

# Critical Approaches and the Problem of Social Construction

*Reassessing the Legacy  
of the Agent/Structure Debate in IR*

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# CRITICAL APPROACHES AND THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION: REASSESSING THE LEGACY OF THE AGENT/STRUCTURE DEBATE IN IR

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## **Abstract**

Conceptualizing the process of social change in IR has proved more elusive than initially thought. If the notion of agency that was proposed to capture this moment gained great saliency in the field, it has had surprisingly limited analytical effects on the discipline of IR. Hence, many can agree that social actors have agency, but very few have managed to set up an agenda that uses this notion in productive ways. Discussions about agency often remain meta-theoretical, and have had arguably little effect on the concrete studies in the field. This paper argues that debates over agency have failed to produce a satisfactory response to the question of how critical theories should approach social construction largely because they have missed what is ultimately at stake in thinking about social change and agency. Seeking in the latter an alternative form of causality that could be distinguished from structural reproduction, they created a dualism that was bound to be unproductive. Adopting a different perspective, this article revisits the structure agency debate with the aim of demonstrating that the notion of agency is fundamental to a critical perspective on social construction. It argues that introducing agency within our epistemological framework does not offer a solution for understanding social construction, but rather helps us frame the problematic of social construction itself in ways that pushes critical theory away from the reifying glance of positivism. More specifically, it uses agency as a means to problematise power as practice, arguing that, too often, critical theories take this aspect for granted. As a result they miss what exactly is being negotiated in struggles over power.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Twenty five years ago, Robert Cox established his famous distinction between problem solving theory and critical theory by characterising the latter as being focused on social change. As he argued, 'critical theory, unlike problem solving theory, does not take institutions and social and power relations for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with the origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing'.<sup>2</sup> This concern with social change as a key for understanding how social dynamics are socially constructed came to be broadly shared by a wide variety of critical approaches. However, conceptualising the process of social change proved to be more elusive than initially thought. Although the notion of agency, proposed to capture this moment, gained great saliency in IR, it had surprisingly limited analytical effects on the discipline. Even as numerous scholars recognised the importance of agency, very few managed to set up an agenda that uses this notion in productive ways. Discussions about agency thus remained mostly meta-theoretical and had little impact on concrete studies in the field.

In this article, I argue, that proponents of the notion of agency have failed to produce a satisfactory response to the question of how critical theory should approach the issue of social construction. The problem stems from the fact that agency is often presented as a new form of causality which could account for social change, a means for *explaining* social change, rather than as a means to *specify the significance* of social change. This difference is subtle but fundamental to the project of critical theory, since it is one thing to stress that institutions and/or discourses are socially constructed but another to define what exactly is being constructed. Hence, coming to terms with the issue of social construction is not simply a matter of focusing on the social context to explain international dynamics. Rather, the challenge consists in grasping the historical significance of social institutions and discourses. It consists in problematising what is taken for granted, since critical theorists are themselves conditioned by their own social context.

Take money for example. While we can all agree that money is socially constructed, it would be wrong to seek an explanation for the creation of money, as we know it, since it was never created as such. Trying to explain the creation of money as if it was invented to serve the purposes it now fulfils is the classic mistake of neoclassical economics which generally presents money as an instrument invented to simplify barter. By contrast it is argued now that money might have been the product of a long lineage which saw it evolve from a form of religious artefact to a means of payment with multiple economic functions.<sup>3</sup> As this example illustrates, it is always a challenge to grasp the process of

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank George Comninel, Lee Evans, Richard Lane, Tony Porter and Benno Teschke for their comments on previous drafts of this manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> Robert W. Cox, 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10 (1981), p. 129.

<sup>3</sup> Sitta von Reden, *Exchange in Ancient Greece* (London: Duckworth, 1995).

social construction and determine what needs to be explained. The problem is that we often seek the explanation to the wrong question because we misconstrue the nature of social reality and take for granted institutions that were never created in the way we know them. In other words, *the process of social construction is never as obvious as it might appear because discourses and social institutions are historically created in ways that defy our own assumptions.*

It is in light of this difficulty that I wish to consider the agent structure debate and examine whether it can help us better specify what is socially constructed. By contrast to previous interventions in the debate which take agency and structure as ontological realities and then attempt to build an epistemology that reflects this reality, this article starts by asking whether these notions can help us elaborate a critical epistemology. I thus shift the emphasis away from the issue of 'how does social construction work' to the more reflective question of 'how can we *see* this process at work'. In doing so, I argue that the notion of agency offers an invaluable means to problematise social life, but this requires that we correctly specify what purpose this notion fulfils in our analysis. Introducing agency within our epistemological framework does not offer a *solution for understanding social construction*; a different causal mechanism that could account for social change. Rather it helps us *frame the problematic of social construction itself* in ways that pushes critical theory away from the reifying gaze of positivism.

Critical theory is here understood in the wide sense intimated by Cox. It encompasses approaches that seek to overcome the reifying gaze of positivism by showing how features we take for granted are in fact socially constructed. It should be stressed that the categories of positivism and critical theory that I use here are not meant to map exactly the actual configuration of debates in IR, but rather to refer to two distinct epistemological dispositions. They can be distinguished, I contend, on the basis of their ability to grasp the process of social construction. In doing so, I wish to problematise the way in which critical theorists too often distance themselves from positivism without realising how they often reproduce themselves some of its problems, more specifically its tendency to reify social structures.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first sets out the problematic of social construction and how it relates to critical theory. As I will argue, the failure of critical theory to use productively the notion of agency largely stems from the desire to present power as a structural phenomenon. Seeing power as embedded in the very structure of society, it becomes difficult to see how social forces can escape the inherent tendencies imposed by structures. As I will argue, the issue of social change has thus continued to elude critical theory making it difficult to make room for a conception of agency. After outlining this problem, I focus in section two on the question of agency and show how this tension between structural power and social change has yielded a highly voluntarist notion of agency which has no heuristic value for problematising social construction. This explains, I argue, why many critical theorists have now moved away from the notion of agency. Section three, addresses the notion of structure in order to show that the

problems with the concept of agency, in fact, reflect a deeper problem with the way critical theorists think of structures, and more specifically of structural power. This has resulted, I contend, in an overemphasis on structural determination which only contributes in reifying social reality by suggesting that discourses and institutions have inherent tendencies which are imprinted on society regardless of how social actors relate to them. Finally, the fourth section advocates for a move away from structural notions of power in order to take more seriously power as practice. In order to highlight what is at stake in thinking about power as practice, I reformulate the notion of agency as the ability to relate to a social context, rather than an ability to transform it in ways that are not predetermined by structures. I argue here that the reason for highlighting this aspect is that critical theorists take this very ability for granted when they focus on structural notions of power. The difficulty of relating to a constantly changing social context is what drives the exercise of power. Hence, only by taking this pragmatic aspect into consideration can one start to problematise the process of social construction and grasp its significance.

### 1- Positivism and the Problem of Social Construction

My starting point is the critique of positivism. I use positivism here to designate approaches that reify social reality and present it as a 'normal' or 'natural' order, rather than as a socially constructed one. This specific definition of positivism follows on the general use of the term among critical theorists,<sup>4</sup> even if my emphasis might differ somewhat from others. Instead of focusing on the separation of the subjective and objective world<sup>5</sup> or the empiricist epistemology of positivism,<sup>6</sup> I see the problems of positivism as being rooted in the way it seeks to generalise *laws* of social development. This quest for broad generalisations drives positivists to develop methodological tools which downplay the specificities of their object of research in order to infer more general and abstract laws. The problem with this predilection for transhistorical models built on causal laws which are applicable to a wide range of cases is that it creates the impression that these laws are 'universal' because, supposedly, they can be observed across a wide variety of societies. In that sense, these laws conceal what is socially constructed since they always seem to transcend the particular context in they are instantiated.

This positivist framework has two important consequences when thinking about social construction. First, positivism neglects social change by virtue of the method it promotes. Indeed, the more a theory is inclined to derive general laws of social development, the

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<sup>4</sup> Yosef Lapid, 'The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era', *International Studies Quarterly*, 33 (1989), pp. 235-254.; Stephen Gill (ed.), *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relation*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Steve Smith, 'Positivism and Beyond', in S. Smith, K. Booth and M. Zalewski (eds.) *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 11-44.

more social change loses its importance. Change becomes a matter of historical curiosity, but it is no longer deemed scientific as an object of research. Positivism thus tends to split science and history as if they are different orders of explanation, one being theoretical the other descriptive. A second consequence, of particular importance for critical theories, is that this framework tends to present structures in apolitical ways, as if structures transcend power relations. For positivists, structures always seem to precede politics. They set out the fundamental laws that govern society. Because they operate at a general level, they appear impervious to the specific politics that are played out 'below' them.<sup>7</sup> These structural laws are thus often seen as being generated independently from power dynamics and, while they set the terrain for social struggles, they are not directly linked to any specific interest or worldview. It is as if structural conditions apply equally to all actors.

Two examples can help better illustrate these features of positivism. In the field of IR, the Realist tradition presents the international system as being driven by the imperative of survival which emerges from the fragmentation of the system into various communities protected by their own state.<sup>8</sup> Without an overarching authority, all states are said to be compelled to ensure their own security through the accumulation of power.<sup>9</sup> Not only is this imperative considered almost timeless, but it is also seen as apolitical in that it results from the asociality of the international system. Indeed, the international system is here deemed akin to a state of nature. In that sense, structural determination precedes any exercise of power, and is not associated with the specific interests of any social force. An important corollary is that power is then considered mostly in behavioural terms, that is mostly as an attribute of states.<sup>10</sup> It is their ability to mobilise resources in order to achieve certain goals which matters most here.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, power is seen as having little impact on the structures of the international system. While it determines the configuration of force among states, and thus the strategic considerations of the latter, it is governed by imperatives that ultimately escape the 'agency' of states. In other words, power cannot, 'realistically', redefine the deeper structures that govern the international system.

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<sup>7</sup> This point is related to what Wendt criticized, from a different vantage point, as the arbitrary dissociation of structure from process. Alexander E. Wendt, 'The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory', *International Organization*, 41 (1987), pp. 335-370.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Gilpin, 'The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism', *International Organization*, 38 (1984), pp. 287-304.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Massachusetts: 1979).

<sup>10</sup> There are some exceptions, notably among neorealists who have attempted to problematize the notion of power. Robert O. Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown & Co., 1977); David Baldwin, *Paradoxes of Power* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989). Here one finds the foundations for a notion of structural power that shares some features with critical notions of structural power that will be discussed below. For a discussion see Stefano Guzzini, 'The Use and Misuse of Power Analysis in International Relations', in Ronen P. Palan (ed.) *Global Political Economy: Contemporary Theories* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 53-66.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: a Theory of International Relations* (London: Weidenfeld, 1966).



In a different way, neoclassical economics also isolate the laws of the market from power. The former is seen to be a product of an inherent logic of competition which governs the law of supply and demand on markets. Again, this law is not dependent on any social institutions to operate.<sup>12</sup> It is the product of a highly decentralised system and stems from the repeated negotiations over the exchange of commodities and services. Within this template, power is seen as a form of arbitrary and external intervention which can distort, but not alter, the inner laws of the market. It does not rely on the structures of the market itself and is deemed unable to reshape the market's inherent tendencies. This leads to a behavioural conception of power once more. This time, however, the formulation serves to justify the laws of the market as devoid of structural inequalities, rather than see power politics as an expression of an underlying anarchy. While the theoretical articulation of power and structure is different from Realism, the positivist framework that underpins both theories leads to a conception of structures as being neutral, since they are distinct from power struggles, and almost timeless, because they are unlikely to evolve into something different. Furthermore, in both cases the structural laws are deemed to be the object of science, while 'politics' is relegated to the second order of 'historical facts'.

The tendency of positivism to abstract science from history and to neglect the relationship between structure and power was criticised by various approaches in the 1980s. The common element that united these critical theories was a desire to emphasise the process of social construction. This generally meant two things. First, critical theories rejected the notion that social structures were neutral, or apolitical. Referring to different types of structures, they showed how structures were in fact tightly connected to specific interests or discourses as a means through which power is exerted. Social construction was thus primarily conceived as the process by which social forces establish the conditions, or structures, for exerting power over others. This implied a re-articulation of the notion of power in order to move beyond a sole focus on behavioural, and more apparent, forms of power. Critical theorists thus introduced structural conceptions of power that emphasised the capacity of social forces to influence people's behaviour by shaping the environment in which they operate.<sup>13</sup> Structures were thus increasingly seen as being imbued with power. In fact, structural determination often became indistinguishable from power since, it was argued, the way structures shape society is never neutral.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> At best, economists evoke social institutions, such as property rights, which ensure that no predatory behavior will distort the operation of this logic of the market, but this logic is not conceived here as being shaped by these institutions. It simply operates when finally allowed to.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Gill and David Law, 'Global Hegemony and the Structural Power of Capital', in Stephen Gill (ed.) *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 93-124.

<sup>14</sup> Stefano Guzzini, 'Structural power: the Limits of Neorealist Power Analysis', *International Organization*, 47 (1993), pp. 443-78.

In rejecting the positivist dualism between power and structure, critical theorists also challenged the notion that structures transcend the process of history. Since structures were seen as consolidating the interests and worldviews of dominant social forces, it became necessary to problematise how these structures are established in the first place through power struggles. Hence, this added a second element to the attack on positivism as critical theorists accused it of being unable to account for social change.<sup>15</sup> Partly in reaction to the rise of structural realism, numerous authors thus began to champion more dynamic approaches that moved away from the rigid determinism of positivism.<sup>16</sup>

The focus on social construction was thus meant to overcome the two key problems of positivism: its tendency to see structures as socially neutral and to neglect the role of social forces in setting them up. However, this notion of social construction raised its own difficulties as it proved difficult to reconcile its two fundamental aims. Indeed, while the notion of structural power put a premium on social change, it also, paradoxically, made it difficult to conceptualise social change because it entailed a circular logic: if structures empower the very people who are interested in protecting a given social order, how then can we explain change? In other words, how can less privileged social forces overcome the biases embedded in society in order to transform it? This broad critical framework thus implicitly gave rise to a tension between its conceptualisation of power and its desire to highlight social change. Having emphasised that social structures reinforce dominant forces, change again seemed to elude critical theorists.

One can appreciate, in light of this problem, the significance of the structure/agency debate and the specific conception it proposes to formalise the process of social construction. In articulating the notions of agency and structure, one of the objectives of contributors to the debate was to overcome the problem of structural determinism.<sup>17</sup> In short, having asserted that structures tend to reproduce a given social order, it was necessary to trace change back to a different source: agency. Hence, by purporting that individuals have the ability to act in ways that are not predetermined by structures, the notion of agency offered a means to articulate structural power and social change in a coherent framework of analysis.<sup>18</sup> It seemed to resolve a tension which had been created by the analytical move of 'socialising' structures, since it posited reproduction and change

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Ashley, 'The Poverty of Neorealism', in Robert Keohane (ed.) *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Cox, 'Social forces.' See also John Gerard Ruggie, 'Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Towards a Neorealist Synthesis', *World Politics*, 35 (1983), pp. 261-285.

<sup>17</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Margaret Archer, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> There is another alternative to the inclusion of agency for theorizing social change which is to focus on internal contradictions, as if change was generated by the structures themselves. I cannot deal properly with this view here except to note that this view leads to a form of functionalism in that social change is always explained then in terms of the need to overcome contradictions. Why one specific solution is necessary to overcome a contradiction rather than another, however, can never be explained within this framework.

as two distinctive moments of social construction. However, I argue in the rest of the paper that this proposition effectively formalised a tension already present in critical theory by separating the question of social construction into distinct moments that could never be properly reconciled. *Social change thus became a means to explain how social structures come about, but the significance of these structures was never conceived in relation to social change. It remained the purview of structural analysis. In other words, our conception of what these structures are about, of what they construct, mostly remained dependent on a structural and ahistorical framework of analysis.*

To demonstrate this point, I now examine these two modalities of social construction, agency and structure, and highlight more concretely how they hinder our ability to formulate a proper conception of social construction. Conceived as two different moments operating partly in abstraction from one another, they entertain a tension which has incited more and more critical scholars to move back towards a highly structuralist perspective that further reifies our understanding of the world. In other words, I will argue that the inability to properly resolve the structure/agent dilemma has pushed critical theory back towards a form of structural determinism which shares crucial features with positivism.

## **2- Agency and the Elusive Source of Social Change**

In addressing the notion of agency, my interest is, as I mentioned, limited to an epistemological question: in what way does the concept of agency, conceptualised here as ‘the capability of the individual “to make a difference” to a pre-existing state of affairs’,<sup>17</sup> enable us to grasp how things are socially constructed. This section points out that this concept, in its current guise, tells us little beyond the obvious point that there is social change that is triggered by the activity of social forces. Despite its fashionable ring, it cannot help us solve the problems that emerge from a structural conception of power. There are three reasons which account for why this is the case.

The main issue concerns a fundamental methodological ambiguity that is attached to the notion of agency. Initially, interventions in the debate about structure and agency were motivated by a desire to transcend the apparent dualism between reproduction and change. Alexander Wendt, in particular, explicitly attempted to articulate structural determination and social change. The publication of his ‘The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory’ served to sum up the state of the field in sociology, and set out the parameters for subsequent discussions about agency in IR.<sup>19</sup> One of its main propositions was that the ability of people to transform their social environment is a crucial dimension of social reality which needs to be integrated more directly into the analysis along with social reproduction. He thus insisted on surmounting the dualism between both facets of social life. As Wendt and Duvall later stated, ‘the goal of

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<sup>19</sup> Wendt, ‘Agent-Structure Problem’,

structurationist ontologies is to replace the 'dualism' of agency and social structure that pervades individualist and collectivist ontologies with a perspective that recognizes the 'codetermined irreducibility' of these two fundamental units of social analysis'.<sup>20</sup> Agency and structural reproduction, Wendt insisted, are inseparable aspects of social reality and must be both taken into account in the analysis of international dynamics.

While this intervention was certainly laudable, the end product remained flawed. Indeed, one could agree that there was no separation at the ontological level, but the dualism quickly reappeared as soon as one tried to derive the implications of this notion for the way we understand social reality. The difficulty here was to determine what difference the recognition of this role of agency would have for the way we do social analysis. As constructivists reflected on this question, the agents/structure dualism seemed to rapidly resurface, as theorists struggled to ascertain what aspects of social reality should be ascribed to agency and to structures.<sup>21</sup> Hence, while both structural determination and agency could be said to be inherently tied to one another from an *ontological* standpoint, the dualism proved difficult to overcome *methodologically*. As one constructivist put it: 'as long as actions are explained with reference to structure, or vice versa, the independent variable in each case remains unavailable for problematization in its own right'.<sup>22</sup> In the end, the study of social reproduction and social change could thus never be fully articulated to one another because it seemed to imply two different forms of causation. On the one hand, structures were said to shape the behaviour of agents, establishing the rules and norms that condition people. On the other hand, agency was presented as the ability to step out of social conditioning and, to some extent, freely transform structures. Hence, both types of causation appeared opposite to one another, and thus required a different perspective to be analysed, even when both aspects could be said to exist in a single moment. This is why the concept of bracketing out each moment seemed to resurface at various points of the debate,<sup>23</sup> as if one needed to abstract from one of the two modalities in order to perceive the other.

This very problem prompted various critics to suggest that structuration theory amounted to nothing else than a restatement of the problem.<sup>24</sup> In their influential *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*, Hollis and Smith pointed out that ultimately one could not overcome the problem by superposing two different forms of causality (one structural and one related to agency).<sup>25</sup> As they stressed, it is one thing recognising that

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<sup>20</sup> Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall, 'Institutions and International Order', in Ernest Cziempiel and James Rosenau (eds.) *Global Changes and Theoretical Changes: Approaches to Worlds Politics for the 1990s* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1989), pp. 59-73.

<sup>21</sup> Wight, 'Agents, Structures'.

<sup>22</sup> Walter Carlsnaes, 'The Agency-Structure Problem in Foreign Policy Analysis', *International Studies Quarterly*, 36 (1992), p. 250.

<sup>23</sup> Archer, *Realist Social Theory*.

<sup>24</sup> Ronen Palan, 'A World of their Making: an Evaluation of the Constructivist Critique in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 26 (2000), pp. 575-598.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

people maintain some margin of freedom even if they are conditioned by their context and another to articulate these two aspects into a coherent methodological framework. Hollis and Smith thus warned against the temptation to resort to a 'collage' of two narratives that could never be fully articulated to one another. For them, it was 'all too plain that "structuration theory" is more of an ambition than an established body of theoretical achievements. It is more a description of social life than a basis for explanation'.<sup>26</sup> From this they concluded that 'although it is appealing to believe that bits of the two stories can be added together, we maintain that there are always two stories to tell and that combinations do not solve the problem'.<sup>27</sup> In other words, a structure/agency dialectic cannot solve the problem of reproduction and change since it offers no epistemological basis on which to ground an explanation. Unable to solve the epistemological issue, some authors reverted to the idea that the dualism could only be addressed in relation to specific cases, arguing that it is only at the level of ontology that one can establish the part that befalls to each of these modalities.<sup>28</sup> In this way, nothing seemed to be solved at the theoretical level. If anything, the framework only raised further methodological difficulties when examining history, adding the new task of having to sort out what relates to structural determination and what stems from agency.<sup>29</sup>

A second problem, closely related to the ambiguity of this framework, was that the notion of agency proved to be a poor, if not sterile, heuristic tool for understanding social dynamics. As hinted by various critics, the concept is largely constructed as a residual category in that it is defined as that aspect of social dynamics which escapes, at least partially, structural determination. This conception makes it virtually impossible to theorise agency itself.<sup>30</sup> As a moment of freedom from structural conditioning, it appears as something formless about which we can say very little. If one can point to the 'occurrence' of agency or describe an act of agency, there is little more to say about it. Arguing that agency would be shaped by institutions or structures would be, in effect, tantamount to denying it.<sup>31</sup> Hence, cast as the ability to escape social conditioning, agency cannot have any historical shape or be thought in relation to historical structures. For this reason, the notion of agency acquired a voluntarist and ahistorical form, one which is mostly defined in abstraction from its social and historical context.<sup>32</sup>

This is the reason why this notion has had little heuristic value for historical research, even when people admit to its theoretical importance. When authors wish to move

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<sup>26</sup> Mark Hollis and Steve Smith, 'Beware of Gurus: Structure and Action in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 17 (1991), p. 406.

<sup>27</sup> Hollis and Smith, *Explaining and Understanding*, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> see for example Wight, 'Agents, Structures'.

<sup>29</sup> Andreas Bieler and Adam D. Morton, 'The Gordian Knot of Agency-Structure in International Relations: A Neo-Gramscian Perspective', *European Journal of International Relations*, 7 (2001), pp. 5-35.

<sup>30</sup> Roxanne L. Doty, 'Aporia: A Critical Exploration of the Agent Structure Problématique in International Relations Theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3 (1997), p. 81.

<sup>31</sup> Martijn Konings, 'The Rise of American Finance: Agency, Institutions and Structural Power from Colonial Times to the Globalization Era', PhD Thesis (Toronto: York University, 2006), p. 23.

<sup>32</sup> Samuel Knafo, 'The Fetishizing Subject of Marx's Capital', *Capital and Class*, 76 (2002), pp. 183-213.

beyond the simple description of individual actions, they are necessarily driven to focus on structural determination. Hence, the introduction of the notion of agency has done little to solve the structural bias of the discipline. Scholars continue to rely on structural arguments for theorising social developments, even when they go to great lengths in order to bring agency back at a more epistemological level. If agency enters the picture, it is generally within the confines of a hypothetical reflection about what could have happened, with little explanatory value for understanding what did happen other than asserting that societies could be different. At best, referring to agency serves here to 'prove', in a circular fashion, that there was indeed agency, but this is as far as the notion can go.

A good example of this can be found in the arguments made by Susan Strange and Eric Helleiner who have shown, each in their own way, how key decisions made by state officials have allowed financial globalisation to proceed<sup>33</sup> While such an emphasis might be fruitful to attack deterministic conceptions of globalisation, they provide little in terms of casting a different picture of globalisation. For both of these authors, agency *allowed* the structural forces of globalisation to operate, most notably by liberalising economic flows, but this analysis does not change how we see globalisation itself. Ultimately, globalisation might have been engineered by specific actors, but it is never really shown how these decisions have fundamentally shaped the nature of globalisation. Hence, the notion of agency here seems to say little more than the obvious: social dynamics are indeed socially constructed. What is socially constructed, however, remains as opaque as before.

A third problem with this conception of agency is that it relies ultimately on an arbitrary assessment when time comes to determine what exactly constitutes an act of agency. Indeed, the relevancy of the concept hinges on the possibility of showing that a significant change has occurred that was not predetermined by structures. The threshold that demarcates this criterion, however, will necessarily vary depending on the approach or the author. Indeed, what appears for some authors as a moment of agency can easily be reinterpreted by others as being determined by broader structural forces that were neglected in the first place. For example, what is perceived by Helleiner and Strange as decisions that allowed globalisation to proceed, thus exemplifying the freedom of actors, can easily be read instead as proofs of the very opposite. Is it a coincidence, one might ask, that all these decisions to liberalise and allow globalisation to proceed pointed in the same direction? Hence, various authors have seen in these 'turning points' the proof that structural constraints were actually narrowing the freedom of state officials.<sup>34</sup> To separate

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<sup>33</sup> Eric Helleiner, *States and the Reemergence of Global Finance. From Bretton Woods to the 1990s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Susan Strange, *Mad Money* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

<sup>34</sup> John B. Goodman and Louis W. Pauly, 'The Obsolescence of Capital Controls? Economic Management in an Age of Global Markets', *World Politics*, 46 (1993), pp. 50-82. Simon Clarke, 'Capitalist Crisis and the Rise of Monetarism', in Ralph Miliband, Leo Panitch and John Saville (eds.) *Socialist Register 1987* (London: Merlin, 1987).

agency from structural determination is thus always bound to rest on an arbitrary distinction that can never be convincingly established. While it might be right to assume that societies change in significant ways that are not predetermined by structures, examining social dynamics in terms of structure and agency is bound to be highly contentious and unproductive.

The three problems highlighted here – methodological ambivalence, the lack of heuristic value and the arbitrariness of the concept – have mostly stripped the notion of agency of its usefulness because they make it difficult to operationalise the concept of agency as a tool for historical enquiry. More fundamentally, I argue that these problems are all symptoms of the inability to marry a notion of agency with a conception of power that has become increasingly structural in form. Critical theorists thus regularly *oppose the notion of power and agency, as if those with power have no agency and those with agency have no power*. This curious opposition makes it virtually impossible to grasp social construction. Indeed, on the one hand, the social forces associated with agency are seen as struggling to garner the power needed to realise their vision of a different world. They always seem to be ‘in waiting’ for the moment when they will be empowered and finally able to change things. On the other hand, those with power are seen to have no interest in changing society. Seen as reproducing a given order, they appear, in fact, to have no agency. As a result, there never seems to be any social construction in the making since we only have powerless agents of change and powerful agents of reproduction.

Since the concept of agency is here mostly reduced to a voluntarist notion defined as the ability of social agents to step outside of their social conditioning, it is no surprise then if the notion of agency has faded in IR. It is now mostly a marker which attests to an author’s sensitivity to the role of social forces in shaping the world, but without really transforming the structuralist bias that informs the historical analysis. In this way, the idea of agency is generally evoked as a formal defence against determinism, but without having a heuristic value in helping us better explain concrete historical developments. It provides a token recognition of the problem of social construction and offers little to further problematise what we take for granted.<sup>35</sup>

In the end, the emphasis on agency has not enabled critical theorists to overcome their tendency to reduce social change to a marginal phenomenon. If many approaches in IR

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<sup>35</sup> Arguably, the concept also fulfills a normative function. Generally imbued with radical connotations, it helps critical theorists leave the door open for conceiving of social change by alluding to the ‘potentiality’ of agency in the face of massive structural forces. In the work of Neogramscians, for example, the idea of agency, mostly discussed as counter hegemony, is evoked to counter the pessimistic impression that discussions of globalization might leave. References to the potential for counter-hegemonic movements thus anchor a theory that relies heavily on structural determination to explain the process of globalisation. The idea of agency is then married to a fairly structuralist view of the world by positing that agents always ultimately have the freedom to opt out. For a critique see André C. Drainville, ‘International Political Economy in the Age of Open Marxism’, *Review of International Political Economy*, 1 (1994), pp. 105-132.

insist that agency must play a role at one point in the analysis, that instance is rarely reached. Even, constructivism, which initially championed the notion of agency, fell back on the tendency to ‘overemphasize the role of social structures and norms at the expense of the agents who help create and change them in the first place’.<sup>36</sup> Mostly treated as an exogenous variable, social change thus continues to be invoked to explain the advent of specific social configurations which are then assumed to last for a given time. This generally yields a conception of social change as being exceptional, short lived, and cataclysmic, as reflected in the idea of social revolution or epistemic changes. *Hence, by pushing social change into the interstices of history, as an exceptional case by contrast to the prevalent dynamics of reproduction, critical theories only reinforce the notion that social construction should essentially be addressed as structural determination.*

### 3- Structural Power and the ‘Limits’ of Structural Determination

In this section, I wish to demonstrate that the weaknesses attached to the idea of agency are, in fact, symptomatic of a deeper problem with the notion of structure itself and its inability to capture the process of social construction. As I mentioned, the concept of structure has evolved in critical theory to be closely connected to the notion of power, an idea most clearly exemplified by the poststructuralist claim that knowledge is power. In arguing that power operates in the very structuring of society, critical theorists came to see structures as directly benefiting dominant social forces and/or specific worldviews. Their insistence on the fact that structures have inherent biases implies that structures can be studied in abstraction from the concrete ways in which they are exploited by social agents. But, as I will argue, a conception of structural determination that is derived in abstraction from agency – *that is outside of the way specific agents relate to structures* – is bound to be problematic, just as the notion of agency is unhelpful when considered as a source of causation independent from structures. More specifically, I will argue that deriving an explanation for social dynamics from the structures themselves leads critical theorists to reify structures and thus reproduce problems that are generally associated with positivism.

It is interesting to note that it was precisely the difficulty of linking structure to practice which spurred the rise of continental structuralism. What distinguished this approach was a keen awareness of the radical autonomy of practice in relation to structures. Saussure had initially emphasised that language may have rules, but one still cannot know what will people do with language despite the constraints that these rules impose. In other words, grammar does not provide an explanation for why people say one thing rather than another. The brilliant contribution of structuralism was thus to highlight the

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<sup>36</sup> Jeffrey T. Checkel, ‘The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory’, *World Politics*, 50 (1998), p. 325.



distinctive challenge this poses for social theory.<sup>37</sup> If there is an infinity of possibilities that agents can exploit within a structural framework, how can we determine, from what we observe, what are the effects of structures? Are we then simply reduced to describe practice?

Unfortunately, structuralism never overcame this problem. In seeking to conceptualise structures while recognising the radical autonomy of practice, structuralists systematically dissociated history from theory. The aim was to develop a grammar of society that would capture the deeper principles that govern the way people generate concrete strategies or behaviour, and leave the description of these concrete practices to the realm of history. This, however, reproduced some of the problems of positivism, which were mentioned earlier, and which structuralism initially wished to overcome. On the one hand, it led to a form of essentialism in entertaining the thought that there were generative principles that transcend specific social formations.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, it perpetuated a highly contingent conception of history which could never be properly theorised.<sup>39</sup>

The problem of the gap between structure and practice remains today a crucial issue for social theory. While, it is certainly possible to relate the actions of people to all sorts of constraints and rules they confront, it would be wrong to assume that one follows necessarily from the other, as if these actions were the 'necessary' or 'normal' product of these constraints; as if people were forced to relate in a specific way to the constraints they experience. Hence, structures do create imperatives, but this does not mean that there is only one way to react to these imperatives. To say for example that a market obliges people to find ways to remain competitive does not tell us what strategies people will choose in order to do so.<sup>40</sup> In other words, institutions and discourses provide rules of the game, but they do not determine how people play it.<sup>41</sup> In what follows, I develop further the point that we cannot determine the trajectory of a society by examining social structures in themselves (e.g. the logic of capitalist accumulation, the discourse of modernity etc.). As I argue, the significance of social dynamics is not given by the structures themselves, but by what people do with them.

The main issue is foremost a *methodological* one, in that structural readings create a misleading *perspective* on social dynamics which blurs the process of social construction. Indeed, the argument that structures constrain or condition people to act in certain ways lead critical theorists to focus on the agents who are constrained by structures. But this view misses that for one agent that is constrained, there is always another that is empowered. For example, Marxists often argue that workers must subject themselves to

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<sup>37</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale de Saussure* (Paris: Hachette, 1979). Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Verso, 1996).

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967).

<sup>39</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978).

<sup>40</sup> Knafo, 'Fetishizing Subject'. P. 160.

<sup>41</sup> Martijn Konings, 'Political Institutions and Economic Imperatives: Bringing Agency Back In', *Research in Political Economy*, 22 (2005), p. 108.

the imperatives of capitalism because they no longer own their means of production and thus need to enter the wage relation to get their means of subsistence. However, this structural constraint on workers provides at the same time agency for capitalists who can use this power to exploit labour in various ways. In other words, when we focus on the restrictive nature of structures we limit ourselves to only one side of a social relation. What appears as the product of structural constraints, if we limit the analysis to the actor 'constrained', is always a product of agency when properly resituated within a social relation which takes into account the power of another actor exploiting these structural constraints. The structure/agency debate is thus ill defined because it examines the issue in terms of a dual relation between structure and agent, when in fact we are dealing with a social relation between agents *which is only mediated by a structure*.

This point is crucial because there are no structural constraints that will translate into an imperative for one agent if there is not another agent that threatens to act upon these constraints. This is, in a way, a banal statement. Most people would agree that law, for example, never applies homogeneously across society. Some people have more means to mobilise it and exploit it than others. Some can afford to ignore it. In this way, law has no determinate effect that could be derived in abstraction from the agents involved. Such a simple argument can be applied to any other social dynamic. In my own work, I have shown that the gold standard imposed certain constraints on states but only because it created distinct opportunities for financiers to arbitrage and speculate on the currencies.<sup>42</sup> Hence, to think about the constraints on central banks without factoring the agency that financiers gained is to limit ourselves to one side of the equation. In the end, the gold standard was only a source of concern for central banks when financiers threatened to speculate against these banks.<sup>43</sup>

The point, here, is not simply that structural determination is activated by dominant agents, but more fundamentally that these rules have little implication outside of the way people exploit them. Under the gold standard, central banks thus experienced differently the constraint of convertibility depending on who held banknotes, what kind of strategies these actors adopted, and the way they converted banknotes into gold. In the same way, workers experience differently the constraints that stem from the market depending on the way capitalists exploit their vulnerabilities. This is important because taking into account the people who exploit structures, rather than simply those who are constrained by them, one gets a richer picture of the social dynamics at work. Indeed, the focus is

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<sup>42</sup> Samuel Knafo, 'The Gold Standard and the Creation of a Modern International Monetary System', *Review of International Political Economy*, 13 (2006), pp. 78-102.

<sup>43</sup> Central banks could in fact stray far away from what would be considered prudent behaviour by today's standard because they were able to negotiate and make sure that key financiers and merchants would not exploit the commitment of convertibility in ways that were detrimental for central bankers Lars Jonung, 'Swedish experience under the Classical Gold Standard, 1873-1914', in Michael D. Bordo and Angie J. Schwartz (eds.) *A Retrospective on the Classical Gold Standard, 1821-1931* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 361-399.. This is again an indication that the existence of structures does not provide us with any reason to necessarily conclude that predetermined outcomes will result from them.

here set on *what is being done* through these structures, rather than simply on the product that results from these actions. In other words, we examine the process of social construction, rather than limiting ourselves to its outcome. When we conceal from view the role played by social actors, it becomes difficult to avoid the impression that structures generate themselves the result we observe. The outcome then appears as a necessary product of a structure, as if it had an inherent logic. In this way, we reify social reality.

Unfortunately, this important point is often neglected because there is still an assumption among critical theorists that differences in the way people exploit structures are largely secondary; that they simply constitute variations on a common theme. Hence, critical scholars are often adamant that there are limits to the possible which are established by these structures and which enable us to keep a structural viewpoint while still entertaining the possibility that, within these limits, concrete strategies can vary. Marxists might accept, for example, that capitalists pursue different strategies of accumulation, yet still emphasise that all capitalists must still face tight competitive pressures that limit what they can do. But these references to limits of the possible only represent convenient assertions that enable scholars to maintain a structural viewpoint while allowing for diversity, and/or agency. They lead us to misleadingly focus on structural similarities, to overemphasise the restrictive nature of structures, and to downplay their productive leverage. Social construction is then essentially conceptualised as a form of structural determination that manifests itself necessarily in restrictive terms as a limit to what people can do. This makes it impossible, in turn, to really grasp the process of social construction since we then interpret what structures do in static terms, that is in terms of how they reproduce something *already given*. *One can say that this perspective highlights how a state of affairs is maintained, but social reality is here, in a way, already constructed.*

More fundamentally, this emphasis on the restrictive nature of structures reinforces our own assumptions about social reality because the focus is set on *what cannot be done*, rather than what *is* being achieved. Assessing what cannot be done is highly arbitrary and necessarily depends on what we assume should be possible. It encourages anachronistic and biased readings that consolidate our own assumptions about social reality. We thus, for example, often project on the past our understanding of the present and measure the significance of past developments in relation to what we assume should be possible. *For this reason, the notion of limits undermines the project of critical theory because it reifies reality by erecting our own assumptions about social reality into limits that are confronted by others or by us.* In doing so, we are bound to miss the significance of social construction because we always play it out in our own terms.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Inversely, this scenario is often played out in an inverted form with the assumption that a specific limit we confront today is said to have been absent in the past, or in another society. However, the key assumption is here again what we presumed *should* be possible.

In my work on the gold standard, I have shown how the literature has systematically misread, in this way, the significance of this 19<sup>th</sup> century institution of monetary governance. Focusing on the constraints the gold standard imposed on states, this literature has come to see this institutions as a typical form of '*laissez-faire*' governance. Hence, most scholars present the gold standard as a means for limiting state intervention and consolidating self regulating markets.<sup>45</sup> For them, it imposed tight constraints on states, in the spirit of economic liberalism, most notably by obliging central banks to make banknotes fully convertible into gold at a fixed rate. As a result, states would have had to be careful with their policies not to provoke a capital outflow which could quickly deplete the gold reserves of their central bank.

However, as I argued, we generally exaggerate the restrictive nature of structures simply because we assess them in terms of the distance that separates these cases from our assumptions of what should be possible. In this way, the gold standard is generally seen as a restrictive system being compared, as it often is the case, to more recent monetary systems. Our judgement about its restrictive nature thus appears validated by the fact that the gold standard proved incompatible with modern large scale welfare policies, as developed under Keynesianism.<sup>46</sup> However, the assumption that the gold standard served to limit modern expansionary economic policies is ahistorical because such policies had never been implemented when the gold standard was first established. It is thus misleading to emphasise this constraint of the gold standard as a determining feature of monetary policy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When examining the gold standard from a historical standpoint, it appears instead as a flexible structure of governance in comparison to *previous* monetary systems.<sup>47</sup> It was, after all, a means to lend credibility to banknotes by ensuring that they would be convertible into gold. For that reason, it proved decisive in the shift to paper money and quickly became a powerful framework to inject massive amounts of money into the economy by the standards of the time. This helps account for the otherwise troubling fact that the countries wh' adopted the classic institutions of the gold standard generally saw a great surge in their supply of money despite the so-called limits these institutions imposed on states. The irony then is that the very restrictions imposed by the gold standard were only significant because of the very possibilities they opened up. While the gold standard limited the amount of banknotes that could be issued, it still enabled the issue of banknotes in the first place.

In emphasising the problems with readings that focus on the restrictions that structures imposed on agents, I do not wish to deny that there are limits to the possible. People,

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<sup>45</sup> John Gerard Ruggie, 'International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Post-War Economic Order', *International Organization*, 36: 2, (1982), pp. 195-231; Forrest Capie, 'The Emergence of the Bank of England as a Mature Central Bank', in David Winch and Patrick K. O'brien (eds.) *The Political Economy of British Historical Experience, 1688-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 295-315.

<sup>46</sup> Barry Eichengreen, *Golden Fetters: The Gold Standard and the Great Depression 1919-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>47</sup> Knafo, 'The Gold Standard', p. 79-80.

clearly, cannot do whatever they wish. Yet this does not mean that these 'limits' actually determine in a significant way what actually people do. More importantly, it is always dangerous to assume that we can determine what are/were these limits because such judgements rely disproportionately on our own assumptions of what is possible. It leads us to highly formal interpretations which are problematic because detached from the real significance of these structures for the agents involved. In this way, we assume too readily that the same limits apply to all actors subject to a specific structure.

Take for example the case of the discourse of economic liberalism. Most participants in British monetary debates would have defined themselves as liberals, yet they still defended highly divergent conceptions clashing, for example, over devaluation (late 17th century), the freedom of the Bank of England (most of 18th and 19th century), convertibility (early 19th century), and monometallism (the bullion controversy of the 1890s). Hence, the mistake here would be to assume that economic liberals in Britain shared a common understanding regarding the nature of the economy and what it should be like. The fact that economic liberalism became a widespread discourse was not a sign of a certain homogeneity in people's thinking. The mutual adherence to economic liberalism reflected, instead, the fact that people used common discursive tools which permeated the society in which they lived. It was the discourse with which people made sense of their situation. However, their ideas were not reducible to the theoretical framework they relied upon. In that sense, liberalism did not predetermine in any meaningful sense what people could say with it, as exemplified by the great diversity of liberal conceptions. In practice, the abstract principles of economic liberalism could thus be used to generate opposite claims and were mobilised for a wide range of purposes that cannot be grasped by looking simply at 'the discourse of economic liberalism' considered as an ideal type.<sup>48</sup>

Interestingly, British political economists in the 19th century generally framed their analysis according to the need to reach a self regulating economy free of state intervention. This could be deemed to be a defining feature of economic liberalism; an assumption establishing the limits of the possible. Indeed, the idea of self regulation proved to be a powerful notion because it suggested that a policy would bring British society closer to a natural, and thus objective, state of affairs. This idea thus represented a crucial parameter around which discursive struggles were waged; a condition to be respected for someone's ideas to be considered legitimate within liberal circles. But the irony, however, is that this notion was often used by Liberals in Britain to justify state intervention itself on the basis that this or that policy would enable the market to function properly and self regulate itself. In other words, the discourse was used both to

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<sup>48</sup> As some have noted, the abstract principles of liberalism can generate an infinite amount of strategies, many of them being incompatible with one another. The objective of liberalizing trade, for example, has often been seen to conflict with the project of liberalizing finance, since the monetary volatility that accompanies the latter tends to undermine the former. See Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations* (Princeton University Press, 1987); Eric Helleiner, *States and the Reemergence of Global Finance. From Bretton Woods to the 1990s* (Cornell University Press, 1994).

defend and to reject state intervention. For this reason, one could make the case that political debates in Britain largely gravitated around the issue of what should be the role of the state in economic development, not how it should retract from intervening in it. As Eric Helleiner pointed out, liberals could thus, in practice, move far away from the notion of *laissez faire* even if they used it ultimately to justify the policies they promoted.<sup>49</sup> This is why monetary and financial debates must be read as having more to do with the pragmatic problems which different social forces confronted by using the parameters of a liberal discourse. The positions of these protagonists were not a predetermined product of a liberal theoretical framework that would have simply been applied to specific practices. They were not simply variations on a common theme. For this reason, the significance of economic liberalism as a discourse simply cannot be understood apart from the way specific actors used it in order to relate to their own reality. One should thus be careful not to assume too readily that one can determine in a meaningful way what limits are imposed by a discourse on society. To see a discourse, such as liberalism, in formal and structural terms as determining the significance of debates in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain completely misses its political and pragmatic dimension. It fails to appreciate what people *do* with discourses. In other words, such an approach conceals precisely what is being constructed through these discourses.

Both examples outlined here show how an emphasis on the restrictive nature of structures, rather than their productive leverage, translates into a tendency to reify social reality. To assume that the existence of constraints or imperatives can *explain* why agents act in one way or another only entrenches social theory in a form of positivism. It perpetuates the illusion that people follow a template already laid out by the structures within which they operate. To put it differently, when we assume that the behaviour of agents can be deduced from the structural framework, we take these behaviours for granted as the 'normal' manifestations of structural constraints. We thus discount the very problem of understanding what is being constructed, as if social behaviour or strategies are 'already given' by the structures themselves; as if these strategies are the only way to relate to structural imperatives or constraints. To assume that capitalists, for example, would always exploit workers in the same way is precisely to naturalise their behaviour *as if there was a 'normal' strategy for them to adopt*. Developments such as mass production or Fordism can thus be almost naturalised as necessary steps in the development of capitalism, rather than specific innovations by agents in their attempt to come to terms with their own social reality.<sup>50</sup> Innovations are thus, too often, flattened

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<sup>49</sup> Eric Helleiner, 'Economic Nationalism as a Challenge to Economic Liberalism? Lessons from the 19th Century', *International Studies Quarterly*, 46 (2002), pp. 307-329.

<sup>50</sup> Another rendition of this problem can be found in Quentin Skinner's work. His magnificent *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* shows how political theories have repeatedly misunderstood the canon in political theory by focusing on key ideas found in the work of 'great' theorists. But as Skinner shows, often the most striking ideas to modern eyes were in fact common to the era in which these authors wrote. Hence without resituating these authors in their intellectual context in order to better assess their actual contributions, commentators often neglect the actual distinctiveness of these theorists; agency in

and presented as the predetermined outcome of an overarching logic. Social change is thus levelled out and too often reduced to an inconsequential development; one which, oddly enough, has a significance only to the extent that it is now repackaged as a functional requirement of social reproduction itself.

It is important to emphasise this point, because too often the debate over structure and agency degenerates into a discussion over whether agents have an autonomous freewill or not. Albeit a fascinating question, this is of secondary relevance to what is at stake here. The important problem relates to the way we make sense of the world. It is an epistemological issue because it concerns the nature of critical knowledge and a methodological one because it relates to the type of rigour that is required to overcome the pitfalls of positivism. Hence, I am not rejecting the notion that structures do, in a way, condition the behaviour of agents, but the more specific idea that critical theorists can derive from the structures they analyse why social dynamics take specific forms. Seeing determination as being inscribed in the very structures they analyse, critical theories then necessarily end up reproducing the problem they initially identified in positivist approaches because they reify structures in their own way. A drift towards essentialism is then inevitable and well exemplified in the broad generalisations that pervade the work of critical scholars. It is on this basis that some Marxists can posit that 500 years of market development in Western Europe are ultimately driven by a single logic of accumulation that was presented by Marx in *Capital*, or that some poststructuralists can hastily conclude that the West has been shaped by a similar discursive structure of modernity for the past 300 years.

#### 4- Agency and the Practice of Power

Having criticised the concepts of agency and structure, we are now left with the difficult task of reassessing the problematic of social construction from a critical standpoint. As I argued, a fundamental tension remains in critical theory between the desire to read social dynamics in terms of power, that is to attribute the main significance of various social structures to the way they shape power, and a desire to examine how these social structures come about through social change. The reason for this conundrum, I pointed out, stems from the reliance of critical theories on a structural framework of analysis to address the question of power (i.e. the significance of social structures), even when they wish to see history (agency) as a means to explain how these structures are set up in the first place.<sup>51</sup> Such formulations, I argued, oddly perpetuate a dualism as the significance of

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appropriating a discourse to challenge certain of its assumptions. Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Volume One: The Renaissance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

<sup>51</sup> The various approaches that reject the notion of agency, quite tellingly, also generally relinquish the ability to account for how social structures come about. This is notably the case of most approaches inspired by Foucault which are often criticized for their inability to account for social change. In keeping only the structural side of the analysis, they avoid some of the contradictions that emerge from the notion of agency, but still perpetuate a form of reification linked to their structural framework.

social structures is derived in abstraction of social change, with the result that historical analysis tends to be relegated to a descriptive and secondary role. History, here, never seems to have a proper theoretical status for grasping the *significance* of social dynamics. It only informs us on how structures come about.

What is then taken for granted in this broad conception of social construction? When we labour to demonstrate that there are inherent biases embedded in social structures, we have to adopt structural conceptions of power which are incompatible with discussions of social change and which reify power. Such views effectively convey a passive conception of power in the sense that power seems here to be already played out before we look at concrete practices. Not only does power appear to have no agency, always serving to reproduce an already given structure, it is also presented as something already settled, as if it was no longer negotiated among social actors. I will thus argue in this section that what is fundamentally taken for granted in structural conceptions of social construction is *power as a practice* or what I reformulate here to be agency.

In referring to practice, I come back here to the idea of classic structuralism that practice has a radical autonomy from structures, that it can never be directly derived from structures, because of the pragmatic considerations that shape it.<sup>52</sup> In simple terms, there is no straightforward way to apply practices we learn and develop because the social context in which we do so always changes. For this reason, there is always a pragmatic element in the way we use structures, that is discourses or institutions, to relate to our own social reality. This pragmatic dimension, I argue, is *the central consideration* that shapes the practice of power. It is what determines the significance of distinct structures.

When it comes to power, social theorists often underestimate the challenge there is for social forces to exert power over others. This is not an evident process. First, social actors must conceptualise their complex reality in order to relate to it. Trying to conceive, for example, of strategies for regulating an economy that is constituted by millions of different activities is a challenge of great proportion that always partly eludes state officials.<sup>53</sup> Second, developing proper institutions in order to gain leverage over this reality is also tricky, partly, because other agents resist and subvert attempts to do so.<sup>54</sup> Hence, to say that dominant social forces have *more* power to determine what should be done does not mean that they can easily achieve what they set out to do. Such slippage

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<sup>52</sup> This is not to revert to Roxanne Doty's ontology of practice as something radically indeterminate. R. L. Doty, 'Aporia: A Critical Exploration of the Agent Structure Problématique in International Relations Theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3 (1997), pp. 365-392., but simply to problematise social dynamics as being shaped by the specific problem of practice which is to relate to a social context that is always specific.

<sup>53</sup> James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (London: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>54</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The practice of everyday life* (London: University of California Press, 2002); Michel Crozier and Erhardt Friedberg, *Actors and Systems : the Politics of Collective Action* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980 ).



lead critical scholars to make three problematic assumptions: 1) that dominant forces fully understand the problems they face 2) that they know how to solve these problems, as if there was a predetermined and objective course to ensure reproduction, and 3) that they control the consequences of what they do, as if other social forces react passively to their actions. Such pragmatic considerations are more than 'complications'. They are the motive that shapes the practice of power. For this reason, one cannot emphasise enough how power, and the ability to shape society, is continuously exaggerated and misunderstood by social theorists who focus on structural power. In abstracting from the agents involved, and thus neglecting the practice of power, they miss the significance institutional and discursive developments. This cannot be defined without understanding how they are conceived to provide leverage for distinctive actors in order to relate to a constantly changing reality.

To illustrate the importance of this argument, let me come back to the example of the gold standard mentioned earlier. As I argued, a structural approach that derives the significance of structures in abstraction from practice is bound to misunderstand these social structures, and to overemphasise their restrictive nature. It is this very bias which led the literature on the gold standard to posit that the latter had limited the range of possibilities for monetary policy. But in doing so it missed how the gold standard had created a radically new form of agency by profoundly transforming *the way states relate to monetary phenomena*. It is the institutions of the gold standard which directly contributed to the rise of central banking, to a new structure of governance which would rapidly become central for state intervention in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, this literature only saw the restrictive impact of the gold standard (the limits imposed on central banking) because it took for granted the very thing the gold standard constructed (central banking). When inverting our reading in order to examine the leverage that the gold standard provided for states, it then appears as a crucial stepping stone towards the construction of monetary policy, rather than something fundamentally constraining it.<sup>55</sup> It was precisely this new agency that made the institutions of the gold standard, initially developed in Britain, so alluring in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as other states raced to emulate its example.

This case helps specify how the significance of structures can only be grasped if one problematises how social actors relate to a specific social context through them. It is precisely because we take for granted this agency that we miss what these structures mean for social agents *in another social context than our own*; as if they would relate to their reality in the same terms as ours. Overcoming this bias requires a specific rigor in systematically problematising power as practice. To this end, I propose to reformulate the notion of agency as the ability to relate to a changing social reality in order to modify it, rather than the ability to change society in ways *that are not predetermined by structures*. Further, I argue that critical theory must take agency as its main focus of analysis since the development of agency is the motif behind social construction or, to be

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<sup>55</sup> Knafo, 'The Gold Standard', p. 97.

more precise, behind the way the social is conceptualised and institutionalised. I thus take agency to be the central problematic of critical theory.<sup>56</sup>

Seeing power as agency is the only way to reconcile the two aims of critical theory outlined above. This conception highlights, first, that the significance of structures is linked to power, but only insofar as it provides agency, that is leverage for social forces to influence their social context. Power is thus directly tied to social structures, but not embedded in them. If structures provide the necessary leverage to exert power, the practice of power is never reducible to the structures within which it is exerted. It is precisely because this methodological point was ignored that the literature on the gold standard never properly understood this institution. Starting from the paradigm of central banking, it always assumed that the constraints were aimed at the state. Yet, historically, it was the opposite. The gold standard was imposed by the British state on banks, such as the Bank of England, which were, at the time, private or semi-private. The aim was precisely to develop a new framework of governance to relate to a banking sector that escaped state control, a means to control, more specifically, the practice of banknote issuing which was growing rapidly in England. The significance of this was that it unwittingly created new tools of governance, notably by centralising banknote issuing under the aegis of the Bank of England and increasingly subjected the Bank to state control. In the process, central banking was progressively constructed as the state experimented with monetary governance in order to get a grip over developments that escaped its control.

As this example highlights, agency is not an inherent capacity of agent, as it is too often suggested, *it is a capacity that is itself socially constructed and which needs to be problematised as such*. Too often, agency appears in the work of critical theorists as a primordial ability that is progressively reined in by structural constraints. It is precisely this assumption that can lead scholars to see agency as something that escapes social

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<sup>56</sup> For poststructuralists influenced by Foucault, there is no space for a concept of agency because there is no subject that stands outside of the very practice that constitutes that subject. Dyrberg conceptualises this issue by pointing out that power operates in a 'circular fashion by reference to base values and structural determinant, which are at one and the same time the medium and outcome of power' Torben B. Dyrberg, *The Circular Structure of Power: Politics, Identity, Community* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 29. Structural determinants and practice are thus bound in such a way that none of these aspects can be seen as standing outside as a prior determinant which could be said to shape the other. On this issue, see also David Campbell, 'Political Prosais, Transversal Politics, and the Anarchical World', in Michael Shapiro and Hayward R. Alker (eds.) *Challenging Boundaries: Global Flows, Territorial Identities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 7-31.

This conclusion, however, only stands if one remains within an ontological framework where the objective is to determine the logic of causality. As Dyrberg correctly shows, there is no way to isolate a moment of causality that one could ascribe to an agent constituted in abstraction of practice; as if the agent was defined prior to what it does or 'performs'. However, if we switch the terms of the debate to think of the issue in terms of epistemology, that is as a means to problematize what is socially constructed, then there is no point to seek the 'agent' responsible for this agency. The point is not to identify the cause that produces what we are trying to explain, but rather to problematise the *significance* of what is achieved from the perspective of agents and the way they relate to their social context.

conditioning. Similarly, the very idea that structures condition social agents by imposing limits is a perfect illustration of the fact that we often essentialise agency. Indeed, this suggests that agency is an inherent property of individuals before they are socialised; the process of socialisation being ultimately a process of formalisation which reduces the range of what we can do. Having taken agency as a given, everything that is socially constructed will then appear as opposed to this innate capacity of agents. Our theoretical framework thus necessarily projects a conception of agency that is desocialised, since it precedes, in a way, the social. In the end, this framework leads us to focus on what hinders action, rather than problematise what makes action possible in the first place. Shifting to this second perspective implies that we examine power as agency. *From this standpoint, the significance of social developments is partly determined by the way social forces change the nature of their agency, the way they relate to their social reality by using and transforming structures.*

Secondly, the idea of power as agency emphasises that power always produces social change. Indeed, the practice of power requires adjustments and innovations on the part of agents in order to relate to their specific context and exert power. It also triggers reactions on the part of other agents who are affected by this power. Social change is thus an integral feature of any social process rather than an exceptional event. Even if we start from the idea that people's practice is fundamentally shaped by their ability to use a strategy learned in one context in order to apply it in another (social conditioning), these contexts always differ. A same behaviour will thus have different effects because of the specific context in which it is adopted. Hence, even when replicating a similar strategy, there is an innovative effect within the new context in which it is pursued. This is why people can often innovate and transform their reality even without realising the significance of the transformation that is taking place. In the end, while no actions are truly revolutionary, in the sense of breaking completely with the past, people still always innovate, even if most of the time the consequences appear minor. Such social changes, however, should not be dismissed, as superficial, on the basis that they serve to reproduce something already given; as if they simply served to make the structure work. As various historians have shown, people change their structural conditions in the very process by which they attempt to reproduce or bolster the forms of power they already have.<sup>57</sup> In order to perceive the significance of these actions, the process by which they construct social dynamics, requires precisely that we problematise the way in which they slowly transform how social actors relate to their reality.

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<sup>57</sup> Robert Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economical Development in Pre-Industrial Europe', in T. H. Aston and S. H. E. Philpin (eds.) *The Brenner Debate* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 10-63; Ellen Wood, 'From Opportunity to Imperative: the History of the Market', *Monthly Review*, (1994), pp. 14-40.

## Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that critical theories have misunderstood what is at stake in the agent/structure debate. By seeking different forms of causality in order to capture two aspects of social construction, reproduction and change, they have entertained a problematic dualism by assuming that social construction can be conceptualised as two distinct modalities. As I showed, such a framework offers no space to reconcile the notion of power and agency which are thus generally opposed to one another, with the former being generally privileged to 'explain' the significance of social dynamics. This bias, I have argued, undermines the project of critical theory since, in attributing social developments to the existence of given structures, it further reifies the social reality theorists wish to critically engage. A structural framework of analysis is thus bound to overestimate what can be derived from the analysis of social structures and consequently tends to relegate any conception of agency to irrelevancy.

By contrast, I have argued that the notion of agency allows us to reformulate the problematic of social construction by enabling us to better specify what is the significance of social dynamics. Problematising social processes from the standpoint of agency is to examine how social forces develop means to relate to a constantly changing social reality. This highlights, first, that contextualisation is crucial to specify what exactly is being constructed. Structures have no significance outside of the way they are *historically* implemented and exploited in a given context as means to relate to this context and more specifically to other social actors. Second, it requires that we take the effects of this construction more seriously by making social change the focus of our analysis. Even when reproduction is the aim, it always requires innovations which necessarily act to transform social reality, even if unwittingly. It is precisely this impact of social practices in reshaping societies that we too often neglect with the result that we tend to reify social reality.

In making this argument, I insisted that the debate on agency and structure is fundamentally one concerning epistemology, not ontology, and the method that derives from it. Colin Wight has contested this claim arguing that the literature on structure and agency has adopted a misleading epistemological focus.<sup>58</sup> For him, the debate must be re-articulated, more fundamentally, in terms of ontology. However, this assessment fails to see that the literature, in fact, already assumes that structure and agency are two aspects of ontology. Hence, the debate has thus been mostly about finding ways to recognise this ontological framework by adopting a proper epistemological standpoint. By contrast, I have argued that agency and structures are not two ontological dimensions of social reality that we need to recover, but refer rather to a broader epistemological issue, one that is at the very heart of the opposition between positivism and critical theory.

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<sup>58</sup> Wight, 'Agents, Structures'.

It is on this basis that I offer a re-reading of Robert Cox's opposition between problem solving theory and critical theory which I rearticulate in relation to the structure agent debate. Here, the opposition between structural and agent based readings of social construction boils down to the contrast between positivism and critical theory. From this perspective, positivist approaches reify social reality by assuming that social dynamics are already determined, or constructed, by structures. This mode of theorisation cannot grasp the process of social construction because social reality is here only reproduced. In that sense, these approaches must always posit reality as a given. What I defined as critical theory, by contrast, puts into question what we take for granted by problematising the significance we attribute to these structures in order to highlight what is socially constructed. It does so by highlighting how these structures have a different significance depending on the agents who exploit them and the context where they do so.

The categories of structure and agency thus refer to two perspectives that I deem incompatible, not two ontological realities that we should reconcile. On the one hand, positivists build structural interpretations which consistently downplay the role of social actors in creating their social reality, and miss, for the reasons mentioned above, what is being constructed. Structural readings will thus always reinforce our own assumptions of the world and thus blunt the critical edge of theory. Critical theory, on the other hand, requires a focus on agency to problematise how people make their own history. This focus on agency, I argued, is necessary for the project of critical theory because without the methodological rigour of reading all social processes in terms of agency, there is nothing to stop us from lapsing back into the reifying gaze of positivism. In the end, a focus on agency is the only way to reconcile the two aims of critical theory, that is to address social change while accounting for the way structures are directly linked to power, as a leverage that social forces exploit to influence the behaviour of others. From this perspective, finding ways to exploit structural leverage is to transform social reality.

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