

‘Voluntarism and Determinism in Giddens’s and Bourdieu’s Theories of Human Agency’

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Abstract

The theme of human action has undoubtedly been one of the central areas of investigation and debate within the sociological arena during the latter part of the 20th century. Among the ‘amalgamation of theories and theorists’ who have presented their accounts of human agency, two academics –and their ideas- have monopolised most of the attention: Tony Giddens and his ‘Theory of Structuration’ and Pierre Bourdieu and his ‘Theory of Practice’. Although both accounts have attempted to provide a distinct answer to the structure/agency dispute, they have also been subject to a number of criticisms. While Bourdieu’s standpoint has largely been accused of adopting an overly objectivistic approach, Giddens’s work has been blamed for its essentially subjectivistic nature. This essay will introduce Bourdieu’s and Giddens’s perspectives of human agency and will review the above claims and the complications these theories face in their attempt to reach a balanced theory of human agency.

Introduction

When examining the development of social theory during the last half of the 20th century, it becomes apparent that one of the most significant efforts within the discipline has been oriented towards developing an intermediate approach towards the theme of human action which successfully reconciled the formerly antagonistic terms of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’. In this way, a reconciliatory movement has recently evolved which tries to overcome some of the dichotomist concepts, theories and schools within classic and contemporary sociology, i.e. agency/structure; subjective/objective; idealism/determinism; existentialism/structuralism; Ethnomethodology/Functionalism; etc.. While a number of theoretical approaches have attempted to tackle this issue, the ideas of two of the most influential modern sociologists have occupied a privileged position in this debate and have been subject to most of the attention and discussion. In this way, both Anthony Giddens’s ‘Structuration Theory’ and Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘Theory of Practice’ have emerged as two of the most competent accounts which try to overcome the ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ divide in classical social theory, presenting two similar and often interrelated sets of ideas which attempt to provide a holistic theorisation of human action.

Although common links and comparable sets of ideas can be found between these two theoretical approaches, a particular divergence also emerges from them: while, on the one hand, Giddens’s account is often accused of being essentially voluntaristic, that is to say, dangerously leaning towards the agent’s perspective, Bourdieu’s theory, on the other, has been argued to fall into certain deterministic pitches, thus overemphasising the role of structures in influencing human behaviour.

The following essay will briefly introduce the main concepts behind both Giddens’s ‘Structuration Theory’ and Bourdieu’s ‘Theory of Practice’ and critically evaluate the validity of the claims which accuse such approaches of being overly voluntaristic or deterministic

respectively. Finally, I will briefly address the issue of to what extent it would be possible to achieve determinism-free and voluntarism-free social theory and the complications to reach a balanced approach.

Giddens's 'Structuration Theory' and the critique of 'voluntarism'

Giddens's version of 'Structuration Theory' developed as an alternative to the sociological 'cardinal sins' of subjectivism and objectivism in an attempt to develop an all-encompassing theoretical approach with focus on the duality (instead of dualism) of structure. Thus, structure and agency are not conceptualised as separate entities but as different sides of the same reality (i.e. the two sides of a coin) brought together through practice. In this way, by engaging into different social practices and behaviours, agents produce and reproduce social structures in an ever-flowing circle or, better conceptualised, a spiral which repeats over and over again. Agents draw upon social structures in order to act and, at the same time, they reproduce these same or slightly altered structures, which in the end, are established as the new conditions of action for the next cycle of the structuration process.

Structures are, in fact, 'structured practices' -connecting praxis and structure- which do not just exist in and of themselves and which cannot exist without enacted conduct (Cohen, 1989, p.131). They are, therefore, a set of enduring patterns of action which are at all times guided by rules and resources.

These structures in Giddens theory can be divided into two sets of elements. On the one hand, 'rules' are conceptualised as '*generalisable procedures applied in the enactment/reproduction of social life*' (Giddens, 1984, p.21) and differentiated into 'procedural rules' (how individual social practices are performed) and 'moral rules' (what is permissible and what is not when carrying out social action and interaction). The second component of structure in 'Structuration Theory' is resources. These can be either 'material resources', i.e. money or commodities, or 'resources of authority', such as cultural capital; political power, etc. (Giddens, 1984) and are closely linked to social rules, i.e. in order to use coins or bank notes you need to know first that they belong to you, how these are used and how to go on in a specific situation to transform them into other commodities. This last example also serves as an introduction for another of the particularities of Giddens's account of structure/agency: structures have, in fact, a 'virtual existence' as they are always incurred into by the mind and/or behaviour of the agent or user; that is to say, structures are not material but '*they only exists as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents and as the instantiation of rules in the situated activities of agents*' (Giddens, 1987, p.21).

Even more interesting for the purposes of the present paper is Giddens's 'stratification model of the agent'. In this respect, Giddens divides any social action or behaviour (praxis) into three necessary components: a 'motivation' for the agent to incur into the action (which can be either conscious or unconscious), the 'rationalization of the action' (by constantly making choices between different courses of action to fulfil a 'hierarchy of purposes') and the 'reflexive monitoring of the action' (clearly inspired on interpretivist approaches) (Parker, 2000; Craib, 1992). In this way, motivation, knowledge and reflexivity are the 3 key elements which play a part in the carrying out of any social action in Giddens's 'Structuration Theory'. At the same time, Giddens divides the second of such components, placing particular emphasis on the knowledgeability –or lack of it- of the agent (Stones, 2005, ch.2). Thus, agents produce action by possessing only partial information of the context and outcome of that action ('acknowledged conditions of action' and 'intended consequences of action', respectively) while ignoring some uncontrollable factors within the context of such

an action and some of the potential unforeseeable outcomes ('unacknowledged conditions of action' and 'unintended consequences').

Giddens also distinguishes between different levels of reflexivity employed by the agent in order to 'go on' through its routine social activities. On the one hand, 'practical consciousness' acts as the main form of human consciousness and is conceptualised as the automatic knowledge of 'how to go about' social life and involving the skills and abilities used to perform individual daily routine activities, i.e. getting dressed (Giddens, 1979). 'Discursive consciousness', on the other hand, can be defined as the ability to tell 'rational stories' about these daily-life activities. It takes the form of articulated discourse about one's social conditions of action and is argued to be a much rarer form of reflexivity (Giddens, 1979). In addition, Giddens also draws upon the Freudian concept of the unconscious, but its explanation is out of the scope of the present essay. In summary, we should hold on to the fact that Giddens clearly views the agent as a 'reflexive' and 'self-monitoring' being able to respond to a variety of changing situations.

The approach Giddens offers concerning the structure/agency debate and which has been summarised above has been criticised by a number of academics from diverse backgrounds for a number of different reasons (see i.e. the work of Archer, Mouzelis or Thompson). However, one of the most incisive criticisms of the theory relates to its –arguably- essentially voluntaristic nature. In other words, some see 'Structuration Theory' dangerously leaning towards the agent's perspective and overemphasising the role and freedom of the agent to the detriment of the constraining pressures of social structures. In this respect, we can identify, at least, 3 problematic themes within Giddens's version of Structuration Theory in relation to its voluntaristic conception:

1. The high level of knowledgeable ability and reflexivity attributed to individual actors alongside Giddens's conception of agency as 'the ability to do otherwise' (Tucker, 1998) or 'the capacity to resist structural pressures' (Cohen, 1989).
2. Giddens's loose and limited conception of social structure as internalised rules together with material and immaterial resources as well as his failure to conceptualise external constraints for agency.
3. The claim that structure has a 'virtual existence' (Giddens, 1984).

In relation to the first of these claims, it can be noted that Giddens has an overly optimistic view of the agent, which is in all cases competent and skilful, and of his ability to control his own existence but lacks a notion of why agents cannot quite often avoid social failure (i.e. unemployment, divorce or poverty). It follows that Giddens theory is in need for a notion of what makes the system 'opaque' for some agents and not for others in a similar way that Bourdieu's 'cultural capital' serves the purpose of 'decoding' reality for the agent. It can be argued that the equivalent concept would be that of 'discursive consciousness' introduced above as the ability of the agent to put agency into words. However, it is not completely clear why some agents possess a higher degree of this than others and where they obtained it from in the first place. In this way and in the context of criminology research, O'Brien *et al* claim that Giddens voluntarism '*might be called a 'Californianism', his sunny sense that social difficulties can be largely solved by therapy and insight, and that everyone has access to the playful possibilities of reflexive identity construction available to 'clever' people*' (O'Brien *et al*, 1999, p.124).

Besides, Giddens is also particularly optimistic when he states, for instance, that '*all social actors, no matter how lowly, have some degree of penetration of the social forms which oppress*

them' (Giddens, 1979, p.72) or that '*at any phase in any given sequence of conduct, any given agent could have acted in a manner somewhat different than she did*' (Giddens, 1984 cited in Cohen, 1989). In fact, even when actors theoretically have such a rational possibility to choose a particular way of acting from a range of possible ones when being under the often suffocating pressures of social structure, is it really a choice when possibly most of or all the courses of action will lead to the same outcome? Such a naïve and humanistic view is difficult to believe and essentially denies the realities of a world in which social inequality and exclusion are spreading faster than ever and in which the gap between the powerful and the powerless is clearly widening.

Giddens's conceptualisation of social structure as rules and resources can also be problematic. As Thompson points out, 'there is more to structure than rules and resources' (Thompson, 1989). For instance, in Giddens's account there is not a clear, material, tangible reality 'out there' which exerts pressure on the agents to act in a way or another, not even in terms of internalised structures as in Bourdieu's 'habitus'. Thus, Giddens lacks a patent explanation of the difference in power and resources among agents or about how rules and resources are tied to each other as well as a convincing hint of why agents act in different ways than other agents and sometimes in a seemingly patterned way (i.e. consumption being somehow distributed by occupation or social class). In other words, you can see a well balanced version of the agent in Giddens's theory conceptualising motivations, reflexivity and rationality from the conscious to the subconscious level, and you may also find an almost valid account of social structure (although, in my view, missing a more traditionally encompassing conception of it) but, disappointingly, there does not seem to be a clear link which connects the enabling capabilities of the agent with the essentially constraining material properties of the structure. Moreover, and as Archer points out, Giddens does not leave room in his theory to properly explain issues concerning the agent's degrees of freedom and constraints and, in the case of the latter, how some structural properties may be more amenable than others (Archer cited in Craib, 1992, p.151).

The fact that Giddens develops the concept of structure by announcing its 'virtual existence' does little more than further confusing the reader and giving his critics more ground to attack the apparently subjectivist nature of his theoretical effort. For instance, Derek Layder questions the validity of something which has a 'virtual existence' as a basis for social theory (Layder, 1981) or as Craib points out '*can anything which is out of time and space have an existence?*' (Craib, 1992, p.152).

Nevertheless, although the criticisms above may sound as implying a total rejection of his approach, that is far from my intention. When closely examining Giddens writings on Structuration and considering the clarifications made by some of his 'followers', it becomes apparent that most of the objections above are, in fact, amendable. The main problem, thus, arises from Giddens sometimes underdeveloped concepts and from his essentially abstract and philosophical view of agency and structure. In fact, once his ideas are properly clarified and expanded and some contributions of his detractors affixed to his theory (one of the positive sides of Structuration theory being too abstract is that it is relatively easy to do this) it all becomes less problematic. One of the best efforts to overcome the voluntaristic perception of Giddens concept of agency comes from Stones, who argues that, although the area regarding the constraints of external structures is underdeveloped in Giddens theory, it can be derived from certain fragments and allusions in his writings (Stones, 2005). In this way, Stones argues that Giddens does, in fact, offer a balanced account of the structural pressures on the individual since a logical consistency with the rest of his theory would imply

a notion of external structures which impact the agent-in-focus ability to act by: a) *'being subject to the constraints entailed by the distribution of power among not compliant others'*; b) *'through successfully deploying normative sanctions and rewards'* on the basis of social norms embedded in the structures of legitimation; and c) *'as a result of being facilitated or constrained by the interpretative schemes of the agent'* (à la Bourdieu) (Stones, 2005, p.60-61). Similarly, Cohen also points to the neglected idea in Giddens theory that *'in every social relationship there is a dialectic of control involving the asymmetrical access to and manipulation of the resources through which agents influence one another's behaviour'* to supersede claims of voluntarism in his approach (Cohen, 1989, p.25). In this way, he proposes that Giddens statement that agents are always able to *'act otherwise'* acts just as a rejection of *'a thoroughgoing determinism'* while he also locates an individual's degree of freedom in his ability to perform a range of different practises: the more skilled the agent is, the higher his freedom to *'act otherwise'* (Cohen, 1989, p.24). However, Cohen may be ignoring the role of resources in this equation.

Thus, in this section it is shown that it is not too far-fetched to attack Giddens's 'Theory of Structuration' on the grounds of being essentially voluntaristic but that, at the same time, the re-elaboration of some of his ideas can partially counteract some of the claims of his critics. In the next section we will explore in a similar way Bourdieu's 'Theory of Practice' and some of its related criticisms regarding determinism.

Bourdieu's 'Theory of Practice' and the threat of 'determinism'

Pierre Bourdieu's 'Theory of Practice' can be regarded as the major alternative to 'Structuration Theory' as a plausible attempt to bridge subjectivist and objectivist approaches in the study of human action. In this way, Bourdieu intends to effectively unite social phenomenology and structuralism in his belief that *'it is possible to step down from the sovereign viewpoint from which objectivist materialism orders the world without having to abandon to it the 'active aspect' of apprehension of the world by reducing knowledge to a mere recording'* (Calhoun et al, 2002, p.276). In order to build up this all-encompassing theoretical approach, Bourdieu developed a set of concepts around which the logic of practice was explained. The key conceptions are 'habitus', 'fields' and 'capital'.

The term 'habitus' was borrowed and expanded by Bourdieu from the writings of Marcel Mauss and was defined by himself as *'a system of generated dispositions integrating past experiences, which functions at every moment in a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks'* (Bourdieu, 1977, p.83). Habitus is, therefore, a set of mental structures and internalised schemes which influences how the individual perceives, understands, evaluates and acts in the social world at all times. This set of generative schemata is acquired through the interaction of the individual within the social world and in particular 'fields' within it. The habitus is the product of an individual's particular history or trajectory through life. The habitus includes *'the conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence'* (Bourdieu, 1990, p.53), for instance, the social position/s an individual occupies, his socialization process or his social background. As the individual develops these dispositions in response to the objective conditions he encounters, the habitus acts as the inculcation of objective social structures into the subjective, mental experience of agents. In a similar fashion, the habitus encompasses all past experiences. It is *'the product of history'* as it signifies *'the active presence of the whole past of which it is a product'* (Bourdieu, 1977, p.56).

However, the concept of habitus can only exist and make sense in relation to its objective complement: the notion of 'field'. Bourdieu defines the term 'field' as a social arena within which people compete for scarce resources; a system of social positions based on structure in power relationships; *'a network, or configuration of objective relations between positions'* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.97). Society is not conceptualised by Bourdieu merely in terms of competing classes, but as a compendium of independent and differentiated fields (i.e. the fields of politics, the field of work or the field of arts) in which individuals compete and struggle in order to multiply their capital. Everyday life is therefore, nothing but the continuous struggle in not one but a conglomeration of horizontally and vertically organized force fields.

It is at this point that the notion of 'field' naturally derives into the third of Bourdieu's conceptual pillars: his particular understanding of 'capital'. In this respect, although Bourdieu shares the 'conflict element' and the term capital with Marx, the French scholar adds new dimensions to the concept and develops new links with the previously introduced terms of 'habitus' and 'fields'. In this respect, 'capital' in Bourdieu's social theory can be defined as different types of resources distributed throughout the social body which have an exchange value in one or more of the various 'fields' which comprise the social world (Bourdieu, 1977). Hence, anything can become capital when it presents itself as significant or desirable. Thus, Bourdieu's conceptualization of capital goes beyond the classic Marxist material 'economic' perspective towards the inclusion of less tangible forms of resources such as 'cultural', 'symbolic' and 'social' capital. Individuals bring their capital with them into the different force 'fields' which organize society and compete to multiply it. In this way, fields are hierarchically distributed spheres often analogized as 'marketplaces' or 'games'. Each one has its own norms and work mechanisms and requires different types and/or combinations of capital to, first, guarantee access to it and, second, achieve dominant positions within it.

Field and habitus have therefore a two-way relationship: fields can only exist if social agents possess the habitus necessary to maintain them and, reciprocally, by participating in the field, actors incorporate into their habitus the specific rules which will allow them to constitute the field. Therefore, habitus enacts the structures of the field, and the field mediates between habitus and practice (Bourdieu, 1977; 1984; 1992). In a mathematical fashion, Bourdieu summarizes the interplay between his concepts in the following formula:

$$[(\text{Habitus}) (\text{Capital})] + \text{Field} = \text{Practice} \quad (\text{Bourdieu, 1984, p.101})$$

Making the analogy, for instance, of a footballer, we can infer that it is necessary to take into account the player's *'feel for the game'* (Bourdieu, 1998, p.76-77) developed by his past experiences playing football (habitus), his physical and tactical resources (capital) and the rules of the football game alongside the privileged forms of capital within it (field/doxa) if we are to fully understand and explain why the sportsman behaves in the way he does (action/practice).

It follows from this that habitus can be considered both 'structured structures', as it incorporates habits which predispose the agent to maintain particular forms of practice within a field, and 'structuring structures', since it is equally responsible for the later generation of practice within the same field, or even as 'structured structuring structures' (Dyke, 1989, p.211). In this way, we can appreciate how habitus and field are locked into a cycle of mutual reshaping and why habitus is presented by Bourdieu as the key to social

reproduction: it is both structure and agency and it is central to both generating and regulating the practices that constitute social life.

However, despite Bourdieu's attempts to achieve relative neutrality between the two sides of the 'voluntarism'/'determinism' debate, many authors have argued that he retains a primarily objectivist point of view. There are essentially three main reasons as to why this label has been put onto his work:

1. Bourdieu's conception of action is primarily instrumental and mechanical (largely based on past experiences) and mostly neglects the capability of agents to be reflexive, creative and/or critical (see, i.e. Calhoun *et al*, 1993; Swartz, 1997).
2. Bourdieu's model marginalises inter-subjective elements and the power of agency through communication and interaction in favour of action as positional (within 'fields') (Swingewood, 1984).
3. There is a problematic under-theorization of 'rationally developed strategies' in Bourdieu's model of agency and the linkages between the concepts of 'field > habitus > practise' are deterministic-mechanistic and present the agents as essentially passive (Mouzelis, 1995).

Bourdieu's 'Theory of Practice' already starts from a suspiciously objectivist point of view when he denotes that objective structures are independent of the actors and are, therefore, the starting point of inquiry. At the same time, he puts too much emphasis on the deterministic and constraining nature of habitus (the unalterable past necessarily modifies the present through its presence in the habitus) and the power of socialization (a primarily structural notion). Besides, he also misses a detailed account of how habitus changes –if it does- over time and through which mechanisms for both one individual's life and as a preset entity. All these claims lead to the first of the points numbered above. As habitus is understood as the collection of internalised past experiences and capital as an essentially objectivist concept, Bourdieu leaves too little room for individual willpower, reflexivity and ability to change when he evaluates the agent's course of action (Calhoun *et al*, 1993).

Furthermore, Bourdieu's imbalance towards structural ends can also be noted when he is unable to explain individual motivations by reducing human nature as 'egoist and selfish', being solely motivated by competition for goals and status. It follows that he is in pains to conceptualise mechanisms for breaking with routine and habitus which would facilitate individual and social change (Swartz, 1997). In this manner, if the dominant possess the capital necessary to perpetuate their hegemony into the different fields society is composed of; plus a habitus established as 'superior' through the legitimating mechanisms of 'symbolic violence' as well as ensured means to pass it from generation to generation and to avoid other groups 'getting into it', there seems to be no room in his theory to explain social change or to account for exceptions such as people who, like himself –raised in the French countryside by a postman and a housewife - could somehow overcome their acquired 'habitus' and lack of capital and succeed in one or more of the fields of social life.

Furthermore, there is also Swingewood's claim that, although Bourdieu's field theory 'assumes [...] modes of communication', he lacks a proper concept of interaction. Thus, communicative practises in his work 'arise entirely on the basis of positions occupied within a field not through the subjective properties inherent in forms of interaction' (Swingewood, 1984, p.217). As a result, although Bourdieu presents his theory as a balanced account in terms of the reflexivity of his agents, 'the conditions which enable actors to be reflexive are theorised away' (Swingewood, 1984, p.217) and actors in the 'Theory of Practice' are, in the end, presented

as 'cultural dopes' who mechanistically struggle for goals and status, being uncritical and lacking freedom of choice.

The third and last main objection to Bourdieu's conceptualisation of agency is outlined by Greek theorist Nicos Mouzelis and concerns the explicit neglect of 'rationally developed strategies' (an essentially reflexivity-based course of action) in Bourdieu's notion of agency (Mouzelis, 1995, p.108). After providing reasons as to why volitional strategies are an important part *'in playing the game'*, Mouzelis explains that, if habitus could indeed be *'stretched'* to cover both consciously and unconsciously motivated decisions, then *'it would lose its analytical edge'* and, therefore, could not be presented anymore as a novel superseding concept of the subjectivist/objectivist debate, but instead as the result of *'putting new labels on old bottles'* (for instance, Garfinkel's or Mead's ideas) (Mouzelis, 1995, p.108-109).

In my opinion, Bourdieu's approach should not be defined as essentially deterministic, although it is easy to identify some potentially deterministic elements and understand the grounds of the critiques above. Bourdieu explicitly tries to emphasise that it is not that people do not act 'reflexively' or 'voluntarily', but that their choices are limited by real life conditions as well as by -mostly unconsciously- the differentiated 'habitus' they carry. Agency in social life is seen as a 'menu' from which you can choose on the basis of your social background and available capital rather than as a free-will game, thus taking into account, although to different degrees, both the enabling and constraining sides of structure and agency. My view is, hence, more akin to that of Calhoun or Swartz insofar as I understand habitus as a mediating concept between structures and practices, and not as a structurally determinant construction. Habitus can, thus, contain both dimensions: determinism (as it tends to perpetuate the existing structures it internalised and 'protect itself to change') and the possibility of change (when it encounters social conditions of action which are different to the conditions in which the habitus was originated) (see, i.e. Swartz, 1997). It may still be the case, as seen above, that this implies the theory being rather mechanistic and deterministic, but I believe this essentially pessimistic view of human agency can easily be sustainable based on philosophical premises which conceptualise human nature and agency within these parameters.

Finally, what was claimed against Giddens theory concerning 'theoretical looseness' can also be held against Bourdieu. Although the French academic is well-known for making good use of research as an essential complement to theory -unlike other theorists, including Tony Giddens- his theoretical concepts still suffer from some vagueness and are often too broad, ambiguous and malleable, being his notion of 'habitus' the best example for this. In this way, talking about Bourdieu's structure/agency theoretical framework, defined by himself as 'a work in progress' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992 cited in Swartz, 1997), implies discussing all the potential interpretations of his different concepts and of the linkages between them, which makes it a really complex task to evaluate his theory as a whole. However, it has been shown in this section that it is not illegitimate to catalogue his effort as, at least, 'suspiciously deterministic'.

Towards a non-voluntaristic and non-deterministic theory of human action?

As shown above, it is not too far-fetched to consider Giddens's and Bourdieu's accounts of human agency as voluntaristic or deterministic respectively. However, this critique should always be relative and some of the counterarguments carefully considered before 'condemning' their theories. Furthermore, the fact of adopting a particularly voluntaristic or deterministic view does not necessarily have to be considered an inherently bad thing,

although it would certainly go against the sometimes 'megalomaniacal' claims of transcendence of the authors. In fact, it should be acknowledged that theorists come from different sociological and philosophical traditions, with particular definitions and presuppositions about the nature of the social. In this way, it would, for instance, be almost an impossible project to position oneself in favour of Giddens more optimistic account of social theory or for Bourdieu's more pessimistic one without being influenced by one's own theoretical standpoint. A clear example of this is the paradox that Giddens 'Theory of Structuration' has been accused by some academics of being overtly voluntaristic while, at the same time, was found guilty of latent determinism by theorists of a different school. Here, I find myself in a position in which I would strongly remind the often neglected role of social research in favouring or disfavouring one or another account, instead of confining the discussion to the different ontological levels. In this way, I believe that contemporary social theory, particularly in the case of 'quasi-grand theories' as the ones above, has abandoned one of the essential principles of sociology and social science, namely the essential duality between theory and research. Hence, I would strongly argue in favour of giving much more weight to theoretically oriented research in order to advance in the debate.

However, this should not be an excuse for ignoring the flaws of the two considered accounts of agency addressed above. In this respect, throughout this essay it was attempted to convey that such issues can and should be reconsidered by developing the too abstract concepts at the ontology-in-general level and, especially, at the 'ontic' (ontology-in-situ) level (see, i.e. the discussion in Stones, 2005, ch.2-3). Additionally, at a personal level I believe that considering social structure and human agency as a 'duality' instead of a dualism may be highly problematic (as discussed thoroughly in Archer, 1995) if wanting to avoid the traps of voluntarism or determinism in one's theory altogether (as well as for other reasons which are out of the scope of the present paper). In this respect, I believe that a theory which attempts to maintain a balance between objectivism and subjectivism should probably avoid confusing accounts of structure and agency as the two sides of the same coin. Other than this elementary appreciation, it would probably be impossible, overambitious and naïve to propose here which particular guidelines a theory should follow to avoid the pitches of voluntarism and determinism. Throughout this paper it became apparent that a well conceptualised agent able to be reflexive and critical, competent to learn from experiences and capable of communicating and interacting with others is an indispensable element of a successful theory of action. In addition to this, a well balanced account of non-virtual but real structures which constrain more than enable agency and which embrace rules and norms, material and immaterial resources and mechanisms for continuity and change as well as a range of well conceptualised theoretical and practical levels (micro, meso and macro) should also be an essential constituent of such an approach. Thus, such a theory should incorporate the main advantages of classical objectivist perspectives, such as the principle of continuity and regularity of structure and practice in the social world, as well as those champion factors of subjectivist approaches, for instance, their focus consciousness, reflexivity, conflict and competition at the individual level.

However, even if such an unlikely theory was ever achieved and accepted across a range of influential academics, there is still a real possibility –not to say almost certainty- that a number of detractors would confront such an approach on the grounds of their internalised theoretical standpoints. Nevertheless, this should not be seen as inherently negative, but as the way in which any social science is meant to work and advance: by constant dialogue and critique among those who 'practice' it –and ideally- by all those who are involved into it, that is to say, the whole of the general public.

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