their own history but being swept along by it, for not adequately recognizing that "those subject to the power of dominant groups are themselves knowledgeable human agents, who resist, blunt or actively alter the conditions of life that others seek to thrust upon them." Similarly, Braverman (1974) is criticized for treating workers as passive agents incapable of effective organizations and resistance. Instead of discussing different modalities of resistance in different social formations, Giddens (1982: 197-8) simply asserts that "to be a human agent is to have power," so that "the most seemingly 'powerless' individuals are able to mobilize resources whereby they carve out 'spaces of control'" giving rise to "a dialectic of control." For Giddens, therefore, the basis for resistance is that they are knowledgeable human agents, which is a completely ahistorical approach. There is no examination of the historically specific conditions that allow oppressed groups to resist: the measure of resistance for agency in history varies according to the specific situations in which individuals find themselves (Anderson 1979). Giddens' preoccupation with an abstract account of subjects' capacity to resist, therefore, indicates his predilection for the pole of agency as against that of structure in structuration theory.

Giddens' account of action is thus located at the voluntarist pole of the dichotomy, which means that he has failed to overcome the dichotomy of determinism and voluntarism. The fact that structuration theory is based on a complete rejection of objectivist epistemology and ontology attests to this. Callinicos (1985), for example, argues that Giddens' commitment to the idea that social actors produce society demonstrates a tendency to "collapse into the hermeneutic pole of the two extremes." Layder (1987) agrees that Giddens' acceptance of an exclusively humanist conception of ontology precludes any notion of social reality as being also constituted by impersonal, objective or external social forces. A related problem is the way

Giddens treats structure as being more enabling than constraining (Archer 1982). One important consequence is that Giddens' conceptualization of structure lacks the notion of durability and persistence that is inherent in conventional use. In his attempt to minimize what he sees as an undue emphasis on structure as constraint, Giddens has done away with any notion of durability related to structure. Also, by insisting that structure is not external to the subject, the theory of structuration fails to account for the fact that structures do create variable measures of freedom and constraint for the agents. As a result, it cannot address the issues about degrees of voluntarism/determinism nor about variations in the number of options open to actors (Archer 1982). Giddens thus needs to provide more precise proposition about when agents will be merely reproductive and when transformative.

Giddens' conceptualizations of structure and system, i.e., their presence only in their "instantiation," are also problematic. They overlook any concern with the prior conditions or constraints upon agency. Giddens' theory does not deal with the prior structural constraints or with relations of domination and power. In this sense, Giddens' "instanciation thesis" of structures can be viewed as implying "that the 'structures' and 'systems' concerned are inchoate and evanescent, appearing and disappearing at the behest of specific individuals in specific encounters" (Layder 1985: 143). Furthermore, Giddens' conceptualization of structure implies that it functions only as a secondary aspect of social practice, subject almost entirely to the interventions of "knowledgeable human agents." What is desired is a formulation that leaves the possibility of various outcomes of action, depending on the concrete historical situation.

Another notable problem includes what Gane (1983) identifies as the "irremediable ambiguity" in Giddens' theoretical sources, i.e., between existential humanism and the structural theories of Althusser. Such ambiguity befuddles what is exactly meant by agency in Giddens' work; it is not clear whether it refers to "persons" or to the "dominant set of practices," the operation of which requires "practical agencies." In *New Rules of Sociological Method* (1976), for example, Giddens links agency to personal responsibilities, whereas in *Central Problems in Social Theory* (1979), he identifies it as sets of practices. On the theoretical level, Giddens is deeply committed to "person," while in the conceptual framework for social analysis the issue of agency is often structurally situated.

The problems discussed above have prompted many scholars to argue that the distinction between macro and micro levels must be sustained. Archer (1982: 467), for example, maintains that Giddens "merely transposes dualism from the theoretical to the methodological level—thus conceding its analytical indispensability." Layder (1987: 139; also 1989) agrees that "Giddens' attempt to overcome the dualism of action and structure fails precisely because he tries to collapse a real ontological distinction into a false duality." It can also be argued that both notions of duality and dualism are necessary in explaining social reality. According to Mouzelis (1989: 628), they are equally necessary in order to account for the variability in

subject/object relationship, i.e., subjects can either perceive structure as external or distance themselves from structures.

JEFFREY ALEXANDER: MULTIDIMENSIONAL ACTION THEORY

Jeffrey Alexander, whose neofunctionalism in the 1980s represented a revival of Parsonian Thinking, gained prominence by publishing the four-volume *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, which provides a detailed analysis of the theories and methodology of three great founders of sociological thought—Marx, Durkheim and Weber—along with those of Talcott Parsons. Alexander has since largely disassociated himself from neofunctionalism and has lately devoted his efforts to the study of culture, civil society and social change, all of which complement his general theorizing. In his analysis of the emergence and transformation of civil society, for example, Alexander (1998; 2008) discusses the civil sphere as a realm which is analytically and empirically distinctive from other institutions, such as the state and market, and emphasizes the “solidary” aspects, i.e., comprising a community of interests and responsibilities, of the modern civil realm. The rise of the civil society is not inevitable, as it is marked by periods of expansion and retrenchment. In cultural sociology, which is a main focus of his current efforts, Alexander, (2006; Alexander et al. 2006) analyzes the cultural codes, pragmatics and narratives that inform and influence varied aspects of social life. Alexander argues that culture, comprising of various symbolic sets, determines action as concretely as material circumstances. He views culture as a coherent, autonomous social realm which is causal, not just a reflection of social structure, and as being embodied in institutions and personalities. Alexander also maintains that cultural structures translate into concrete actions and institutions and that only by understanding structural factors and the mechanisms through which culture works, can such dichotomies as values and facts, religion and reason, and the this-worldly and the transcendental be truly understood.

In the field of social theory, his *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* remains a *tour de force*. In these volumes, Alexander (1982: 125) attempts to overcome the “debilitating dualism of one-dimensional thought” through a “multidimensional” theory of society. Sociology, Alexander contends, has been caught between sociological materialism and idealism—virtually all theories have embraced either one or the other, thus making them one-dimensional. He proposes to remedy this theoretical impasse by establishing a multidimensional framework which integrates the valuable insights of materialist (rationalistic, utilitarian) and idealist (normative) approaches into a synthetic sociology. Alexander (1982: 68) believes that this endeavor is the same vision that motivated Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Parsons (see Calhoun et al. 2007; Ritzer 2006; 2007).

The key term in Alexander’s theoretical logic of sociology is “presuppositions.” The goal

of his work is to argue for “a presuppositional position of multidimensionality.” What Alexander (1982) means by multidimensionality is that the social theorist must make constant reference to each pole of several traditional antinomies. The first polarity centers on a methodological issue—the theory-fact relationship—which he calls a continuum of scientific thought, in which science is seen as an intellectual activity that is bounded on the right by an empirical environment and on the left by a metaphysical one (which includes general presuppositions, models, laws, propositions, correlations, and observations), which differ only quantitatively by “degrees of generality and specificity” (Alexander 1982: 40). It is argued that the dominant positivist approach is based on an inadequate one-dimensional conception of the process of inquiry as moving from specificity to generality, whereas the “human studies” orientation commits the opposite error in championing subjectivism.

The second dichotomy concerns polarized conceptions of action. Action concerns the basis of human motivation, whether it is conceived as basically normative or basically instrumental. To be solely committed to the former is to become a “sociological idealist,” while the latter yields “sociological materialism.” Dual conceptions of “order” constitute the third antinomy. According to one strand, order is either constitutive of individual volition or characterized by collective domination.

In opposition to these one-dimensional approaches, Alexander’s multidimensionality holds that both alternatives apply in varying degree in accordance to different contexts and situations, and that both must have a place in the theorist’s scheme. Alexander (1982: 30) offers a post-positivist conception of science, arguing that “all scientific development is a two-tiered process, propelled as much by theoretical as by empirical argument.” Alexander (1983a: 114-7) believes that multidimensionality is capable of making sociology more objective. By objectivity, he means not the separation between theory and fact, but rather that it is “expansive and synthetic in scope,” that it represents a dialectical integration of the central contributions of other approaches (Alexander 1982: 122).

Based on these basic theoretical foundations, Alexander (1983a; 1983b) has argued that each of the theories of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber has been one-sided. In his mature work, Marx leaned toward the side of materialism and economic determinism, and focused on utilitarian, instrumentalist motivational factors. Alexander (1983a: 11) argues that “Marxism is an anti-voluntaristic social theory which functions, ideologically, to stimulate active, voluntaristic change.” Durkheim, on the other hand, erred in relying too much on subjective ideals and moral factors. Although Weber attempted to be multidimensional, he was inconsistent: in his sociology of religion, for example, he emphasized the independent power of religious values and ideas, while being preoccupied with material conditions in his study of politics. Weber failed to fit these two sides into a single system.

In Alexander’s (1983c) view, only Talcott Parsons saw the importance of multidimensionality. Of particular importance is Parsons’ AGIL paradigm, which argues that

in order for a system to survive, it must adapt to its environment (Adaptation), obtain its goals (Goal attainment), integrate its components (Integration), and maintain its latent pattern (Latency pattern maintenance). Parsons attempted to create truly a general theory of action with the AGIL model (also called the system's functional imperatives), which treats the material, political, cultural and interactional spheres as equal components. The model gives full scope to both the micro level of actors and the macro level of the social system. Alexander argues that the theories which are critical of Parsons—conflict theory and subjectivist theories—are actually weaker as general theories. Conflict theory reduces society to one or two spheres of the system, i.e., economics and politics, while the phenomenological theories cannot account for the entire level of macro structure. Notwithstanding his advocacy of a neo-Parsonian school of social thought, at least in his early works, Alexander (1987: 107) does identify a number of major problems in Parsons' sociology, especially its overemphasis on the normative, arguing Parsons' work ultimately has not produced an open-ended, multidimensional approach which would bring about a unified perspective on sociological issues.

Critical Assessment

Like Giddens, Alexander had attempted to accumulate and synthesize the main theoretical accomplishments of the past, but the latter's work too is not without problems. In his call for a multidimensional sociology, Alexander posits a synthetic alternative to sociological idealism and materialism, and holds Weber and Parsons as its representatives. However, Alexander does not actually attempt to formulate a multidimensional conceptual framework, but is content to reassess Weber's and Parsons' work rather methodologically. As Burger (1986: 274) maintains, Alexander's major contribution is to be found "more in the direction of a methodological justification of the synthetic approach than toward a development of this approach itself." Furthermore, Alexander avoids the question of whether or not a synthetic approach is preferable to unidimensional alternatives on empirical grounds. Alexander is so concerned with demonstrating in great detail the one-sidedness of Marxian, Durkheimian, and Weberian interpretations that he ends up with a repetitive rhetorical insistence on multidimensionality. This is attested to by the fact that even review articles of his work are more concerned with refuting Alexander's interpretations of the sociological classics than with critically assessing his success or failure in accomplishing his intentions.

Alexander's *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* has been often compared to Parsons' *Structure of Social Action*, especially for the former's possible imitation of the latter. Although Alexander's work differs in some fundamental ways, i.e., his anti-positivism and his addition of Marx to his scheme of things, his work can be largely seen as an attempt to assess Parsons' approach. As the title of his review essay "Parsons, Jr." indicates, Sica (1983: 212) criticizes Alexander for being "slavishly Parsonian," claiming that what Alexander tried was largely a multidimensional theory of action and order of a neo-Parsonian type.

Multidimensionality implies that what is objective cannot be one-sided, but must be comprehensive. However, Popper, who was too easily dismissed by Alexander, proposes the idea that the power of a theory is a function of how much it excludes, not necessarily of how much it includes. In this sense, a reductionist materialist theory would constitute a major theoretical breakthrough. Alexander, however, rejects this possibility on the basis of an a priori decision. A related problem is that although he sets out with a model of multidimensionality, which must account for two dichotomies—the problem of action (instrumental/material versus ideal/ normative) and the problem of order (micro/negotiated versus sui generis/emergent)—Alexander focuses only on the one-sidedness of various theorists on the dimension of action (material/ideal), and largely ignores problems with the dimension of order (micro/macro) (Collins 1985: 884). Collins (1985: 889) thus concludes that “multi-dimensionality ought to be taken as a heuristic device, not an epistemological absolute.” Theory has to be multidimensional, for the world we are trying to explain is such, but that does not mean “that all of the multiple dimensions must be equal; some may in fact turn out to be relatively more powerful than others” (Collins 1985: 890). In Alexander’s multidimensional theory, micro and macro are not integrated, but rather juxtaposed. Collins thus asks: “Is the ‘theoretical logic’ of sociology a movement towards ultimate synthesis, or is it, on the contrary, a perpetual tendency to be one-sided, now on one side, now on the other?” (Collins 1985: 892).

Like Parsons, Alexander is aware of the variable cultural constitution, and yet wants to press forward with a single mode of construing the theoretical field. He proceeds by reducing the universe of metatheoretical problems to a single set of issues and meanings—those of “action” and “order,” which in turn are reduced to one issue, “materialist” versus “idealist” conceptions of action. Like Parsons, Alexander limits the meaning of action to the one that builds on the means-end schema of utility-seeking individuals, while ignoring the action theories of Dilthey, Dewey and Mead. Furthermore, as Wallace (1984) argues, despite his commitment to multidimensionality, Alexander really regards action only one-dimensionally, that is, as “in part voluntary, and in part determined.” No other dimensions of action (i.e., egoistic/altruistic, aggressive/cooperative, intended/unintended, etc.) enter into his multidimensional thinking.

Another problem with multidimensionality is that it is in fact a misnomer for bipolarity or two-dimensionality. For example, Alexander’s conception of action appropriates the basic ideas of Weber not only in the inner-outer dimensions but also in his discussions of emotional (affectual) and habitual (traditional) actions. Even if we grant that Alexander’s formulation is distinct from Weber’s and even Parsons’, it is not clear why this two-dimensional formulation is called multidimensional, rather than two-dimensional or bipolar. Alexander has attempted to do integrate a number of antinomies or dichotomies—materialism-idealism, determinism-voluntarism, objective-subjective, etc., but it is not clear if this effort can be viewed as multidimensional. Lastly, Alexander’s multidimensionality is persuasive only if the concepts of

sociological idealism and materialism are centrally important problems of social theory and of the theorists Alexander examines, and if Weber's and Parsons' work can reasonably be seen as efforts to achieve multidimensionality. Joas (1988: 476) maintains that this is not at all self-evident. Viewing the struggle between idealism and materialism as more of a philosophical problem than with sociology, Joas (1988: 477) sees Alexander's construction of the philosophical problems in the works of the sociological classics as unjustified. Furthermore, the endeavor to achieve integration of action and social order is a typically modern cultural problem, thus not appropriate to the problems dealt within the works of the sociological classics (Joas 1988: 478-9).

CONCLUSION: STRUCTURATION THEORY, AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL THEORY: NEW CLASSICS?

Taken together, structuration and multidimensional theories represent attempts to reconcile theoretical dichotomies of agency/structure and subjective/objective. The two theories remind us that both the microscopic and macroscopic frameworks are essential levels of explaining and understanding social life. Both theories also attempt to elucidate the historical and social processes producing the structures that shape human life. Moreover, these theories aim to avoid the extremes of agent or structural determinism, arguing that while social structures make social action possible, those very structures are created by social action. Social life is thus not solely the sum of all micro-level activity, just as social activity cannot be entirely explained from a macro perspective only.

In assessing the contribution and importance of structuration theory and multidimensional theory to contemporary theory, the paper found many shortcomings in the two theories. In a nutshell, the paper argues that both Giddens and Alexander have largely failed to accomplish the task of convergence. When applied to empirical analysis, their concepts do not provide much more than to warn against being committed to one theoretical extreme or the other. This brings us back to Popper, who stressed that the power of theory is frequently a function of how much it excludes. This is largely true of much of the classical tradition of sociological thinking, which in its own way has provided observations and insights that are invaluable to sociology. As insinuated above, the attempt to achieve integration of action and order is a modern sociological problem; hence, it is inappropriate to criticize the classical tradition on that ground. The issue of micro-macro is maybe new, but essential ideas inherent in those camps were readily anticipated by the classical thinking. The only way, therefore, Giddens and Alexander can add anything new to the classical tradition is by successfully bridging the microscopic and macroscopic frameworks of analysis as they set out to do. As the aforementioned criticisms of the two theories reveal, both the theory of structuration and

multidimensional theory of action have largely failed to converge the agency/structure dichotomy. This being true, their theories are not much more than noble ideas whose attempts have failed. All of these problems reveal that the traditions Giddens and Alexander are trying to combine, i.e., historical materialism and interpretive sociology, are so fundamentally opposed in substance, method, and political implications that the result can only be eclecticism, incoherence, or the denaturing of either or both traditions of thought. After all that is said and done, we may still ask “So what else is new?” With sociological theories and metatheories—theories whose subject matter is some other theory—abound, the only distinctive aspect of these works is that they are metatheories with a twist—convergence of metatheory and theory building.

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