

# CRITICAL REALISM AND THE STRATEGIC-RELATIONAL APPROACH

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1. Andrew Sayer gave me valuable comments on this article; the usual disclaimers apply.

This essay develops a distinctive critical realist analysis of structure and agency.<sup>1</sup> It first describes Roy Bhaskar's account of critical realism; then discusses critical realism in general; next introduces Anthony Giddens's structuration theory and two particular applications of critical realism to structure and agency – those of Bhaskar and Margaret Archer; and, finally, presents a third such application based on the strategic-relational approach. The latter goes beyond conventional analyses of the duality, dualism, or dialectic of structure and agency by studying the recursive conditioning, mutual coupling, and complex co-evolution of structure and agency and, above all, by stressing the differential, spatio-temporal relationality of structure and agency. Its advantages over other approaches should emerge as we proceed.

## CRITICAL REALISM AND TRANSCENDENTAL NATURALISM

2. See M.S. Archer, R. Bhaskar, A. Collier, T. Lawson, and A. Norrie (eds), *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*, London, Routledge, 1998 (*CRES* in this text).

Although 'critical realism' is a relatively recent term and the package of ideas linked with the Bhaskar 'school' is certainly distinctive and has its own logic,<sup>2</sup> many basic concepts and explanatory principles involved in critical realism have a longer history. A non-partisan, non-teleological genealogy has yet to be written. But Marx would figure as a major precursor both philosophically and in substantive theoretical terms; and others have independently 'discovered' several key themes articulated by Bhaskar and his associates. Moreover, while the initial revival of philosophical interest in the possibilities of critical realism in the social sciences in the last 30 years is strongly (and legitimately) associated with Bhaskar, his own work moved into a complex philosophical and methodological analysis of the dialectic as the pulse of freedom and then into what many regard as a late 'theological wrong turn'.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the more detailed elaboration of critical realist arguments, the development of particular critical realist analyses, and its application to specific explanatory and practical problems have involved many other theorists who have arguably made much more crucial contributions to the flourishing of critical realism in the social sciences.

3. R. Bhaskar, *From East to West*, London, Routledge, 2000.

It is therefore worth distinguishing critical realism in general from particular positions and arguments developed within (or compatible with) this general framework. Bhaskar's work gave an initial justification for a realist position in general but could not justify any particular realist position. Indeed, given his 'underlabourer' view of philosophy, he did not try to do

so.<sup>4</sup> His arguments incisively rejected alternative (non-realist) ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies. But they did (and could) not rule in just one particular variant of critical realism and exclude others. For, it is one thing to give a general transcendental justification of critical realism's superiority as a general account of the world and the conditions of its scientific investigation, whether in the natural and/or social sciences. It is another to establish the superiority of one particular critical realist ontology, epistemology, and methodology over another located within a general critical realist framework.<sup>5</sup> This sort of demonstration requires other kinds of argument and evidence based on their respective degrees of theoretical coherence and explanatory power.

Bhaskar aimed to refound the philosophies of natural and social science in opposition to prevailing orthodoxies and to define the relations between their corresponding modes of scientific inquiry. He offered a transcendental proof – based on the feasibility of successful scientific experimentation in an open world – for the existence of real objects with naturally necessary properties and tendencies that were nonetheless only tendentially, if ever, actualised and so accessible to empirical observation (on the real, actual, and empirical, see Box 1). Bhaskar also argued that science develops according to a threefold schema:

Science identifies a phenomenon (or range of phenomena), constructs explanations for it and empirically tests its explanations, leading to the identification of the generative [causal] mechanism at work, which now becomes the phenomenon to be explained, and so on. In this continuing process, as deeper levels or strata of reality are successively un-folded, science must construct and test its explanations with the cognitive resources and physical tools at its disposal, which in this process are themselves progressively transformed, modified and refined (*PON*, p12).

For the social sciences, Bhaskar develops an *anti-positivist naturalism*. This posits that, while the natural and social sciences both adopt a relational approach in arguing that relations rather than isolated entities should be the primary unit of analysis and share other key ontological and epistemological arguments too, they also differ in significant respects.

#### Box 1: The Real, the Actual, and the Empirical

- ◆ Real: generative structures or causal mechanisms
- ◆ Actual: events resulting from various real tendencies and counter-tendencies in specific initial conditions
- ◆ Empirical: observations or measurements of actual events and, in some circumstances, underlying structures or mechanisms

4. R. Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989 (in this text, *PON*).

5. M.S. Archer, *Realist Social Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995 (*RST* in text), pp159-60.

Specifically, Bhaskar argues that:

the *predicates* that appear in the explanation of social phenomena will be different from those that appear in natural scientific explanations and the *procedures* used to establish them will in certain vital respects be different too (being contingent upon, and determined by, the properties of the objects under study); but the *principles* that govern their production will remain substantially the same (*PON*, p20).

This is an essentially *philosophical* argument because it aims to show the plausibility and superiority of naturalism. For example, Bhaskar argues that, while hermeneutics claims correctly that the social world comprises a pre-interpreted reality, it does not follow that the social world is reducible to the ideas that people have about it. For *social forms* are a necessary condition for any intentional act; their *pre-existence* implies their *autonomy* as possible objects of scientific investigation; and their *causal efficacy* confirms their *reality*. But human agency is required for the actualisation of these causal powers. These principles underpin Bhaskar's transformational model of social action (see below), Archer's detailed account of the development of selfhood and collective social action, and, indeed, the strategic-relational approach.

#### CRITICAL REALISM IN GENERAL

Bhaskar's critical realism is very distinctive and, in its entirety (especially as developed in recent years), it excludes many other critical realist positions. Thus it is worth presenting some key propositions relevant to critical realism in general in order to compare various views on structure and agency as an important area where possible differences among different realist positions can be expected to occur.

Ontologically, critical realism (hereafter CR) adopts an *ontological realist* position that distinguishes between the real, actual, and empirical. It emphasizes their 'relational' nature, in other words, the internally necessary and/or external contingent relations that obtain within and among these dimensions. In particular, the naturally necessary properties of the real may (or may not) be actualised in specific initial conditions and/or through specific (non-) interventions. In this sense, then, the appearance of such properties is not guaranteed but only tendential. Indeed, critical realists regard properties and events both as necessarily contingent and as contingently necessary. First, events are necessarily contingent because tendencies are only ever tendential, may be opposed by counter-tendencies, and are instantiated, if at all, in specific historical conditions. Tendencies are themselves tendential because their operation depends on the overall reproduction of the social relations and processes that generate them. Because this reproduction cannot be taken for granted and depends on other social relations and processes, how far a given tendency operates

(disregarding for the moment whether there are counter-tendencies) depends on the extent to which its own conditions of existence tend to be reproduced.<sup>6</sup> This has implications for the relation between structure and agency and, as we shall see, for the constraining/enabling power of structures and for the reproductive/ transformative power of agency. But, second, critical realists also assume that events are contingently necessary because a particular combination of tendencies and counter-tendencies in specific historical conditions typically makes one particular outcome (or set of outcomes) rather than another necessary. Note that this is an ontological assumption about the objective world and remains to be demonstrated through specific theoretical analyses and scientific inquiries that should be grounded and explored in the epistemological field.

Epistemologically, CR distinguishes the *intransitive* and *transitive* dimensions of scientific enquiry. Knowledge (transitive) is produced through a continuing process of confrontation between *retroductive* theoretical *hypotheses* about intransitive objects and *evidential statements* generated in and through transitive enquiry. Retroduction involves asking what the real world must be like for a specific explanandum to be actualised and, as such, differs from empirical induction and logical deduction. Evidential statements are the mediated results of investigation and so never directly reflect real or actual phenomena. Experimentation, measurement, observation, etc., are always contingent, fallible, and, perhaps, corrigible. For this reason, critical realism embraces *epistemological relativism*. How to resolve any inconsistency between hypotheses and evidence is determined within the prevailing (hegemonic or dominant) rules of science but, for these rules to be accepted as scientific, they must provide a basis for rational judgement among different claims. These rules belong to the transitive aspect of science, of course, and are subject to reasoned critique and development. Thus epistemological relativism does not entail *judgemental relativism*, that is to say, the view that any judgement is as good as any other. For, insofar as competing claims refer to the intransitive world, it is often (but not always) possible to make rational judgements between competing claims (*CRES*, pxi; *CS*, pp213-20).<sup>7</sup>

Methodologically, a search for constant conjunctions is inadequate for generating scientific knowledge. Instead critical realists aim to discover the necessary and sufficient conditions of a given explanandum. Simple empirical generalisations are only acceptable in the absence of knowledge about causal powers or mechanisms and form at best the basis for retroduction to discover the mechanisms and other conditions that generate them (*RSS*, pp20-22). This is illustrated by Lawson's account of CR in economics. He suggests that, insofar as one can identify demi-regularities - non-spurious, rough and ready, partial regularities that come to dominate restricted regions of time-space - this indicates the possible reproduction of an underlying real causal mechanism (or mechanisms) that is being more or less actualised in specific sets of circumstances. The identification of such 'demi-regs' is facilitated through comparison, the study of crises and turning

6. On the doubly tendential nature of tendencies, see B. Jessop, *State Theory*, Cambridge, Polity, 1990, pp188-190.

7. See also A. Sayer, *Realism in Social Science*, London, Sage, 2000, pp10-19, 40, and 47-51 (*RSS* in this text).

8. T. Lawson, *Economics and Reality*, London, Routledge, 1997, pp204, 208-218.

points, and counterfactual analysis.<sup>8</sup> More generally, explanation is only adequate relative to a given explanandum. This can move from abstract to concrete, that is to say by increasing concretisation of a given phenomenon (for example from commodities in general to labour-power as fictitious commodity to the wage relation to nominal wages to the real wage ... ); and from simple to complex, in other words, by introducing further dimensions of a given phenomenon (such as state, capitalist state, patriarchal capitalist state ... ). No explanation is ever complete. It can always be re-defined and/or questioned by making the explanandum more concrete and/or complex (CS, pp213-230).

What does this imply for the social sciences? First, ontologically, CR asserts that social forms pre-exist individuals and are a necessary condition of their activity (this excludes voluntarism). Social forms do not exist apart from agents' conceptions of what they are doing (for instance casting votes) and, in this sense, are discursive as well as material. Social actions reproduce or transform social forms (this excludes the reification of society). Society is an articulated ensemble of provisional tendencies and powers that exist only as long as at least some of them are being exercised via the intentional activity of human beings, witness runs on banks or the collapse of state power during revolutions. Second, epistemologically, the intransitive objects of social investigation are themselves either directly meaningful or emerge in part from the relations among meaningful actions. This implies a 'double hermeneutic'<sup>9</sup> in that what social scientists attempt to interpret is itself pre-interpreted. This means that social science results can feed back into the social world (transforming it) and thus requires self-reflection by social scientists. It also implies that good explanations combine explanatory (causal) and interpretive (hermeneutic) analysis. There are two main reasons for this. First, CR rejects the Humean model of constant conjunctions and Hempel's neo-positivist, deductive nomological 'covering law' model of causal analysis. And, second, 'reasons' can be causes. Thus an adequate explanation of a specific historical, cultural or social phenomenon must be adequate both in terms of motivational intelligibility (that is its social meaning for the relevant actors) and its production by the contingent interaction of causal processes in specific conditions.

Third, methodologically, with one proviso, the same points hold for the social sciences as for CR in general. The key difference is that, whereas the basic causal powers and laws of the natural world have been constant since the formation of the universe, the social world displays few constants and correspondingly more variation in emergent real properties across time and place. Thus social scientists need to consider the historical specificity and spatiality of social forms and transformation of their social properties (for example, the embedded feudal economy vs the disembedded market economy). This is particularly important for disciplines or inquiries concerned with the distinctiveness of particular events or processes (whether micro or macro), which will typically engage in probabilistic and

9. A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Cambridge, Polity, 1984 (COS in this text).

counterfactual reasoning applied to the internal and external causal conditions of the phenomena in question.<sup>10</sup>

10. Cf. F.K. Ringer, *Max Weber's Methodology: the Unification of the Cultural and Social Sciences*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1997, p3.

## GIDDENS, BHASKAR, AND ARCHER ON STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

The relationship between structure and agency is one of the long-standing and defining controversies of sociological inquiry. Here I review three recent attempts to resolve the problem: Giddens's structuration approach, Bhaskar's transformational model of social action, and Archer's morphogenetic theory.

Giddens rejects dualistic ontological treatments of structure and agency as logically exclusive social phenomena and, *a fortiori*, rejects the respective epistemological temptations of imperialism of the object (functionalism, structuralism) and of the subject (interpretive sociologies). Instead, he defines structure and agency as mutually constitutive – and hence, in some sense, actually identical. On the one hand, he treats structures as sets of chronically reproduced, deeply sedimented rules and resources that constrain and facilitate social actions. Such structure exists only as memory traces (the organic basis of human knowledgeability) and as it is instantiated in action at a given point in time. On the other hand, Giddens regards individuals as more or less knowledgeable and practically skilled actors who use these rules and resources to reproduce social order (*COS*, pp17-25). In critical realist terms, however, this argument lacks ontological depth. For it treats structure and agency at the level of the actual rather than in terms of real mechanisms, emergent properties, tendencies, and material effects. It also means that Giddens must study structure and agency in terms of an alternating movement in which he brackets (temporarily ignores) one moment of the duality when examining the other within the same time frame. Thus, within these terms, he treats structure at any given time in isolation from action and thereby implies that a given structure is equally constraining and/or enabling for all actors and all actions - simply serving (no more, but no less) as the prevailing set of rules and resources for action. Similarly, action at any given time is isolated from structure, since actors choose a course of action more or less freely and skilfully within the prevailing rules and resources. This tight imbrication generally results in a recursive reproduction of both structure and agency, with structural transformation largely explained in terms of the unintended consequences of social action and inaction, thereby creating new sets of constraints and opportunities for action. Indeed, again within the basic terms of structuration theory as Giddens presents it, there is little, if any, recognition (let alone adequate explanation) of the differential capacities of actors to change different structures by acting in one way rather than another. Nor, despite his persistent and laudable efforts to integrate time and space into structuration theory, does he consider the differential temporalities (and spatialities) of structures as emergent properties of social relations in their interaction with other features of the natural and social worlds. Instead structures are assumed to continue to exist insofar as actors

instantiate them by drawing on the relevant rules and resources and insofar as they must take these rules and resources as given when they act.

Elsewhere, it must be admitted, Giddens goes beyond this relatively flat ontology of structure and agency (as he defines the former) and introduces a much deeper and richer vocabulary for the analysis of 'structure' as it is understood in critical realism. In particular, having defined 'structure' for his own purposes as rules and resources, he develops another set of terms to identify emergent 'structural properties' that exercise various external structural constraints over agents' capacities for action (*COS* pp25, 176). These properties include: social milieus and their time-space contextuality; regionalisation (produced by the intersection of different locales); the 'facticity' of chronically reproduced, path-dependent institutional orders; institutional 'fixity' (structural stability); system integration (the structured coherence of institutional orders); structural principles (the contrasting organisational bases of tribal, class-divided, and modern societies); patterns of class domination; and time-space edges (produced by contact between social formations with different structural principles). Likewise, in regard to agency, Giddens is well aware of the differential capacities of actors to constrain the actions of others so that, while some actors can 'make things happen', others have things 'happen' to them (*COS*, *passim*). In addition, he allows for the reflexive monitoring by agents of their conduct and their strategic situation (or the action contexts). The aggregate effect of these additions to the structuration approach is to re-introduce the ontological distinction between structure and agency insofar as they are once again seen to have different emergent properties and causal powers, different spatio-temporalities, and different spatio-temporal horizons of action. Only by restricting the definition of structure to rules and resources and confining agency to the manner in which actors draw on these rules and resources can Giddens maintain that they are mutually constitutive and effectively identical in any given action context. Thus, because these concepts and arguments appear to be *ad hoc* but necessary supplements to his basic theory, Giddens can operate with an essentially agential view of the duality of structure and agency (denying their ontological distinctiveness) and link his analysis with more conventional sociological analyses of structure, agency, and strategic context.

Bhaskar introduced his transformational model of social activity (TMSA) in similar terms to Giddens's restricted account of the structuration approach. He has since developed it along new and more comprehensive lines. Bhaskar initially treated the structure-agency dualism in terms of the ontological distinction between 'society' and 'people' and rejected three main positions on their connection: social atomism and methodological individualism; societal reification and methodological holism; and the compromise view that individuals create society, society produces individuals, and so on, in a continuous dialectic (*CRES*, pp212-13). Instead, proceeding (like Archer) from the *ontological distinctiveness* of society and people, he proceeds to focus on their *contingent mediation* through specific practices

that are enabled as well as constrained by the societal positions that people *qua* agents occupy. Society is an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions with its own emergent properties and own material effects; but these distinctive properties and effects are impermanent and their reproduction (or transformation) requires the performance of appropriate practices. Conversely, while actors are distinct from these structures (and can therefore reflect on them and attempt to transform them), their capacity to act and the impact of their actions depends on the specific positions they occupy in these structures, the resources they control, their capacity to monitor what they are doing and its effects, and, of course, the specific actions that they perform.

Society is both the ever-present *condition* (material cause) and the continually reproduced *outcome* of human agency. And praxis is both work, that is, conscious *production*, and (normally unconscious) *reproduction* of the conditions of production, that is, society (p215).

This model is superior to structuration *as formally presented by Giddens* because it enables the analysis of the material effectivity of the emergent properties of structures, including the division of labour and the allocation of resources. Thus, as Archer correctly notes, while Giddens's mediators between structure and agency are free-floating modalities (interpretative schemes, facility, norm or knowledge, power and convention), Bhaskar has specific slots, points of contact, that are differentially distributed, concretely located (*RST*, p152). However, as I have just noted, Giddens introduces a whole series of further concepts to deal with what most theorists would regard as aspects of structure. This suggests that there is actually less difference between Giddens and Bhaskar than Archer identifies in her defence of the TSMA. And, even if we conceded Archer's defence, the TSMA would still be inadequate in critical realist terms insofar as it adopts a flat temporal ontology, neglects space, and treats the poles of structure and agency in terms of a relatively undifferentiated concept of society and people rather than engaging with specific sets of structural constraints and different kinds of social forces. In short, the TSMA is unilinear and monopolar rather than complex and stratified.

Archer's 'morphogenetic' approach was an independent discovery, which she later developed in dialogue with Bhaskar and other members of his school (see *RST*). While recognising that structure and agency are interdependent, she insisted, like Bhaskar, on their non-identity. Only thus can one explore the changing forms and effects of the relations between structure and agency over time and pose questions about when actors can or cannot change things, about variations in the strength of constraints, or about what gives people more or less freedom.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, while her work does not operate in terms of a sociology-psychology dualism, she focused first on the analytical dualism of culture and people, then society and people, and, lastly, 'culture-society' and self. Archer introduces a more explicit temporal dimension into her

11. M.S. Archer, 'Human Agency and Social Structure: A Critique of Giddens' in J. Clark, C. Modgil and S. Modgil (eds), *Anthony Giddens: Consensus and Controversy*, Brighton, Falmer Press, 1990, pp 73-84, at pp78-9.



morphogenetic analysis, both through a critique of Giddens's collapse of time into crude empirical correlation and Bhaskar's inability to deal with time in his initial presentation of the TSMA (*RST*, pp154-157). Thus she claims that morphogenesis 'accords full significance to the timescale through which structure and agency themselves *emerge, intertwine* and *redefine* one another' and examines this in terms of three distinct temporal moments – structure, interaction, and structural elaboration (*RST*, p76). She also seeks to avoid an overactive view of agents as constantly engaged in social practices; an over-socialised view of the person such that (s)he has no autonomous personality; and an under-stratified view of actors such that they are de-centred bundles of identities, roles, etc., without underlying motives and sense of self (*RST*, pp117-32). When she attempts to develop these new theoretical principles, however, she does so in terms of generalised taxonomies of possible forms of social and system integration (or lack thereof) or examples drawn from her own cross-national research on the cultural and structural elaboration of education systems. Thus her morphogenetic approach also suffers, as does the TSMA, from a relatively flat spatio-temporal ontology - operating basically with past, present, and future - and hence from associated neglect of the complex spatio-temporalities of structures, strategic contexts, and social practice and their contingent articulation.

## THE STRATEGIC-RELATIONAL APPROACH

The strategic-relational approach goes beyond all three positions (although it is closest to morphogenetic theory). It examines structure in relation to action, action in relation to structure, rather than bracketing one of them. Structures are thereby treated analytically as strategically-selective in their form, content, and operation; and actions are likewise treated as structurally-constrained, more or less context-sensitive, and structuring. To treat structures as strategically-selective involves examining how a given structure may privilege some actors, some identities, some strategies, some spatial and temporal horizons, some actions over others. Likewise, to treat actions as structurally-constrained requires exploring the ways, if any, in which actors (individual and/or collective) take account of this differential privileging through 'strategic-context' analysis when undertaking a course of action.<sup>12</sup> This does not mean that actors are constantly making (self-)reflexive strategic choices and/or providing a running commentary (as part of an ongoing internal conversation and/or for the benefit of significant others) about their real motives for action. But it does highlight the potential for such strategic reflection and the role of social action in reproducing-transforming social structures and their emergent properties. In short, the SRA is concerned with the relations between structurally-inscribed strategic selectivities and (differentially reflexive) structurally-oriented strategic calculation.

The arrows in figure 1 depict the SRA's logic of conceptual development rather than some necessary historical sequence in the development of

12. On this, see R.A. Stones, 'Strategic Context Analysis: a New Research Strategy for Structuration Theory', in *Sociology*, 25, 3, 1991, pp673-95.

structure and agency or a mandatory order of presentation for empirical analysis.<sup>13</sup> *Row one* presents the inadmissible dichotomy between (absolute) external constraint and (unconditional) free-willed action – the initial thesis and antithesis of the movement leading to the structuration approach, the TSMA, morphogenetic theory, and the SRA itself. *Row two* presents what Bhaskar calls the ‘illicit identification’ of individual and society (and what Archer terms ‘elisionism’ or ‘central conflation’), prompting a false dialectic because, in seeking to transcend voluntarism and reification, it succeeds only in combining them (*CRES*, pp213-214). Giddens’s work also belongs here insofar as it sublates thesis and antithesis by reducing structure to rules and resources (modelled on the simultaneous enabling and constraining capacities of language) and treating agency as a structurally constrained and enabled skilful action (analogous to parole). For different reasons, Bhaskar’s initial presentation of the TSMA and Archer’s morphogenetic theory also belong here. For Bhaskar referred explicitly to emergent structures and socialised agents but allows for their mutual transformation over time; and, while Archer introduces greater temporal depth into her analysis of their continuing interaction, she is initially insensitive to the always relative, relational, and differential nature of structural constraints and capacities for reflexivity. Concepts introduced after row two in the figure preserve the admissible elements of the preceding row(s).

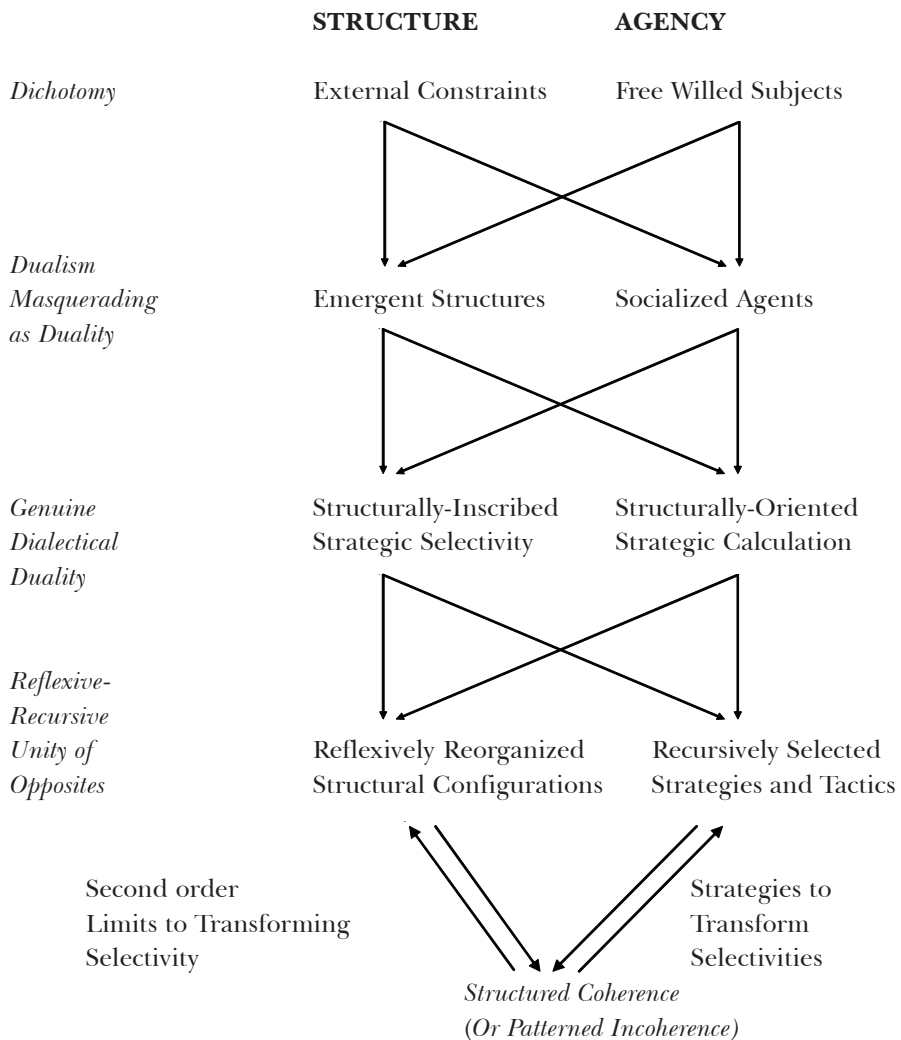
The SRA makes its appearance on *row three* because it is more directly concerned with particular conjunctures, including the distinctive spatio-temporal selectivities of structures and the differential spatio-temporal horizons and action capacities of individual and/or collective agents. Thus the concept of structural selectivity highlights the tendency for specific structures and structural configurations to selectively reinforce specific forms of action, tactics, or strategies and to discourage others. Likewise the concept of structurally-oriented strategic calculation highlights the possibility of reflection on the part of individual and collective actors about the strategic selectivities inscribed within structures so that they come to orient their strategies and tactics in terms of their understanding of the current conjuncture and their ‘feel for the game’. This can (but need not) extend to self-reflection about the identities and interests that orient their strategies. For individuals and organisations can be reflexive, can reformulate within limits their own identities, and can engage in strategic calculation about the ‘objective’ interests that flow from these alternative identities in particular conjunctures. Together these concepts indicate that the scope for the reflexive reorganisation of structural configurations is subject to structurally-inscribed strategic selectivity (and thus has path-dependent as well as path-shaping aspects); and that the recursive selection of strategies and tactics depends on individual, collective, or organisational learning capacities and on the ‘experiences’ resulting from the pursuit of different strategies and tactics in different conjunctures. In turn, the strategic-relational concepts presented in *row four* refer to the strategic-relational aspects of successive

13. The figure derives from B. Jessop, ‘Institutional (Re)Turns and the Strategic-Relational Approach’, *Environment and Planning A*, 33, 7, (2001): 1213-37.

conjunctures and thereby bring out the evolutionary as well as radically methodologically relational nature of the SRA.

The fifth row indicates a possible outcome of the recursive interaction between the strategic selectivities of structures and the reflexive behaviour of agents in producing a structurally coherent, apparently self-reproducing social configuration – marked in some cases by systematic contradictions or patterned incoherence. This is where the SRA makes its most distinctive contribution to a critical realist analysis of structure and agency. The emergence of relatively structured coherence out of potentially unstructured complexity can be understood in terms of the continuing interaction between the reflexive reorganisation of strategic selectivities and the recursive selection and retention (or evolutionary stabilisation) of specific strategies

*Figure 1: A Strategic-Relational Approach to Structure and Agency*



and tactics oriented to those selectivities. ‘Structured coherence’ (or stability) involves a structurally-inscribed strategic selectivity that rewards actions compatible with the recursive reproduction of the structure(s) in question. Nonetheless, for the SRA, this coherence is always multiply tendential. First, since the reproduction of structures is only ever tendential, so too are their strategic selectivities; second, since structures cannot guarantee their self-reproduction but only privilege some strategies and actors over others, there is always scope for actions to overflow or circumvent structural constraints; third, since subjects are never unitary, never fully aware of the conditions of strategic action, never fully equipped to realize their preferred strategies, and always face possible opposition from actors pursuing other strategies or tactics, failure is an ever-present possibility; and, fourth, institutions often embody structural contradictions and create strategic dilemmas.

A major advantage of the SRA as developed here and elsewhere is its explicit concern with the spatio-temporality of structures, agents, and agency and its integration of this into the initial presentation of the core concepts rather than their subsequent introduction on an *ad hoc* basis. These spatio-temporal properties are best discovered through retroduction about the real – a movement that Giddens, for example, rejects because it risks reifying structure as prior to rather than co-produced through agency (*COS*, pp25-26, 180). First, structures emerge in specific places and at specific times, operate on one or more particular scales and with specific temporal horizons of action, have their own specific ways of articulating and interweaving their various spatial and temporal horizons of action, develop their own specific capacities to stretch social relations and/to compress events in space and time, and, in consequence, have their own specific spatial and temporal rhythms. Such features are not accidental or secondary but are constitutive properties that help to distinguish one organisation, institution, institutional order, or structural configuration from another. Second, all structures privilege the adoption, as a condition for success, of certain spatial and temporal horizons of action by those seeking to control, resist, reproduce, or transform it. Thus the spatio-temporal selectivity of an organisation, institution, institutional ensemble, or structural configuration involves the diverse modalities in and through which spatial and temporal horizons of action in different fields are produced, spatial and temporal rhythms are created, and some practices and strategies are privileged and others made more difficult to realize according to how they ‘match’ the temporal and spatial patterns inscribed in the relevant structures. Spatio-temporal matrices are always differentially distanced and compressed; and strategies and tactics can be oriented to the most appropriate spatio-temporal horizons, to changing the forms of spatio-temporal governance, the reflexive narration of past and present to change the future, and so on. And, third, a short-term constraint for a given agent or set of agents could become a conjunctural opportunity over a longer time horizon if there is a shift in strategy. This in turn implies that agents may be able to pursue different types of alliance strategy and so modify the selective impact

upon themselves and others of social structural (including, a fortiori, institutional) constraints and opportunities. Likewise, regarding the spatial dimension of strategic contexts, this approach implies that, since agents may be able to operate across variable spatial scales as well as across several time horizons, spatial structural constraints and conjunctural opportunities are also determined in a 'strategic-relational' manner.

It is in this context that one can study the spatio-temporal dialectics involved in strategy and tactics and the spatio-temporal dialectics of path-dependency and path-shaping (for a discussion of this in Giddens, for example, see *COS* pp319-24). Path-dependency implies that a structure's prior development shapes current and future trajectories and possibilities for structural transformation and innovation. However, while history makes a difference, it does not condemn actors to endless repetition. For, not only can a molecular transformation occur through the gradual accumulation of the unintended consequences of social action, but social forces could also intervene in current conjunctures and actively re-articulate them so that new trajectories become possible. Individual, collective, or organisational reflexivity is significant here insofar as it involves second-order observation of the respective agents' situation and actions and their repercussions on their identity and interests. From a strategic-relational perspective, moreover, such reflexivity could (and should) include reflection on the specific spatio-temporal selectivities of structures and the appropriateness of different spatio-temporal horizons of action. When acted upon this could lead to the reflexive reorganisation of spatio-temporal matrices and to changes in recursively selected strategies and tactics.

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Like other versions of critical realism in the social sciences, the SRA insists on the ontological distinctiveness of structure and agency and develops an epistemology for exploring their complex interaction. This much it shares with Bhaskar's TMSA and Archer's morphogenetic theory and, in this sense, it can be interpreted as one particular version among others of a critical realist approach to structure and agency. It differs from both alternatives in three main respects. First, it unfolds the dialectical interplay of structure and agency in a more complex manner, pushing it beyond the initial level at which the TMSA and morphogenetic theory are introduced. However, given the common starting point in critical realism, there is nothing that prevents adherents of the TMSA and morphogenetic theory from developing the logic of their approach in the same direction. Failure to have done so hitherto may be due to a limited concern with social research in the case of the TMSA and of a limited degree and range of applications so far in the case of morphogenetic theory. Second, the SRA goes beyond both approaches in their present form by arguing immediately and explicitly that the facticity and fixity of structures have no meaning outside the context

of specific agents pursuing specific strategies – even if the latter are expressed at the level of practical consciousness rather than in an explicit, reflexive manner. It is this feature that justifies its proponents' identification of the SRA as strategic-relational in its orientation. Other approaches also recognise this, of course, as shown in Giddens's resort to the conjunctural analysis of structural constraints. And, third, the SRA gives more explicit and immediate attention than do Bhaskar and Archer to the emergent spatio-temporal properties of structures and agency – not just in terms of their spatio-temporal coordinates and extension but also in terms of their inherent spatio-temporal properties, spatio-temporal selectivities, and spatio-temporal horizons of action. This innovation is crucial for an adequate analysis of structurally-inscribed selectivities. For one cannot adequately conceptualise structural constraints outside specific time-horizons and spatial scales of action since any constraint could be rendered inoperable through competent actors' choice of longer-term and/or spatially more appropriate strategies that are concerned to disrupt or reconfigure the existing hierarchies of structures (including institutions) and the selective patterns of constraint and opportunity with which they are associated.

It is these three theoretical advances that distinguish the SRA from its principal alternatives in critical realism. For it interprets structures in terms of the structurally-inscribed spatio-temporal strategic selectivities inherent in particular patterns of social relations. It examines actors in terms of their capacities to engage in strategic-context analysis and to reflexively reorganise structures over different spatio-temporal horizons to modify their selectivities. It studies how the recursive selection of strategies and structures produces relatively stable configurations with structural coherence and mutually reinforcing patterns of conduct. And it emphasizes that the emergence of relatively stable structural ensembles involves not only the conduct of agents and their conditions of action but also the very constitution of agents, identities, interests, and strategies. This co-constitution is always deeply problematic because structures and their associated structural tendencies (including their various selectivities) are never fully constituted but remain vulnerable to transformation, dependent on continued action along certain lines for their reproduction. It is also deeply problematic because agents are never fully constituted as single-minded and omniscient supports of structures but typically have a plurality of identities, interests, desires, and affects as well as differing and variable degrees of knowledgeability and practical competence. This ensures that structures are never reproduced through self-identical repetition but that the future remains pregnant with a surplus of possibilities. It is the explicit concern of the SRA with these possibilities in the relativity, relationality, and contingency of its core concepts that enables it to provide a 'distinctive linkage between social ontology, explanatory methodology and practical social theorising' (*RST*, pp15-16).