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Interpretive Sociology and the Dialectic of Structure and Agency

Bob Jessop

Explanation and Social Theory
by John Holmwood and Alexander Stewart
Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991

Holmwood and Stewart’s monograph, Explanation and Social Theory (1991), is a trenchant but flawed critique of social explanation. Its chief criticism is directed primarily at the recurrent failures of leading neo-Weberian theories of social action and aims to identify their underlying fallacies. Although all the action theorists whose work is criticized (starting with Weber and ending with Giddens) attempt to transcend a supposedly dominant and inhuman positivism, which is inspired by and modelled on the natural sciences, by adopting their own distinctive interpretivist methodology, their efforts are held by Holmwood and Stewart to culminate in a rediscovery of the pathos of human action trapped in the ‘iron cage’ of more encompassing social systems. In this sense Holmwood and Stewart offer the reader an extended illustration and exploration of the paradox alleged by Dawe to encapsulate the history of sociology, namely, that theorists of action typically end up by showing how social actors are the victims of dominating and constraining social systems (Dawe, 1978 cited in Holmwood and Stewart, 1991: 8). In affirming this paradox, Holmwood and Stewart regard abstract theories of social action as essentially hopeless exercises, since even their most skilled practitioners are caught in self-generated contradictions which they continually reproduce rather than creatively dissolve.

What is Wrong with Social Theory? Holmwood and Stewart’s Diagnosis

The authors are drawn down this familiar path by their self-professed desire to liberate social theory from entrenched epistemological and methodological

fallacies which prevent social scientists from successfully getting to grips with practical problems in the way that natural scientists have done. The key
to the natural scientists’ success on this score is held to be a willingness to question their own theories in the face of data which are inconsistent with theoretical expectations. In contrast, social action theorists tend, according
to the authors, to believe they have access to better explanations for social action than do lay social actors who nonetheless routinely and unproblematically reproduce social order in and through their own actions. Thus, when faced with similar inconsistencies between abstract theories and concrete data, social scientists are said to blame them on the recalcitrant, inconsistent or self-contradictory nature of the social world and/or on actors’ freedom to form hitherto undreamt of purposes rather than ask whether the fault might instead lie within their own theoretical frameworks. Even the best exponents of social action theory privilege their own understandings, either by insisting relativistically on multiple truths (thereby allowing for the validity of their own accounts alongside those of lay actors) or by suggesting that their own accounts will ultimately come to be accepted as true by those actors (and incorporated into lay behaviour). Against this arrogant theoretical self-assurance, Holmwood and Stewart argue that, if concrete behaviours inconsistent with abstract social theories are not considered problematic by lay actors, it is the latters’ understandings which should inform explanations. This does not mean that social scientists cannot develop better explanations than those of lay actors. It does require that such accounts are consistently grounded in lay actors’ understandings as well as in more abstract categories and that social scientists should seek to persuade lay actors of this superior explanatory power rather than hoping for some charismatic conversion or imposing from above policies based thereon.

This account of the crisis in abstract social action theory is grounded in the authors’ critique of the ‘social scientific fallacy’. For, contrary to those, such as Giddens, who attribute the relative explanatory and practical weaknesses of the social sciences to the importation of a failed (positivist) methodology from the natural sciences, Holmwood and Stewart argue that it is precisely the home-produced relativism of the interpretivist methodology that is at fault. Whereas the erroneous positivism, realism or pragmatism of the natural sciences nonetheless forces their practitioners to seek coherence between empirical facts and theories by re-examining both, the social scientists’ embrace of relativism serves to relativize their own theoretical failures. It does this by producing and justifying a distinction between social scientists’ accounts and those of the lay subjects whose action they seek to interpret and explain. But this relativism also deems lay accounts inadequate and needful of supplementation by social scientists, whose own interpretations are thereby privileged. In this context Holmwood and Stewart suggest there are two versions of the social scientific fallacy: (a) the horizontal version accepts multiple truths, thereby lending credence not only to lay actors’ accounts but also to those of social scientists, despite apparent inconsistencies of interpretation; and (b) the vertical version argues for a hierarchy of
truths in which social scientists’ explanations will eventually prove more adequate than lay accounts and, perhaps, be integrated into the latter. These two versions of the social scientific fallacy are said to merge into one another, at least tendentially. For, if there are multiple truths, there must be some reason for taking social science accounts seriously when they prove inconsistent with lay accounts; and, if the truth of the social scientists’ account will only be established later, there must be multiple truths now (on positivism in natural science and relativism in social science, see Chapters 2 and 3 respectively). Moreover, according to Holmwood and Stewart, one often finds a cyclical movement across different versions of the fallacy as the contradictions of each become apparent to the theorists concerned. But, as long as social action theorists accept the initial position, there is no escape from the fallacy in one form or other.

This basic critique is then illustrated in a series of chapters that focus on recurrent dualities in abstract theories of social action, specifically: the distinction between rational and non-rational action; the alleged mutual entailment of action and structure; the antinomy of power as an antagonistic and coercive relation of domination and as a collectively produced normative order; the contradiction between the independence of different functional systems and their interdependence within the overall social order; and the status of (false) consciousness and ontological alienation.

Regarding the concept of rationality, Holmwood and Stewart successfully demonstrate that rational action theorists find it hard to maintain the crucial distinction between rational and non-rational action. This difficulty expresses itself in at least three ways. First, rationality is seen to depend on historically conditioned knowledge of ends and means (and thus becomes constrained and historically relativized) and the non-rational is either shown to be rational given the ‘logic of the situation’ facing actors or else becomes meaningless (and is therefore not to be classed as ‘action’). Second, even when they start out from actors’ own meanings and understandings, social action theorists soon disregard incompetent actors who do not understand the rules, then compromise supposedly competent actors by noting the unacknowledged conditions and unintended consequences of their actions, proceed to question whether actors can really understand what is in their own minds, and end up suggesting that actors’ accounts are irredeemably prone to manipulation and inauthenticity. And, third, even without going so far, theories of rational action cannot explain the emergence of new knowledge, new rules and new resources which might transform the meaning of rationality.

Regarding the structure–agency duality, Holmwood and Stewart argue that action theorists either tend to absorb agency and structure into each other so that it is unclear what each category includes or excludes. Or else they assign these categories to different theoretical or empirical sites – which thereby justifies retaining the dualism rather than prompting efforts to transcend it. Thus, in some cases and on some occasions, action theorists argue that some actions are structurally constrained and others unconstrained and that this justifies and demands the coexistence of different
theoretical paradigms; and, in other cases and at other times, action theorists suggest that structure (i.e. rules and resources) is located on a more abstract level than is actual conduct (which draws on abstract rules and resources).

Regarding power and normative order, Holmwood and Stewart claim that power is analysed in the same dualistic manner as structure and action. Thus power resources are regarded as structural, the exercise of power is regarded as a distinctive type of transformative action. As such it can be co-operative, serving collective purposes, or coercive, serving antagonistic interests. But these alternatives are not really reconciled with each other – power is just treated as one or the other or else the distinction collapses in so far as mutually exercised and coercively imposed power plays come to be identified with the collectivity because each inevitably rests on collectively produced power resources. Likewise, just as action theory allegedly fails to explain change in rules, action-theoretic accounts of power are said to be unable to explain the transformation of the resources deployed in its exercise. Nor is it at all obvious from neo-Weberian accounts why power is ever successfully exercised: if it rests on collective resources deployed in the pursuit of collective goals, it does not really constitute an exercise of power and can provoke only unsocial, unexplained opposition. However, if collectively generated power resources are deployed on behalf of antagonistic interests, effective power must rest on pragmatic acceptance; and this, according to Holmwood and Stewart, is simply a re-description of the failure of normative integration.

Regarding structure and function, the authors suggest that this distinction typically rests on a hierarchy of concepts which privileges the atemporal, abstract potentialities of reproducible structures which must provide the reference point for judging functionality over concrete behaviours marked by contingent strains and disturbances which then dysfunctionally disrupt the reproduction of these structures. This inevitably leads, suggest Holmwood and Stewart, to debilitating conflicts between general analyses of structure and context-specific analysis of (dys)functions. This problem is compounded in so far as action theorists distinguish among different structures or functional subsystems within a societal order. For this generates in turn the problem of how they can render consistent the contrary claims that such structures (or systems) are independent and interdependent. If they are independent, there is no guarantee of coherence; if they are interdependent, they cannot really be autonomous systems.

Finally, in their penultimate chapter, Holmwood and Stewart inveigh against the tendency of action theorists to resort to claims of false consciousness on the part of lay actors. They suggest that the hopelessness of ontological alienation attributed to lay actors is nothing but the projection of social theorists’ own incompetence. And this is reflected in the latter’s suggestion that lay actors should want what would make social theorists’ explanations consistent. In this way social theorists’ solutions – abstract and unrealized – are preferred to actors’ solutions – concrete and lived. This would seem to imply that Holmwood and Stewart regard lay actors’ provisional solutions to
the problem of social order as the authentic and necessary starting point for any truly informative and transformative sociological analysis.

**In Defence of Social Theory: An Alternative Approach**

This critique might well discourage new attempts to transcend the dualisms of rationality and non-rationality, structure and agency, or power and freedom through abstract reflection on these traditional antinomies. A common feature of modern Weberian theorizing may well be, as Holmwood and Stewart suggest, its unwitting and unintended reproduction of the contradictory *dualism* of a determinist, structuralist social science and an open-ended, practically unlocated enquiry into culture. Perhaps modern Weberians do end up accepting the contradictory categories of structure and agency, building into their theoretical development of one or the other, or both, the contradiction from which they start. But this is far from an inevitable result of tackling these issues. Indeed, I believe there is another approach to structure and agency which transcends all these antinomies by developing the dialectic in a manner which might even elicit the approval of Holmwood and Stewart themselves. For, in suggesting that Lukes’s self-styled ‘dialectical’ analysis of power is not really dialectical, they propose that a truly dialectical account must not only recognize the contradictoriness of its categories but also ‘go on to consider how this affects their meaningfulness singly and together’ (Holmwood and Stewart, 1991: 115).

Notwithstanding Holmwood and Stewart’s claim that the traditional dualisms can only be resolved through context-specific case studies, I now propose to deal with structure and agency through the self-same dialectical method they support and to show how abstract theorizing has the potential to resolve even this basic dualism in the abstract. This possibly hubristic exercise involves a radical departure from sociological convention in dealing with the problem in so far as both categories will be thoroughly relativized. Sociologists are wont to condemn the irreconcilable, and thus theoretically inadmissible, *dualistic dichotomy* of unconditional, absolute, external constraints and unconditional, wholly free-willed subjective action; they propose replacing it with the *dualized conceptual couplet* of an emergent, contingent, but still determining, social structure and the actions selected by more or less well socialized agents. In this theoretical approach, external social constraints are said to be produced in and through meaningful social action; meaningful social action in turn is said to be oriented in and through socially shared and communicated values, norms and modes of calculation. This is the stuff of sociology textbooks. At best it provides only a partial solution to the structure–agency dichotomy or dualism, however, because it has not yet been theoretically relativized to take account of specific agents and actions. It still inclines to treat social structure (now emergent) as constraining and determining regardless of the agents and actions subject to constraint; and, with its emphasis on the socialization of competent actors, it treats social action as being essentially rule-governed, repetitive and reproductive of structures, regardless of strategic contexts and orientations. In
this sense, even if there is no longer a dichotomy which divides the social world into mind (free will) and matter (social facts), there is still a dualism in which structure and agency are supposed to be mutually reproductive and consistent. It is in criticizing this dualism masquerading as a duality that Holmwood and Stewart are at their most effective.

The false duality links the two categories by counterposing structure (as rules and resources) to action (as concrete conduct) and/or regarding them as recursively reproductive of each other. Despite its counterposition of structure to action, this approach is still abstract; and, despite its ritual reference to recursivity, it remains atemporal. Yet a genuine duality can be created by dialectically relativizing (as opposed to mechanically relating) both analytical categories (see Figure 1). In this context social structure can be studied in ‘strategic-relational’ terms as involving structurally inscribed strategic selectivity; and action can likewise be analysed in terms of its performance by agents with strategically calculating structural orientation. The former term signifies that structural constraints always operate selectively: they are not absolute and unconditional but are always temporally, spatially, agency- and strategy-specific. The latter term implies that agents are reflexive, capable of reformulating within limits their own identities and interests, and able to engage in strategic calculation about their current situation. A number of significant theoretical consequences flow from such a redefinition of the structure–agency relationship.1

First, the ‘structural’ moment in social relations is now seen to comprise those elements in a given temporal-spatial strategic context which cannot be altered by a given agent (or set of agents) pursuing a given strategy during a given time period.2 The ‘conjunctural’ moment in turn will comprise those elements in a given temporal-spatial strategic context which can be modified.

Second, once such a ‘strategic-relational’ approach to the dual ‘structural–conjunctural’ character of strategic action contexts is adopted, conventional views of the structure–agency duality must be rejected. For this new approach implies that the selfsame element(s) can operate as a structural
constraint for one agent (or set of agents) and as a conjunctural opportunity liable to transformation by another agent (or set of agents). It also implies that a short-term structural constraint for a given agent (or set of agents) could become a conjunctural opportunity over a longer time horizon or even within the same 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 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 they also do across changing time horizons, spatial structural constraints and conjunctural opportunities will also be determined in a ‘strategic-relational’ manner. Thus, notwithstanding Holmwood and Stewart’s generalized strictrues against social action theory, it is possible to transcend an abstract, atemporal and unlocated account of structures and develop a context-specific conjunctural account which refers to determinate time–space horizons of action as well as to particular agents and actions. But this creative and resourceful solution requires an adequate account of the dialectic of structure and agency, i.e. serious consideration of how a strategic-relational approach to these twin phenomena ‘affects their meaningfulness singly and together’ (Holmwood and Stewart, 1991: 115).

Third, in regarding actors as reflexive, strategically calculating subjects oriented to the structural–conjunctural complexities of action contexts, the strategic-relational approach implies that they reflect on their identities and interests, are able to learn from experience and, by acting in contexts which involve strategically selective constraints and opportunities, can and do transform social structures. If they consistently adopt such an approach, social action theorists will be readily sensitized to the potential creation of new resources, new rules and new knowledge with all that this implies for the rearticulation of constraints and opportunities. They will also be aware that actors might (re)formulate their strategies in the light of changing experience and knowledge about the strategic contexts in which they perform.

Fourth, if structures are seen as relativized and relational complexes of social constraints/opportunities, then the analysis of power will involve the attribution to specific acts by specific agents of responsibility for the realization of a specific range of effects in specific temporal and spatial horizons. If power involves an agent’s production of effects that would not otherwise occur, it is essential both to identify the structural constraints and conjunctural opportunities confronting those agents and the actions that they performed which, by realizing certain opportunities rather than others, ‘made a difference’. A strategic-relational approach nonetheless challenges orthodox accounts of power in key respects. It not only sees the exercise of power as an *explanandum* rather than as a principle of explanation but also radically relativizes it by treating it as an issue of attribution. For the scope of the *explanandum* will vary with the relative tightness of the spatial and temporal definition of the conjuncture in which particular agents ‘made a difference’.
and of the field of possible effects and repercussions rippling out over social
time and space.\textsuperscript{4} Moreover, if analysing power relations poses issues of attribu-
tion, i.e. identification of those social forces or actions allegedly respon-
sible for realizing a specific set of effects, it also means absolving other forces
of responsibility. But such analyses can be overturned by redefining the con-
jecture in which an alleged exercise of power occurred (widening or further
tightening its scope) and/or by focusing on the prior formation of the agents
whose actions are alleged to have made a difference. This does not mean that
individual actions do not ‘make a difference’ but it does undermine unquali-
fied, non-contextualized talk about power. Nor does a strategic-relational
approach mean that social forces cannot realize intended effects to a signifi-
cant extent. For they may do so within a circumscribed context in which they
can shape conjunctures and so constrain the actions of others. It goes without
saying, of course, that the resulting repercussions will sooner or later escape
not only the control but also the cognizance of the actors who set the scene
for their initial realization (cf. Luhmann, 1984; Matzner, 1994).

In short, structures do not exist outside of specific spatial and temporal
horizons of action pursued by specific actors acting alone or together and in
the face of opposition from others. Likewise, actors always act in specific
action contexts which depend on the coupling between specific institutional
materialities and the interaction of other social actors. Strategic analysis can
be taken still further if we allow for a measure of self-reflection on the part of
some actors regarding the identities and interests which orient strategies.
For actors can and do reflexively remake their identities and the interests
which follow therefrom in specific conjunctures. In turn, structural analysis
can be taken further by investigating the path-dependent structural coupling
and co-evolution of different operationally closed (or autopoietic) systems
(cf. Luhmann, 1984).

Does this approach avoid the problems identified by Holmwood and
Stewart? I would claim that it does. First, it does not posit abstract, atemporal
and unlocated structures or wholly routinized activities performed by ‘cul-
tural dupes’. Structures are irredeemably concrete, temporalized and
spatialized; and they have no meaning outside the context of specific agents
pursuing specific strategies. In this sense there is no abstract theory to be
rendered inconsistent with concrete data about lay behaviour. Rather than
seeking to resolve concrete-complex issues of practical action in specific
conjunctures through abstract epistemological or methodological fiat, the
‘strategic-relational’ approach recommended here leaves these issues
underdetermined on an abstract-simple level and permits their resolution
through appropriately detailed conjunctural analysis. It is impossible to con-
ceptualize 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. This very fact excludes any possibility of a general theory of social
action of the kind so trenchantly criticized by Holmwood and Stevens. But,
contrary to their own prescriptions in the guise of conclusions, it does not
preclude worthwhile abstract theoretical reflection on the nature of the dialectic relationship between structure and agency.

**Concluding Remarks**

There is much of value in Holmwood and Stewart’s monograph. It develops a sustained critique of recent developments in social action theory with rich and detailed analyses of the many internal inconsistencies of leading social theorists. It reveals major similarities in the argumentation and theoretical trajectories pursued by the trinity of ‘modern Weberians’ (Parsons, Habermas and Giddens) despite their respective mutual self-demarcations and insistent protestations to the contrary. It offers interesting comments on empirical as well as theoretical analyses of social actions and reasons for action. In re-analysing data on ‘blackcoated workers’ and contradictory class locations, it shows the benefits of refusing to privilege social scientists’ categories and of reworking empirical data in the light of lay accounts: namely, creatively dissolving apparent theoretical contradictions (or allegedly contradictory realities) in favour of adequate and ‘resourceful’ explanations of previously problematic social phenomena.

Yet Holmwood and Stewart’s argument is also exaggerated and exorbitant in its claims. If it is true that natural scientists have managed to produce practical solutions to major problems despite having erroneous accounts of their methods of scientific work, might it not be the case that practical social scientists (rather than the benighted abstract master theorists upon whom Holmwood and Stewart concentrate their fire) also manage to solve problems creatively by adopting more self-reflexive and self-critical approaches to the assumptions of action theory? In this regard their claims would seem to be exaggerated – especially as they themselves point to successful practical applications of concrete social theory. Moreover, as indicated unwittingly in the title of their book, the authors also tend to conflate neo-Weberian social action theory with social theory as a whole. Their criticisms glide too easily from inconsistencies in some (admittedly very grand theorists) to very grand claims about the failure of social theorists in general to reach the practical standards of the natural sciences. In this regard their claims are exorbitant – being taken out of context and then overgeneralized. It would be interesting, for example, to hear what the authors make of the ‘critical and effective histories’ of Foucault’s discourse analysis with all its scepticism about ultimate truths, whether multiple or transcendent, and its emphasis on discrete analyses of discrete problems.

These difficulties are compounded by the authors’ failure to specify an alternative theoretical and practical agenda. Enlightening as their fine-grained criticisms of action theorists are, it would be even more illuminating to discover how to avoid making the same errors. But they claim that abstract theory is inevitably trapped in potentially vicious cycles of inconsistency and incoherence. The only alternative is to eschew grand theory in favour of concrete, contextualized analyses of problems that exist for lay actors and
public policy-makers. Here Holmwood and Stewart often identify a collective, liberating purpose for practical social scientists which is linked in turn to serving the interests of an unidentified, unsituated ‘we’. Yet their own work cautions against such abstract, atemporal and unlocated analyses and offers a telling critique of accounts of power which link it one-sidedly to pursuit of collective purposes.

Notes

1. In developing these consequences, I draw on an earlier account oriented primarily to state theory (Jessop, 1982: 252–8); I have also been influenced by Rob Stones’s (1991) account of strategic contexts.

2. In this sense structure may include practices as well as their emergent properties and material preconditions and it may be more or less enduring beyond the time period in question.

3. For example, to identify but three possible conjunctures, contrast the immediacy of a particular Cabinet meeting, its occurrence in a medium-term crisis of party political or economic management, and its contextualization in a crisis of the post-war settlement.

4. For example, if one regards the French Revolution as a world-historical event, can one attribute its current effects, even if unintended over such a long time period, to the actions of French revolutionaries?

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