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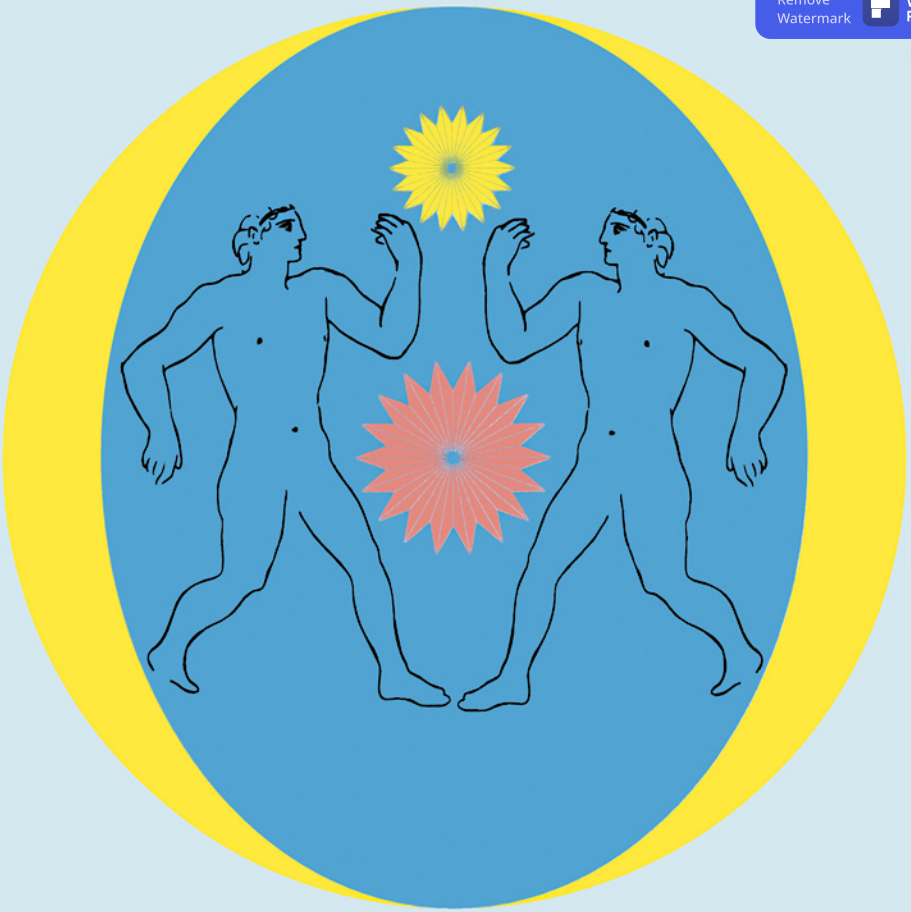

Realist Perspectives on Management and Organisations

Edited by
Stephen Ackroyd and Steve Fleetwood

Critical Realism: Interventions

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Realist Perspectives on Management and Organisations

Organisational and managerial regimes directly impact on our everyday lives, which partly explains why they are so widely studied. However, systematic study of organisation and management does not happen by accident. It requires some reflection upon how best to study them: it requires *methodology*. And here we enter into a minefield of theoretical disagreement.

Whilst management science uses a method very similar to that (allegedly) used in the natural sciences, namely *positivism*, there are no shortage of critics prepared to argue that what might be appropriate for the natural sciences is inappropriate for the social sciences. However, the rejection of positivism often appears to engender a reaction that does not so much resolve the problems of positivism as replace them with those associated with *postmodernism*. There is, however, an alternative to both positivism and postmodernism, namely *realism*. And elaborating how this realist perspective has influenced organisation and management studies provides the rationale for this collection.

It brings together two kinds of work that have been informed by realism. One set of papers originate from scholars who have explicitly sought to employ, or in some cases to develop, a realist perspective. The other set of papers are from those who have implicitly employed something like a realist perspective in their work, albeit without conscious reflection on their methodological roots.

The collection goes some way to demonstrating that realism has the capacity to overcome the severe limitations inherent in positivist and postmodern approaches to organisation and management studies.

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London and New York

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First published 2000
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

"To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk."

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Realist perspectives on management and organizations/edited by Stephen Ackroyd and Steve Fleetwood.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Management. 2. Organization. 3. Realism. I. Ackroyd, Stephen. II. Fleetwood, Steve. III. Series.
HD31 .R432 2001
060'.1–dc21 00-056025

ISBN 0-203-16443-1 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-25856-8 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0–415–24273–8 (hbk)
ISBN 0–415–24274–6 (pbk)

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4 Structure, culture and agency

Rejecting the current orthodoxy of organisation theory

Robert Archer

Introduction

All theory makes assumptions about the nature of reality (either implicitly or explicitly) and such ontological assumptions necessarily regulate how one studies the things and events under investigation. Successful study is inextricably dependent upon an adequate ontology. As Bryant neatly puts it, 'Effective application, in turn, is connected with adequate working assumptions about the constitution of society. Argument about the constitution of society is thus not a recondite activity which most sociologists [and organisation theorists] can safely ignore' (1995: 58, interpolation added). The central concern in this paper is with the ontological underpinnings of much of the current literature in organisation studies in respect of structure and culture. It will be argued that conflation of irreducible and causally-efficacious strata of social reality in the shape of social structure and culture permeates much of the current literature, thus rendering analysis of the interplay between them and their relationship with human agency difficult to elucidate. The ontological underpinnings of organisational analysis have arguably turned full circle from the depth of social reality acknowledged by functionalism, structural Marxism and systems theory to the generic endorsement of Giddens' structuration theory. As will be argued, Giddens' theory entails a depthless ontology, which necessarily precludes methodological prescription.

Conceptualising structure and culture: emergence and stratification

This paper argues that much contemporary writing in organisation studies and sociology involves the conflation of different strata of social reality. In order to do this, an alternative view of both structure and culture from those widely accepted in the literature will be proffered, defending the essential irreducibility of each. Hence, the springboard for theorising the interplay of culture, structure and agency is *analytical* dualism (Archer, 1982; 1988; 1995; 1996: ch. 6; Archer, 1996). Analytical dualism is possible in virtue

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of the intrinsically *stratified* nature of reality. What is at issue here is not the (undeniable) profitability of cultural (and structural) analysis *per se*, but *how* it should be approached methodologically.

Structure: an emergent stratum of reality

As Hays emphasises, the concept 'social structure' is ubiquitous in sociological literature, and its meaning is foundational for the work of social theorists (1994: 57). It is generally taken as axiomatic that structure refers to resilient *patterns* that order social life. However, the exact ontological status that one accords structure is contested. The organisational literature seems to support the view that structure is not ontologically distinct from agency. The two are held to be so intimately intertwined and mutually influential that to accord each an ontological status of their own would be to reify them. This renders a temporal examination of their interplay difficult, if not impossible. The fact that the two *are* mutually influential does not mean that they are analytically inseparable. Social structure is conceptualised as being composed of rules and resources *à la* Giddens. Indeed, many organisation theorists (as well as sociologists for that matter) were quick to join the structurationist bandwagon. Quintessentially, social theory is concerned with the now-familiar dualisms of individual versus society; determinism versus voluntarism; micro- versus macroscopic; that is, the perennial 'problem of structure and agency'. Resolution in terms of linking the latter does not lie in some ostensibly possible transcendence, especially Giddens' structuration theory.

It will be argued that both structure and culture can be approached via the *same* methodological device, viz. analytical dualism, since both are held to be irreducibly-efficacious strata of reality. Analytical dualism is fundamentally not the same as Cartesian dualism. Although Cartesian dualism is appropriate for conceptualising culture, in that as product it does not depend upon continuous human activity, structure cannot be conceptualised in terms of such dualism *vis-à-vis* agency. Instead, *analytical* dualism is appropriate for theorising the relative interplay of structure and agency; analytical because the two are interdependent and dualist because each is held to possess its *own* emergent causal powers. To transcend the Cartesian mind/body dualism *and* to eschew the concomitant temptation of reductionism, one must conceptualise the mind as *emergent* from the body – dependent upon, but not reducible to, that from which it emerged. Thus, conceptualising human agency as a causally and taxonomically irreducible mode of matter is *not* to posit a distinct substance, 'mind', endowed with reasons for acting *apart* from the causal network, 'but to credit intentional embodied agency with distinct (emergent) causal powers from the *biological matter out of which* agents *were formed, on which they are capable of reacting back*' (Bhaskar 1993: 51).

Bhaskar's approach is materialist only in the sense that, while it does not

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rule out mind as an immaterial substance, it would insist that any such substance ontologically presupposes material substances, because the criteria for the existence of any imperceptible entity must be the causal criteria – the capacity to produce effects on matter (Collier 1994: 156). Bhaskar's approach is clearly a theory of synchronic emergence. He is bracketing off questions about temporal priority and the causes of emergence. Collier argues that while all the strata of reality that we know about *do* seem to have emerged at some particular time, there are instances where it is arguable 'that two or more strata, one of which is rooted in and emergent from the other, *must* have emerged simultaneously, since they ontologically presuppose each other … society, mind and language are related in this way' (ibid.: 157).

However, in eschewing reductionism, one does not by theoretical *fiat* have to ground one's approach in synchrony, for specific strata *do* emerge over time, but nonetheless are relatively efficacious and irreducible to the entities from which they emerged.

Contra Descartes, then, we are not dealing with an absolute division between mind and body – between two distinct substances – but with an emergent property *sui generis*, which itself generates further emergent, irreducible properties (society); hence my endorsement of a stratified conception of reality. Structure, like mind, is an emergent property, whose causal powers/liabilities are irreducible to, though emergent from, *sustained* human agency. Hence the possibility of *analytical* dualism, not Cartesian dualism, to examine their relative interplay over time, for the two are mutually dependent but distinct because of their emergent causal powers and the crucial fact that they operate over different tracts of time (Archer 1995; Porpora 1989). Society is peopled, and people have their own emergent powers of reflection and creativity. As the section on culture will argue, however, beliefs are not ontologically dependent upon believers. Although they clearly would not exist without the agents from which they emerge, what Bhaskar and other social realists mean by a stratified ontology is that, while beliefs are emergent from agency, such beliefs are separable and capable of consideration as an emergent system.

To develop this analysis I now turn to the prevailing orthodoxy in organisation theory, namely the generic endorsement of structuration theory. In view of Weick and Sandeland's (1990) contribution to the *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, in which they delineate the influence of structurationists on organisation theory, this paper is of substantive import. Indeed, as Reed points out, 'the most influential development … has been Giddens' attempt to construct a theory of Structuration … Thus, the theory of Structuration is invoked and deployed by a growing number of organisational theorists (1992: 187).

Meek (1992), among others, confidently endorses the structurationist conception of social structure. His principal concern is to demolish the myth of cultural integration, thus correctly arguing that 'organisational culture' is

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rarely, if at all, shared, and open to manipulation by management. He approvingly refers to Patricia Riley, who maintains that

> [Structures] are both the medium and the outcome of interaction. They are the medium, because structures provide the rules and resources individuals must draw on to interact meaningfully. They are its outcome, because rules and resources exist only through being applied and acknowledged in interaction – they have *no reality independent of the social reality they constitute*.
>
> (Riley 1983: 415)

The denial of independent ontological status for structure is evident in Meek's assertion that 'Culture and structure are not concrete entities; rather they are abstract concepts that are to be used to interpret behaviour'; it therefore follows to Meek that the principal task of the social theorist 'is to observe and describe the actions of human beings and *their* characterizations of social reality: social science is the researcher's constructions of the layman's constructions of what he and his compatriots are up to' (Meek 1992: 204). Yet the very possibility of social theory is predicated on the autonomous existence of real social structures and systems *qua* emergent entities that operate *independently* of our conception of them, though are nonetheless dependent upon agential activity while they endure. Mere observation, description and dependence upon agential characterisation, *contra* Meek, are hardly firm grounds for theorising socio-cultural change.

Meek's position, along with many others in his field, is in diametric opposition to the transcendental realist's assertion that it is precisely in virtue of a stratified reality that social science is possible (Bhaskar 1979: 25). To Mills, for instance, organisations are viewed as key sites of 'rule enactment, mediation and resistance' (1988: 366); and for Greenwood and Hinings, organisational structures should be conceptualised as 'embodiments of ideas, beliefs and values … Structures are reflexive expressions of intentions, aspirations and meanings, or "interpretative schemes"' (1988: 295). Hence, what can be identified as ontological depthlessness is widespread. There is no sense in which structure is accorded an ontological status of its own, i.e. distinct from, and irreducible to, human agency, whereby rules, meanings, etc., are held to be temporally posterior. Intrinsic to a stratified or 'depth' ontology is the subject/object dichotomy.

A standard riposte is to maintain that communication proceeds *solely* on the basis of intersubjective agreement, thereby obviating the logical necessity of *common* access to an objective world: in other words, to reduce issues of truth and falsity to local groups. But then, of course, the problem of disagreement arises. Here, the classic response is to adopt the Wittgensteinian fallacy of rendering specific conceptual schemes incommensurable. Indeed, attacks on realism almost invariably enjoin the incommensurability of conceptual schemes. Thus, those who disagree are held a

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priori to be part of a hermetically-sealed conceptual scheme, possessing its own, *internal* criteria for truth. But if no conceptual scheme can be wrong, then none can be right either. Truth must be grounded in the way things are, *independently* of *truth-believers*, for otherwise communication *per se* becomes an impossibility. The invocation of incommensurability is clearly untenable, for how can its advocates logically *know* that specific schemes are incommensurable in the first place? What needs to be recognised is that objective reality (natural and social) *constrains*: it predisposes, not determines, cultural emergent properties; hence the latitude for human error. We must recognise our fallibility (which is not the same as epistemic relativism, for we are indeed right about many matters) and recognise also that to ignore the wholesale importance of objective reality which humankind confronts ineluctably removes the motive for expending intellectual energy in the search for truth.

Many writers in the organisational field (Willmott 1990; Meek 1992; Riley 1983; Pettigrew 1985; Whittington 1989) derive support from Giddens' structuration theory. Hugh Willmott, for example, wrongly maintains that Giddens has successfully transcended the age-old dualisms of objectivity/subjectivity and structure/agency. Giddens' *oeuvre* represents part of a trajectory which started with Berger and Luckmann's social constructionism (1966). All who subscribe to it effectively disclaim an independent ontological status for social structure (and culture), thereby rendering impossible methodological examination of the conditions maintaining for stability or change.

Structuration versus emergence: providing the basis for analytical dualism

Willmott summarises thus:

> In the theory of structuration, attention is focused upon the way in which actors accomplish their practices by drawing upon a knowledge of rules … and a command of resources … and thereby reconstitute the considerations that provide for the very possibility of such accomplishments. In this formulation, 'structure' or 'objective facticity' *does not* exist *independently of the* actor.
>
> (1990: 53; emphasis added)

This is congruent with Giddens' assertion that 'structure has no existence independent of the knowledge that agents have about what they do in their day-to-day activity' (Giddens 1984: 26). At first glance it seems that Giddens is simply asserting that social structure could not exist without some conception on the part of the actors concerned. However, this is not the same as asserting the real, relative independent existence of emergent structures, whose causal powers/liabilities are not dependent upon, or

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reducible to, agential awareness. Giddens wrongly believes that talk of emergent (structural) properties is to be culpable of committing the crime of reification (Giddens 1984: 171; Archer 1996: 695). To argue for activity-dependence and simultaneously to dismiss Giddens' a priori over-accentuation of concept-dependence is not to reify structure, for the structural causes of poverty entail activity-dependence in terms of its continued reproduction, yet full or even partial 'discursive penetration' is not an ineluctable concomitant or precondition. How else can Giddens explicate the acceptance among sections of the middle and working classes that the poverty-stricken are so because of their putative indolent or scrounging nature? As will be argued shortly, an emergent ontology of social reality does not entail reification. Far from it: social theory presupposes it.

To Giddens,

> The constitution of agents and structures are not two independently given sets of phenomena, a dualism, but represent a duality … Structure is not 'external' to individuals: as memory traces, and as instantiated in social practices … Structure is not to be equated with constraint but is always both constraining and enabling.
>
> (ibid.: 25)

The key word here is *dualism*. Giddens' dismissal of Cartesian dualism accounts for his conflation of structure and agency, as conceptually compacted in his 'duality of structure'. Arguably, Giddens conceptualises dualism as Descartes does, which explains his assertion that to talk of structure as independent is inevitably to engage in reification. He writes in a rejoinder to Archer that 'Structure and action *cannot* form a dualism, save from the point of view of situated actors, because each is constituted by and in a single 'realm' – human activity' (Giddens 1990: 299). This is where Giddens ultimately enters the wrong theoretical door, for as argued above, Cartesian dualism *can* be transcended via the idea of emergence. It is also by virtue of an emergentist ontology that social theory is possible. To deny a stratified world is to deny the very possibility of social theory.

It is the relative autonomy of structure, as an emergent irreducible entity, that provides social theory with its object of study. Conceptualising structure as rules and resources is ultimately to render methodological analysis of their interplay intractable, for, *inter alia*, which rules are the most important, for whom and, moreover, why? The basic problem with Giddens' emphasis upon the simultaneity of constraint and enablement is that it really amounts to an unhelpful and misleading truism. All organisations constrain and enable their occupants, but do so differentially. Some are more enabled than constrained and vice versa. But Giddens would no doubt resist this, since to acknowledge the stringency of constraints is to follow the treacherous path of externality, something which actors *confront*. But to confront structure (and culture) is *not* perforce to confront a reified entity.

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Rendering rules constitutive of structure is to rule out an adequate explanation of constraint/enablement, and more fundamentally, *why* actors engage in patterned reproduction. When I enter a university as a student, am I merely entering an admixture of rules and resources? Am I not entering a set of *relations*, which are *independent* of such rules and resources? Rules are not enough to account for the differential distribution of life-chances and resources in society. Indeed, in what conceivable sense are there rules attaching to unemployment and poverty? As Craib (1992) and Thompson (1989) have rightly pointed out, to account for the importance of specific rules, one has to make reference to relatively enduring and independent structures. To assent to the latter is to accord structure an ontological status of its own, something which Giddens and others are at pains to repudiate. Indeed, Giddens fails to realise that whilst rules are constitutive of social positions, such positions acquire relative autonomy from their incumbents. As Porpora puts it, social relations 'do have independent causal properties and, moreover, such relationships, once established, are analytically prior to the subsequent rule following behaviour of actors' (1989: 206).

Yet, Giddens cannot completely distance himself from structure as pre-existent, durable and causally efficacious (1984: 212). His concept of system is more or less coterminous with the traditional conception of structure. Here Giddens is admitting the necessity of pre-existence through the back-door. Indeed, Giddens writes that 'the constraining elements themselves have to be seen as expressing the "givenness" of the social environment of actors to particular agents' (Giddens 1989: 258). To accede 'givenness' is immediately to embroil oneself in the ontology of emergence, because here we have an acknowledgement of pre-existence and relative durability: actors confront organisational structures which continue to exist even when such actors have either died or moved on elsewhere. This is in contradiction of his dictum that 'structure is both the medium and the outcome of interaction', since the latter denies pre-existence, entailing a vicious circularity, for structure is *ever* the medium *and* outcome, never a pre-existent given with which agency starts and either elaborates upon or merely replicates.

The other, equally untenable way in which Giddens endeavours to disclaim an ontological status for structure is to render it 'virtual' until instantiated by agency. But his implicit acknowledgement of pre-existence entails that structure is *real* – not 'virtual' – by virtue of its independent causal efficacy, its 'givenness' which we necessarily confront either as enablement or constraint but are not determined by. Giddens cannot avoid the non-Cartesian dualism of structure and agency. This is precisely his problem. He cannot but avoid ontologically distinguishing between the two, but he wrongly believes that to do so is to be culpable of invoking Cartesian dualism; hence his attribution of a 'virtual' status to structure. But this is not so: to accord structure an ontological status of its own is not to indulge in gratuitous reification, for emergent structural properties are irreducible to

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agency but have to be *mediated* by them to have any efficacy (Archer 1995: 195).

To recognise that specific, relatively independent, social forms do not necessarily lead all to acquire full 'discursive penetration', as Giddens puts it, is not to adopt Cartesian dualism; rather the job here is one of theorising separable, rather than separate, entities, which is transcendentally possible by virtue of a stratified social reality. There are occasions when agency *cannot* do otherwise, because of stringent socio-cultural constraints (e.g. the poverty-stricken). This is not to deny human creativity and reflexivity, but to show that for some in society emergent socio-cultural properties are not enabling. As I have already suggested, the constraint/enablement dichotomy is unhelpful. This issue is not one of simultaneity but one of theorising the *degrees* of constraint and enablement which structurationists are keen to eschew. And in assessing the relative degrees of freedom that some agents may have, analytical dualism is indispensable. The advocacy of inseparability necessarily precludes this methodological procedure – hence Archer's ontological arraignment of Giddens on the charge of 'central conflation', for structure and agency are held to be inseparable by him.

In defending the explanatory indispensability of emergence and stratification, I am not in any way invoking a Cartesian 'substance', utterly divorced from human agency. On the contrary, emergent structural properties ontologically presuppose agency for their efficacy. Structural emergent properties are only possible because of human activity, but once they have emerged by virtue of their internal necessity they possess irreducible causal powers/liabilities. Fundamentally reification is not entailed, for emergent properties only have efficacy *through* people: they have to be mediated and thus compel no-one. Thus a student may decide not to attend lectures, complete coursework, and sit examinations, but to do so would invoke a hefty, structured price, namely possible expulsion. As Archer rightly argues, structural and cultural emergent properties *condition* interaction by supplying actors with reasons for pursuing maintenance or change which work on a priori prior distribution of vested interests (Archer 1995, ch. 7).

Importantly, emergent social structures are such by virtue of internally-related positions or roles that actors *occupy*. What we have to accept is that whilst social relations are constituted by rules, such relations possess an ontological status of their own by virtue of their irreducible emergent causal powers. This is not to say that such causal powers are wholly independent of agency or that such powers have effects analogous to that of a magnetic field (cf. Manicas 1993). Rather, it is in virtue of their *internal necessity* that they come to possess relative autonomy and causal efficacy from role incumbents. This is how one can conceptualise social relations apart from rules. That structure is activity-dependent does not entail that roles do not have autonomy and causal efficacy. As Archer succinctly argues,

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> Roles … are more important for understanding what is going on between landlords and tenants … than their relations as persons. Moreover the role has to be granted some autonomy from its occupant or how else do we explain the similar actions of a succession of incumbents … ? Once again the fact that roles are necessarily activity dependent is insufficient to deny the independent capacity to structure individuals' activities.
>
> (Archer 1996: 682)

Thus, the role of teacher necessarily presupposes a student. On the other hand, a more general notion of organisational structure is required before a system of related roles – a hierarchy of staff including a head teacher, administrators, staff, cleaning personnel, etc., all of which positions are relatively independent of the actors who occupy them.

Sayer defines emergence in terms of

> the distinction between internal and external relations. Where objects are externally or contingently related they do not affect one another in their essentials and do not modify their causal powers, although they may interfere with the effects of these powers … Even though social structures exist only where people reproduce them, they have powers irreducible to those of individuals (you can't pay rent to yourself).
>
> (1992: 119)

Porpora nonetheless recognises that structure is an emergent stratum with *sui generis* causal properties. According to this author, we have to distinguish three things: 'the original constitutive rules that establish relationships of domination, *those relationships themselves*, and the tacit, informal rules that emerge when people enter those relationships and begin interaction' (Popora 1989: 208, emphasis added). The middle part is what social realists hold to be structure – irreducible and causally efficacious. The final part is what I hold to be cultural. And as Porpora rightly points out, Giddens conflates parts one and two of his three-part schema, thereby obscuring the 'causal role of relationships in his treatment of domination' (ibid.). Thus, *pace* Juckes and Barresi (1993: 204), marriage *qua* structural relationship is such by virtue of internally-related roles, viz. those of husband and wife, and is not constituted by the marriage certificate! Certainly, other emergent structural entities, such as the state and the Church, can combine to confront married couples with objective penalties in times of divorce (e.g. two-year cooling-off period before divorce is legally granted). But certificates, ceremonies and 'stag nights' are *cultural* phenomena, which serve to buttress marriage, they are contingent and thus external (cf. Porpora 1989). However, Juckes and Barresi are right to insist upon the *pre-existence* of structural forms. Social relations *do* pre-exist their incumbents; hence the possibility of analytical dualism to examine the interplay of 'the parts' and

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'the people' because of the temporal elements involved. The real sin of methodological individualism is not, as Manicas maintains, its failure to 'see that the materials with which people work enable and constrain them in profoundly different ways', *but its denial of pre-existence* (Manicas 1993: 223). Such an a priori denial necessarily results in voluntarism. Agents must have reasons for pursuing maintenance or change and such reasons must be grounded in something *anterior*, some antecedently-existing state of affairs.

To reiterate, emergent properties denote a *stratified* social world which is composed of non-observable entities which are real by virtue of their internal necessity. *Contra* Giddens, then, the social system constitutes a further stratum of social reality, which arises through a combination of internally-related emergent structures and relations between organisations. Because society is an open system, emergent structures possess *tendential* powers/liabilities, for other contingent factors may (and indeed do) intervene. Water boils at 100°C. However, this is a *tendential* emergent power, because other factors may intervene, such as impurities deposited as a result of pollution. This applies equally to societies and organisations. It is in virtue of the irreducible relations which constitute a university, for example, that one can claim that students will, tendentially, arrive at lectures, complete coursework and sit examinations. The effects of the structural mechanism (university relations) produced by them at the empirical level depend upon contingently related conditions.

To recapitulate, it is precisely on the basis of the reality of a stratified social world that analytical dualism gains its methodological foothold, thus providing social theory with its object of study. There is an important ontological distinction, then, between 'the parts' and 'the people' of society: or between system and social integration, where varying conjunctions between the two account for socio-cultural transformation or replication (Archer 1995: ch. 6). The parts refer to the emergent properties that arise from the relations between (emergent) structures and the people, to embodied agents, whose emergent properties are those of modification *vis-à-vis* other agents or groupings *idem*. It is indeed profitable to distinguish between orderly or conflictual relations maintaining between groups of actors from orderly or conflictual relations prevailing between the parts of society. Moreover, one can in turn theorise about the various conjunctions between the social and the systemic on a *multi-level* basis, for instance, at the level of roles, i.e. with the difference between roles and their occupants. Thus, high social malintegration within a particular organisation may be endemic but does not issue in structural change if the organisation's roles are complementary, and *qua* structured whole is not incongruent with its external systemic environment.

Structuration theory disavows the fact that people enter into pre-existing organisational structures, which specific actors may subsequently endeavour to change or maintain: social interaction leads either to transformation or replication. Structuration inherently disclaims the temporal elements involved in the structuring and restructuring of organisations (and society

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itself). It should be clear from the foregoing that current organisation theory, in its endorsement of structuration, conflates irreducible strata of reality – viz. structure and agency, *inter alia*, thus precluding examination of their relative interplay over time. However, such conflationism permeates analysis of culture.

Culture: establishing its 'World Three' status

As Crane points out, contemporary sociological and anthropological theory on the whole continues to adhere to a conception of culture as consistent and coherent which is 'more an ideal or an ideology than a reality' (Crane 1994: 4). Organisation theory has not been immune from such a conception. In fact, culture is almost invariably held to be embedded in structure rather than ontologically distinct from it. Meek also argues that 'a conceptual distinction be made between "culture" and "structure"' but immediately adds that 'it must be kept in mind, though, that both culture and structure are abstractions, and have use only in relation to the interpretation of observed concrete behaviour' (Meek 1992: 209). By suggesting this, Meek conflates culture and agency, rather than reducing one to the other. Meek, like many of his colleagues, does not conceptualise culture as an emergent, irreducible stratum of objective reality. It will be argued here that culture, like structure, constitutes an irreducible stratum of reality, but whose existence, unlike structure, is not dependent upon the continued reproductive actions of human agency: we are dealing with two separate, rather than separable, entities.

While some tentatively grant culture autonomy from structure (e.g. Mills 1988), others grant it autonomy but hold it to be part of structure (e.g. Hays 1994). Hays argues that 'social structure consists of two central, interconnected elements: systems of social relations and systems of meaning. Such systems … remain analytically distinct, as two aspects of social structure' (Hays 1994: 65–6). They are *ontologically distinct*, with *culture irreducible* to *both structure and* agency. Moreover, she also maintains that culture is '*both external* and *internal, objective and subjective*, material and ideal … it confronts us ready-made' (ibid.: 70, emphasis added). Hays here is confusing culture and its social reception, i.e. what agency *makes* of it. Culture as product cannot be both objective and subjective. This is not to deny that culture is produced by agency or that it is material in origin, but *qua* product it possesses an ontological status of its own. Essentially, one needs to make an ontological distinction between culture *per se* or the cultural system (henceforth, the CS) and what agency makes of it, namely socio-cultural interaction (henceforth, S-C).

Culture, like structure, is an emergent stratum of reality that may be used to start the motor of social theory. Cultural emergent properties, like structural ones, are intransitive, i.e. once registered they automatically belong to what Bhaskar terms the 'intransitive dimension'. As Bhaskar argues

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> the transfactuality of laws and socialisation into science implies the distinction between the intransitive or ontological and the transitive or epistemological dimensions of science. This latter must logically be extended to include the whole *material and cultural* infrastructure of society.
>
> (Bhaskar 1994: 255)

The intransitive dimension is concerned with objects, processes and events that are held to exist or occur independently of human conception; the transitive dimension is concerned with (fallible) knowledge of the latter. Culture constitutes a distinct stratum of reality since it is *about* facts *vis-à-vis* objective reality, which obtain independently of our claims. Again, this is not to disclaim that culture is a human product. Rather, as a product it immediately establishes its existential intransivity, i.e. it acquires an ontological status *apart* from the human activity that created it. If this were not so, then we would not be able to distinguish what it entails in holding certain beliefs and what it is for such beliefs to be true or false.

However, Bhaskar's intransitive dimension does not capture the important ways in which the CS has relational causal properties of its own when actualised or activated by agency – powers that do not depend upon agential cognisance for their efficacy. In fact, cultural emergent properties do not depend upon agency at all *once* produced (written down, spoken, etc.): we thus have *knowledge without a knowing subject*. The defining feature of *cultural* emergence is not internal necessity (although at the S-C level the CS has relational causal properties which exert an influence) but its 'World Three' status, as Popper would put it (Popper 1979). Popper distinguishes three worlds: World One refers to *physical* states and processes; World Two refers to *mental* states and process; and World Three refers to *products* of human minds. Such products include such objects as sculptures and paintings, even Shakespeare's plays. More important, however, is Popper's emphasis upon *objective knowledge*, namely, hypotheses, theories, arguments, ideologies, unsolved problems. Given the heterogeneous nature of World Three, Popper points out that one should distinguish more than three worlds, for example make objective knowledge a separate world from that of the arts. This is precisely what Archer (1988; 1995) does. Archer's equation of the CS with objective knowledge, specifically with that which is propositional, is neither illegitimate nor arbitrary.

As Popper argues, the CS is objective in the sense that it is 'totally independent of anybody's claim to know; it is also independent of anybody's belief, or disposition to assent, or to act. Knowledge in the objective sense is *knowledge without a knower*: it is *knowledge without a knowing subject*' (Popper 1979: 109). Here, then, we have near full-blooded Cartesian dualism in the sense that if the human race were to be obliterated overnight by a killer virus, books, journals, etc., would remain in libraries across the world, paintings in galleries, and so on. Social structure, on the other hand, would

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clearly cease to exist. Thus, the CS is not largely autonomous, since although we act upon the CS and it acts upon us, were we no longer to exist, it would not die with us. This in no way negates the fact that the CS originates as a product of human activity. 'Full-blooded' dualism, however, would, of course, disavow the latter.

What is being resisted is the (ontological) assumption that culture is not objective, that is, not merely analytically separable from, but actually *separate* from, its social production and actualisation. Such a disclaimer of objectivity has led many down the path of central conflation. In other words, such writers withdraw autonomy from agency and culture, rendering them so mutually constitutive that analysis of their interplay becomes impossible.

Following Archer: 'However, the differences between the exact nature of culture and structure vis-à-vis agency are not of major importance. The issue is one of activity-dependence'. The CS can be analysed in terms of its *logical consistency*, that is the degree of consistency between the component parts of culture which exist independently of knowing subjects. Cultural *effects*, on the other hand, are properties of people (the S-C level), and can thus be analysed in terms of *causal consensus*, that is the degree of cultural uniformity produced by the imposition of ideas by one set of people on another. It is worth quoting Archer at length here:

> it is the pre-existence, autonomy and durability of the constituents of the Cultural System which enables their identification as entities distinct from the meanings held by agents at any given time. The distinction is made by virtue of the fact that there are causal relations prevailing between items [of the CS], whereas it is *causal* relations which maintain between cultural agents. The logical consistency or inconsistency which characterizes relationships within the Cultural System is a property of the world of ideas … we utilise this concept everyday when we say that the ideas of X are consistent with those of Y … These are quite different from the other kind of everyday statement, to the effect that the ideas of X were influenced by those of Y, in which case we are talking about causal effects which are properties of people.
>
> (Archer 1995: 179)

Hence, it is not being denied that culture and agency mutually influence each other; but rather, because of the quasi-Cartesian status accorded to the CS as an emergent product, one can indeed examine their interplay over time. For many this entails an unacceptable reification. But does it? Culture *qua* product is a concrete system which is completely divorced from agency. Thus, I wish to defend philosophical dualism *vis-à-vis* culture, but not structure. As Archer herself would concur, a manual that is left to gather dust for hundreds of years still retains the *dispositional capacity to be understood and used*. Structure, on the other hand, is never divorced from agency. However,

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the differences between the exact nature of culture and structure *vis-à-vis* agency are not of major importance. The issue is one of activity-dependence.

The essential problem with many who deny objectivity to culture is reliance on the idea that cultural artifacts are context-dependent to be found meaningful. Joanne Martin (1992), like Meek, ultimately makes culture dependent upon social reception for its validity. In order to understand people's meanings constant reference has to be made to the S-C level. Yet are not people's 'meanings' independent of the CS? Martin's methodological injunction can be refuted with one of her own examples. She maintains that 'culture is not reified out there – to be *accurately* observed' (Martin 1992: 13). But in what sense can ideologies be observed? Here Martin is conflating the S-C and the CS. She focuses solely on the S-C level, i.e. agential actualisation. In fact, Martin rightly argues that there is nothing intrinsically natural about categorising people in terms of discrete, homogeneous 'races' on the basis of phenotypical characteristics. Yet this is to adopt dualism, for racism is quintessentially ideological (CS level) and is manipulated by certain groups to exclude others (S-C level).

Indeed, to put forward the proposition that all black people are intrinsically inferior to white people is to make a truth-claim – a claim about objective reality. If the latter were not objective in the sense of being true or false independently of our claims to either, then we would (i) not be able to put forward such a proposition, and (ii) be able subsequently to refute it. The CS is, as Archer puts it, society's 'propositional register'. It is analysable without reference to agency via the universal law of non-contradiction. Therefore, racism *qua* ideology may either stand in a complementary relationship or an incompatible one in relation to other CS components, independently of agential awareness. Essentially, those who do not assent to the CS/S-C distinction maintain that in practice the CS cannot be examined separately via analytical dualism.

Stanley and Wise object to Popper's ontological schema of 'Three Worlds' on this basis:

> In our approach these three 'worlds' overlap and are inextricably interwoven; and even *for analytic purposes we feel that there is little justification for so separating them*. We believe that what are material things, what is subjectivity, what is knowledge all overlap.
>
> (Stanley and Wise 1993: 130, emphasis added)

Yet if the two cannot be separated analytically, how can one examine, for example, the relative interplay of sexist ideology and capitalism? This is precluded by Stanley and Wise. Instructively, they maintain that

> 'Social facts' embody people's understandings of what is factual and, because factual, what constrains them … We treat a whole range of

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> things as 'facts', as 'scientifically proven', as 'what everyone knows to be true', and these become constraining upon us.
>
> (1993: 131–2)

Against Stanley and Wise, *truth is independent of our claims to it*. If this were not so, then we could never be right or wrong. The two are culpable of committing the epistemic fallacy, reducing ontology to epistemology.

It is difficult to understand why 'facts' and 'scientifically proven' are wrapped with inverted commas. Water has the (tendential) emergent power to boil at 100°C, a state of affairs that is independent of us. There *are* scientifically-proven facts, without which daily life would be impossible. What Stanley and Wise do not accept is that scientific theories, hypotheses, etc., belong to the CS as autonomous components. Naturally, as Popper points out, somehow or other the thing has to be started by us (World Two processes), but once it gets going it produces its own problems which are independent of us. Popper gives the example of a mathematical problem which is placed into a computer: assume that the problem has been solved by the computer, and that the computer is so made that it can print the solution, and that the paper which it produces is at once put into the library and forgotten there. Nobody ever looks at it! Of course the human mind was involved in devising the computer. But nobody knows that this particular problem has been solved. It is just there to be found in the library for those who wish to find it (Popper 1994: 37).

However, it may be argued that sexist ideology, beliefs, etc., are not so neatly lodged in the library or the CS, for there exists no equivalent of a mathematics manual, for checking the correctness of a formal proof. Whilst there is no sexist manual *per se* (although historically one can easily dig up numerous pamphlets, books, etc., regarding women's 'natural' role in the home and so on), *propositions can be passed on orally*. As Popper argues, as far as objective knowledge is concerned (World Three), 'it may be said to be the world of libraries, of books and journals, but also of oral reports and traditions' (Popper 1994: 32). My rejoinder here is quite simply: *what* is being passed on? For something to be passed on, it has to be *outside* of people's heads. Moreover, even if sexist ideology is not written down, it can contradict or be consistent with other propositions independently of us. This of course is not to say that we always live logically; but rather a proposition stands in a *logical relationship* (of complementarity or contradiction) to other propositions.

Dualism: the parts and the people revisited

As with structure, culture is methodologically analysable by virtue of its emergent status. Indeed, like structure, culture has relational, causal properties of its own, which confront actualising agency in the form of situational logics (see Archer 1995: ch. 7). Cultural analysis is also a multi-level affair,

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from the doctrinal level, where, for instance, religious doctrine may contradict welfare policy, down to the micro-level. Just as any role within an organisation can have contradictory requirements, so can cultural values. However, the problem currently vitiating the literature on 'organisational culture' is precisely how one can examine the relative interplay between society's 'propositional register' and agency when culture is reduced to, or defined solely in terms of, what goes on at the level of causality. The realist assertion that culture as an emergent product has properties of its own is thrown out of the analytical window; or, following Archer, the S-C level is conflated with the CS level.

The parallel with structuration theory is palpable. Indeed, given the generic nod in the direction of structuration theory, it is hardly surprising to find that at best some will only accord culture an 'analytical' status. It would not be accepted that actors within organisations confront emergent relational causal properties of the CS as stringent obstructions or welcome opportunities, yet for which they are not responsible. Is it not the case that both the Commission for Racial Equality and the Equal Opportunities Commission were set up in response to the social manipulation of racism and sexism (*qua* CS components) which excluded many women and black people from positions for which they were suitably qualified? According such pernicious ideologies an analytical status is simply not enough, since they are irreducible to their producers. If they were not then we could not examine their relative interplay with structure and agency.

Given that both racism and sexism have social efficacy they must therefore be accorded an ontological status of their own. They pre-exist extant actors and would continue to exist if all were unaware of their existence. People enter into organisations and are consequently differentially able to respond. What is of interest to the practical social theorist is how, for instance, men in organisations respond to the situational logic of a constraining contradiction when they uphold sexist ideology in justifying their exclusion of women from certain positions or turning a blind eye to sexual harassment. As Mills rightly points out, the processes of gender differentiation do not operate 'as a one-way street. Women can and do reflect upon their existence, observing the contradictions in the way men and women are treated in organisational practices. They can and do resist those contradictions' (Mills 1988: 365). Mills correctly argues that gender is a cultural phenomenon. However, he does not accord gender ideology the ontological status it deserves. I would certainly not want to deny that gender ideology is the (revisable) product of ideational development, which is located within a material context. Rather, *qua* product such ideology immediately remains an inhabitant of World Three and stands in a logical relationship to other World Three denizens.

Against Anthony, then, 'cultures' are not 'owned' by members of organisations (Anthony 1994). Members may indeed internalise specific cultural components or uphold others to further their interests, but they internalise

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or uphold something which is an irreducible denizen of the CS. Furthermore, given the intransitive nature of the CS, it is untenable to assert, as many currently do, that each and every 'organisational culture' is somehow unique (cf. Martin *et al*. 1983). To Taylor Cox, for instance, 'organisations may be thought of as having their own distinctive cultures' (Taylor Cox 1993: 2l). Although one can talk of structures in the plural, this is not permissible for culture, since all cultural components belong to the CS. In fact, my main concern is that to permit talk of discrete or unique cultures is to provide relativists with much-needed ammunition, since the next step has been to disclaim the invariant nature of the law of non-contradiction which is employed to study culture anywhere in the world (e.g. Bloor 1976). The salient point, however, is that it is untenable both to assert uniqueness and to talk of 'organisational culture' itself. Asserting the latter is to elide structure and culture. Indeed, *pace* Newman (1995: 23), culture is something apart from human identity and agency: methodological examination would otherwise be impossible.

The ideational elements of culture (CS) are intimately anchored in language. Language presupposes the objective reality of objects, processes and events. As Bhaskar argues, language presupposes referential detachment, which 'establishes at once its existential intransivity and the possibility of another reference to it, a condition of any intelligible discourse at all. Referential detachment is implicit in all language-use' (Bhaskar 1994: 257). By existential intransivity Bhaskar is referring to ontology, specifically to the independent existence of events, objects, etc. Cultural emergent properties must logically be about something in order to have any sense. In other words, they have to be grounded in the way things are. Indeed, as Trigg nicely puts it, 'Any account of human activity is liable to lapse into incoherence without such notions as reason, truth and reality. Certainly without them all human belief would lose its point' (Trigg 1994: 34).

Furthermore, the current orthodoxy regarding culture does not accord it the relational causal powers to direct agency. Instead, the tendency is to confuse culture with structure or downplay dissensus at the S-C level. Indeed, both Hampden-Turner (1990) and Handy (1993) confuse culture with structure. Handy proffers a typology of four cultures: power, role, task and person. In contradistinction, power is an emergent relational property; roles are constitutive of structure, with tasks being an integral aspect; and finally, personhood is the metaphysical anchorage for the agent and actor. All four are irreducible strata of reality (cf. Archer 1995).

I make no apologies for my brief, critical rejoinder to current orthodox views on culture, since each is ontologically depthless *vis-à-vis* culture, structure and agency. Conflationary theorising is amethodological, for analytical dualism is possible only on the basis of real objects of study. If ideologies and structures are efficacious then they are real and thus ontologically distinguishable from their progenitors. The ghost of empiricism still haunts many of the texts on 'organisational culture'. Contrary to Pheysey (1993),

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social structure may not be visible, but its effects are. One can employ the causal criterion to establish its reality. This is equally applicable to culture. Culture is quintessentially not something an organisation is. Contra Anthony, ideologies are not immune from counter-criticism, though their implications may not be realised for structural reasons. 'Impenetrability' is a myth: 'corporate culture is not bereft of logical protection' (Anthony 1994: 36). It can only be 'protected' via S-C containment strategies. And when these fail, structural power is employed often with impunity.

The practical implications of analytical dualism

My reason for reconceptualising structure is not simply to elucidate how conflationary theorising effectively is transported to the cultural scene in the literature, but to insist that the two cannot be analysed in isolation. Focusing on culture alone is to vitiate the enterprise of theorising change versus stability in organisations. Any approach which accentuates one or the other will prove to be inadequate in the long run. The practical theorist's task is to examine the relative interplay of culture, structure and agency: each interpenetrates the other, but each is nonetheless ontologically (and thus methodologically) distinguishable from the other. The purpose of this paper has been threefold: (i) to reconceptualise structure and culture as emergent strata; (ii) to maintain their equal necessity for adequate theorising; and (iii) to argue for the necessity of viewing any organisation from both a social- and a system-integration perspective, i.e. as a set of interacting actors and as a configuration of parts or complexes that both differentially enable and constrain actors. Analytical dualism disengages the emergent powers of people from those of the parts of society (structural and cultural), for the emergent properties and powers of the parts and the people are *sui generis*. S-C dynamics are interrelated in determinate ways, but without one determining the other. Obviously analysis of the S-C level will involve reference to material interests, to power, alliances, and so on, but this merely means that the practical theorist's life is not an easy one!

Agents resist – some more than others – and the overriding question for the practical analyst is how this results in a lack of change. For example, the issue of equal opportunities for women in organisations remains firmly on the agenda. Women still lag behind their male counterparts in terms of pay and promotion. Sexism (the CS level) is often employed to justify exclusionary practices (the S-C level). How do culture and structure interpenetrate here? In large part, the key to explication lies in disengaging the emergent powers of people from those of the parts. The job of the practical analyst is to find out whether the emergent structural powers remain unexercised, or exercised but unperceived. For instance, a male senior manager may have the power (by virtue of his structural location) to promote a female colleague, but because of his adherence to sexist ideology, such powers remain unexercised. Of course, it may indeed be that the male

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manager disagrees fundamentally with sexism, but feels that he cannot promote the woman because of a perceived antagonism among male clerical staff.

The task, therefore, is to pinpoint objective opportunities for the enhancement of women, which can be derived from the emergent structure of the organisation concerned. The scenario is indeed brief and certainly not exhaustive of the causal factors that may be involved, but it does nonetheless transcend subjectivism and evince the indispensability of analytical dualism. 'Organisational culture' is thus not merely about increasing productivity or designing company logos! Cultural items do not remain at the gates of all organisations. Again, it is only in virtue of a stratified reality that analytical dualism is possible. *Pace* Bryant (1995), theorising the relative interplay of generative structures (which may remain unexercised or exercised but unperceived) is not to embroil oneself in an ineluctable regression. Rather, it provides a much more robust analytical grip on S-C dynamics, eschewing the twin nightmares of empiricism and positivism.

The main impetus behind this paper has been to redirect attention away from the elisionist preoccupation with 'organisational culture'. Whether one wants to analyse generic economic failure or gender relations within organisations, then attention must be paid to both culture and structure: both constitute irreducible, causally-efficacious strata of reality and can thus be approached via the same methodological device of analytical dualism – from the macro- to the microscopic level. Both culture and structure are presently being denied an ontological status of their own in the organisation literature. Indeed, it has been argued that the current literature has been influenced by the conflationism of Giddens' structuration theory. This has been explicitly adopted by many and implicitly transferred to the cultural realm. Any form of conflation precludes analysis of the interplay of culture, structure and agency. Undoubtedly analytical dualism and its anchorage in a stratified reality will still be dismissed by many. My final riposte to such dissenters is that a stratified ontology is presupposed by social theory. All human beings enter involuntaristically into S-C relations which are not of their making. Hence, there is the very possibility of methodological analysis and subsequent practical intervention.

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