

Abstracts

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The Problem of Structure and Actor in Main Traditions of Political Theory

The problem of linking structures and actors in social and political theory can be defined as a methodological problem, in the sense that a structure-orientated approach often tends to end up in structural determinism, while an actor-orientated approach is, typically, faced with the danger of voluntarism. The problem is predominant not only in »traditional« social and political theory, represented by Durkheim and Weber, but also in Marxism, represented by names like Althusser and Elster.

Curt Sørensen

Historical Materialism in the Light of Recent Debates about Social Action and Social Objectivity

In more recent theoretical debates within the social sciences the problem of social objectivity and social action has been brought up for discussion. It is possible to identify two main positions: The first position emphasises the importance of objective conditions, structures, and deeper layers of historical circumstances, etc. (Theda Skocpol, G.A. Cohen and followers of Althusser). The second position, stresses the importance of the subjective understandings of the social agents and their actions (Elster, Przeworski, Laclau, Mouffe). Between these two extremes others are trying to link together the structural determination approach and the social action approach to the study of social phenomena (Michael Taylor). In this article it is argued that this »new« debate, though lively and refreshing, does not introduce any particularly fresh positions. It is demonstrated that the tense and complex relationship between social objectivity and social action is present as a central topic in the writings of Karl Marx and after him in other works in the Marxist tradition (Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky, Otto Bauer, Gramsci). The often advanced thesis, (Popper, Gorz, Castoriadis, Giddens) that Marx did hold a onesided teleological understanding of history and society, is disproved. Further, starting from a critical assesment of the »theories of discourse«, (Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and others), the notion of »totality« and the problematic of reductionism is discussed.

Nils Mortensen

Opposition and Reconciliation between Structures and Actors

In contemporary social theory there is a movement towards integration of classical contradictions between perspectives of structural determination and perspectives of actors' freedom. This movement is in accordance with tendencies in contemporary society: Apparently social systems and possibilities for action are both changing dramatically.

There are several dimensions involved in the relations between structural perspectives and actors' perspectives: a) individual and aggregated level, b) actor and structure, c) hermeneutic and objectivistic perspective, and d) freedom and determination. This makes an integration of the perspectives analytically complicated.

Anthony Giddens' structuration theory is among the most ambitious modern attempts to solve traditional analytical contradictions between structures and actors. However, Giddens' theory does not develop the fundamental concepts of actors and structures sufficiently: Actors must be seen as constituted in social contexts stretching far beyond the immediate situation and structures and systems must be seen as indeterminate, contingent and creative.