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## AGENCY-STRUCTURE DEBATE: THE LIMIT OF SOCIOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

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*Abstract:* The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that the agency-structure debate does not only emphasize the contradictory nature of social reality but also discloses from the very theoretical positions – usually divided as voluntaristic or deterministic – a fundamental contradiction immanent in the sociological approach to this issue with regard mostly to the theory of action. It also shows the pervasiveness of positivism, irrespective of the level of sociological abstraction of the facts, for the reason that what is precluded is any departure from the given order of things even when the dichotomy (agency-structure) is subsumed under the concepts of change. But they are derived entirely from the particular forms of relations and the obtaining of laws is performed out of presupposed common and enduring reality defined as “everyday reality”. In other words the epistemological and ontological issues in reference to this topic given by the standard interpretation are unreservedly in preserving this reality. In this paper the abstraction, on the contrary, bounds the multitude of forms and relations of social reality to socio-historical processes in which they are constituted. In other words, it does not neglect the facts but only adds the processes in which these facts develop and in which the relation between agency and structure can be resolved.

*Keywords:* metatheory, micro-macro level, negative unity, self-reflection of totality, everyday reality, ordinary consciousness, teleology, ontological necessity, form and content, quasi-transcendentalism.

### Introduction

In the *Social Construction of Reality* both authors, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, boldly announced their goal: “to move the sociology of knowledge from the periphery to the very center of sociological theory”. They founded the ‘social constructionism’ as a new (sociological) theory of knowledge on the well-known dualism in sociological theory, i.e. the theoretical dilemma of structure/agency, which in their view was epitomized in the “to two of the most famous and most influential marching orders for sociology”. The first (referring to structure) was given by Durkheim (in *The Rules of Sociological Methods*), condensed in his famous sociological principle “consider social facts as things”, namely, the omnipresence of society as a bidding (moral) force of human

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collectivities, and the opposing one, given by Weber who put a strong emphasis on the social actors, or more precisely, on the subjective meaning of their actions. From the authors' point of view there is no opposition at all between these two theoretical positions. On the contrary, as they say, Durkheim as well as Weber knew that there is a mutual influence or inter-determination between structure and action, between these distinct types of causality. Thus, according to these authors "it is precisely this dual character of society in terms of objective facticity and subjective meaning that makes its *reality sui generis*". Given the latter assumption they set out their study by posing a question which in their opinion has a central importance not only for sociology of knowledge but also for sociological theory in general: *How is it possible that subjective meanings became objective facticities? Or in terms appropriate to the aforementioned theoretical positions: How is it possible that human activity (Handeln) should produce a world of things (choses)? In other words an adequate understanding of "reality sui generis" of society requires an inquiry into the manner in which this reality is constructed. This inquiry, we maintain, is the task of sociology of knowledge* (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 32).

At first glance it may seem to the reader that the above citation is nothing more than another attempt to resolve this conundrum in sociological theory. Since Durkheim's 'Dualism of Human Nature'<sup>2</sup> until the structuration theory of Giddens sociologists had been trying to find plausible explanation of this dilemma for obvious reasons. It has a crucial importance for the very existence of sociological theory if not for sociology itself as a separate "intellectual discipline" among others, but also as a "scientific enterprise". The former definition has to do with the *subjective*, "sociologically imaginative", theoretical attitude of "*seeing through*" (Berger, 1963: 44) the vast array of "manifested" content in order to arrive at "latent" structures by posing interesting questions or fashioning substantive claims, and the latter, by gathering the empirical data or emphasizing the significance of *objective* external observation, aims at underlying *laws* that are supposed to prove or disprove our initial, abstract reflections about things. To clarify further the distinction between these two approaches, the first as a "general intellectual endeavor", as a beginning of every science as such, and the second, the empirical analysis, we can refer to Robert Merton's general division among the sociologists: between those "who seek above all to generalize, tending to assess the sociological work in terms of scope rather than the demonstrability of generalization, who seek the grandeur of global summaries, and the second band of sociologists who get involved into the triviality of detailed small-scale observations, those who don't hunt too closely the implications of their research but who remain confident and assured that what they report is so" (Merton, 1945: 462). For the first group, Merton concludes, "the identifying motto would seem to be: we don't know whether what we say is

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<sup>2</sup> See more on this essay in Hart's and McKinnon's *Sociological Epistemology: Durkheim's Paradox and Dorothy E. Smith's Actuality* (2010).

true, but it is at least significant”<sup>3</sup>. And for “the radical empiricist: this is demonstrably so, but we cannot indicate its significance” (Ibid.).

The early beginning of (classical) sociology was marked by an immediate link between these two levels of analysis necessitated by the complex interplay of the economic and political social forces throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Western Europe such as the French Revolution, the Industrial revolution, etc. (Mouzelis, 1993: 675). The gradual separation of sociological theory as a subfield in sociological research was due to the need of paradigms, conceptual frameworks which “prepare the ground for an empirical investigation of social structures and actors” (Mouzelis, 1993: 676).

The goal of this paper is neither to provide a further clarification of this “gap” in the sociological enquiry nor to offer any integrative solutions in view of the differentiation between these two approaches. My central concern is with the possibility of finding a fundamental substantive supposition regarding the micro and macro levels of society which is the most debated issue in sociological theory and which overlaps as well the aforementioned dualism in sociological enquiry. There have been numerous strategies in sociological theory to reconcile the micro-macro divide: “How are theories of action, behavior, and interpersonal processes, on one side, to be reconciled with theories of population level and societal-level forces, on the other? All sciences reveal a micro-macro divide, and even the most advanced sciences have not reconciled the two levels theoretically” (Turner, 2001: 3-4). According to Jonathan Turner another reason the micro-macro - or agency-structure - debate continues is because of what he calls “micro-macro chauvinism,” whereby a good many theorists argue for the primacy of the micro or macro level: “they all argue that reality is to be explained by reference to the micro or macro social processes” (Ibid). The solution that Turner proposed is the recognizing “that social reality does indeed unfold along micro, meso, and macro dimensions; that each of these levels reveals its own emergent properties; that these properties are driven by forces distinctive to each level; that theory is to be about the dynamics of the forces operating at each level; and that theoretical integration will always be about how the properties of one level load the values for the unique forces operating at other levels. This kind of synthesis does not produce a “unified theory” but rather a series of theoretical models and principles on forces of one level of reality, as these are influenced by structures at other levels of reality” (Turner, 2001: 6). Here I am going to propose my general thesis: this theoretical *cul-de-sac* in sociological theory represents a clear indication that a certain *limit* has been reached. In other words, the sociological *understanding* of human society has arrived at a milestone beyond which another perspective exists, a different realm of knowledge. To be a little bit cynical I would say that not the sociological imagination but the

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<sup>3</sup> If we over-emphasize the first campus, that is to say to make it an ideal type, then we cannot resist the temptation to paraphrase the most anti-positivistic statement ever, given by Fichte: “If the facts do not correspond to the theory *so worse for the facts*”.

“sociological intuition” (of the Universal) has correctly framed this perspective as “grand theory” but it sees it from the point of view of understanding i.e. it wants to proceed analytically in it unaware that the grand theory proper, its entire structure is built on the category of *totality*. In our case, (vis-à-vis micro-macro debate) the levels of agency and structure are opposed sub-totalities, a particular expressions of a larger whole (Jay, 1984: 59). So, what lay in the core of the problem is a paradigm deadlock not the scope of analysis of the component parts of these levels. It is not a methodological problem.

Thus, according to Jonathan Turner and David Boyns this micro-macro or agency-structure debate constitutes a scope of theory called *grand theory*: “Theory is “grand” when it seeks to explain a large social landscape, or in a more contemporary vocabulary it tries to link macro and micro levels of reality” (Turner and Boyns, 2001: 353) or: “Grand theory, therefore, must be about a full range of social forces operating at all levels of social reality. The more of reality to be examined, the more “grand” is the theory (Turner and Boyns, 2001: 359). I accept this definition given by Turner and Boyns in their co-written essay ‘The Return of Grand Theory’ (2001). They also argue that for many theorists, distinctions among micro, meso, and macro reality are merely analytical. For the authors these levels are reality: “Understanding of any one level will not be adequate to a grand theory; a grand theory must somehow connect them together conceptually, seeing the dynamics of one level as embedded in and affecting the dynamics of the other two levels” (Ibid.).

But, as I said earlier, what I disagree with is their positivistic vision of resolving this issue. According to their “radical” view, unlike the dominant approach to this debate that sees micro, meso, and macro levels as analytical conveniences, their perspective is committed to looking for underlying *forces* and the *laws* of these (social) forces: “We have in mind something very similar to what Comte and Spencer saw as the paradigmatic force in physics of their time—gravity. Gravity is a force that structures some dimensions of the physical universe, obviously along with other forces. We can conceive of the social universe in much the same way: as governed by forces that drive behavior, interaction, and organization in certain directions . . . We need laws of such forces; and with these laws, we can explain virtually any substantive social phenomenon at any place and time. Thus, the goal of grand theory is to (1) denote the key forces that are always operative when humans behave, interact, and organize; (2) uncover the dynamics of these forces; and (3) explain their relationship to each other. For us, there are distinctive forces operating at the micro, meso, and macro levels of reality” (Ibid.).

My “grand” theorizing about these issues is fundamentally different: it is a) anti-positivistic – it denies the positions that claim social universe is limited to the facts of observation; that what is social can only be subsumed under the authority of experience; that what is “real” is only the actual content; that the true scientific approach is the one which sees the phenomena as neutral objects; and

b) meta-theoretical – it tries to find a solution by examining the very theories that deal with certain issues. This *metatheoretical* approach, is fully analyzed by George Ritzer.

According to Ritzer “a metatheorist is one who studies sociological theories of the social world, while a theorist is one who studies the social world more directly in order to create (or apply) sociological theory: “Finally, and perhaps most importantly, substantial metatheorizing often precedes, and helps lead to, advances in social theory” (Ritzer, 2001: 14). There are three types of metateorizing given by Ritzer who defines their difference by their end products. The first type, *metatheorizing as a means of attaining a deeper understanding of theory* (my emphasis) “involves the study of theory in order to produce a better, a more profound understanding of extant theory; the second type, *metatheorizing as a prelude to theory development* entails the study of extant theory in order to produce new sociological theory and the third type, *metatheorizing as a source of overarching theoretical perspectives, is oriented to the goal of producing a perspective* - one could say a metatheory - that overarches some part or all of sociological theory” (Ritzer, 2001: 18-19). It should be noted that a metatheorist for Ritzer is not exclusively one who studies only sociological theories while theorist is the one who studies the social world more directly: “but most of those we consider metatheorists also study the social world and most of those classified as theorists also study theoretical works” (Ritzer, 2001: 14). In this sense my metateorizing in this paper does not aim at undermining the “theoretical” position as a “less true” theoretical approach in favor of some ideal type of metatheorizing i.e. studying only the sociological theories, or denying the positivistic study of phenomena. In other words my approach would not neglect either the “actual” social world or sociology as autonomous empirical science. What I am going to introduce is a critique whose goal is to complete, not to negate the dominant principles of sociological knowledge based on *understanding* the complexity of facts (as in our case, i.e. the complex relation between macro and micro levels of social reality).

The critique is in direction of discerning the elements of cognition and moments in social actuality that cannot be put aside or totally ignored by the perspective of “objective laws underlying the society” which in my opinion produces a consequence of subsuming the historical process under a natural mechanism of development. Following out this intention, my metatheoretical endeavor belongs nowhere else but totally in the third type of metatheorizing. Ritzer defined the last type as “the most controversial of the three major types of metatheorizing: “This is because they, unlike the other two types of metatheorizing, produce a *metatheory* in the sense of a perspective that stands above sociological theory. . . That is, advocates of *meta-theory* usually emphasize that we cannot develop theory until we have resolved the fundamental epistemological and metaphysical questions” (Ritzer, 2001: 15).

I will examine three theoretical positions which in my view reflect the same sociological architectonic<sup>4</sup> and should be comprehended under the heading of 'social constructivism': the first or the phenomenological one given by Berger and Luckmann who focus on consciousness of social actors, the second is the sociology of form and content given by Georg Simmel, and finally the third one which seeks to make connection between the social structures and actors is the 'structuration theory' proposed by Anthony Giddens.

## 2. The Quasi-Transcendental Root of the Problem

As we mentioned earlier, the task of sociology of knowledge - according to Berger and Luckmann - is to inquire the manner in which social reality is constructed (see the above citation p. 1-2). Because of the limited space of this paper I will concentrate only on the "subject matter" of the *Social Construction of Reality* (1966), i.e. the "world of everyday life" which in the eyes of the authors also represents the subject matter of sociology as an empirical science. Berger and Luckmann define everyday life as a reality "interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world". However, this world of everyday life is not only "taken for granted" as reality by the ordinary members of society but it is a world that "originates in their thoughts and actions and is maintained as real by these" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 34-35). And it is exactly here that we run against the postulate regarding the linkage between the micro and macro levels of society, their reciprocal link i.e. the intersubjective commonsense world as "real reality" constructed by the objectivations of subjective processes and (meanings)" (ibid.) The reality of everyday life is taken by these authors to be a "paramount reality". Unlike the various realities the social actor encounters (dreams, emotional states, phantasies etc.) the former reality bears the features of an "imperative presence". It forces us to be attentive to it in the fullest way i.e. being "wide-awake": This wide-awake state of existing in and apprehending the reality of everyday life is taken by the authors to be normal and self-evident, that is, "it constitutes my natural attitude" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 36). Here I should preliminary apply my critique by posing a question: what is it that guides the authors to claim that the realm of daily experience i.e. the wide-awake state is constituted by the "paramount reality" and vice versa? (the latter as an objectivation of subjective processes and meanings). What is at stake here in my opinion is a philosophical legacy that traces back to the very foundation of classical sociological theory. As sociology, which originated in philosophy, "tried to cut its umbilical cord to the latter" (Israel, 1990: 111-112), these sociological aspirations were founded "upon the notion of the social roots of knowledge and upon the "sociologization" of the philosophy of science, aimed at replacing epistemology with the sociology of knowledge" (Ibid.). In other words we can conclude that after sociology had found its own identity it keeps sustaining it by quasi-transcendentalism rooted in the Kantian

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<sup>4</sup> This term was used by the sociologist (Weberian scholar) Stephen Kalberg in 1983 (see Ritzer, 2011: 34).

and specifically neo-Kantian paradigm. To put in Gillian Rose's words: "the very idea of scientific sociology, whether non-Marxist or Marxist is only possible as a form of neo-Kantianism" (Rose, 1995: 2). The (neo) Kantian legacy in classical sociological theory is consisted in transformation of the Kantian transcendental conditions of knowledge – the *a priori* rules of the mind which make possible empirical knowledge in general, and upon which the synthesis of perceptions is achieved – into sociological *a priori* which is external to the mind: society or culture (Rose, 1995: 14). Durkheim argued that the origin and employment of the categories of mind whose *a priori* status he did not deny presuppose social organization: that society as a reality *sui generis* is the origin of the validity of judgments. . . "Society is a moral power, a *sui generis* force. It cannot be a fact, because it is the precondition of social facts and hence cannot be one of them: it is a transcendent objectivity" (cited in Rose, 1995: 15). For Durkheim, it is essentially through concepts (collective representations) that the social world forms our consciousness (Hart and McKinnon, 2010: 1041). Strictly speaking, the transformation of Kantian transcendental philosophy into the fundamental processes of *social interaction* and the *structures they themselves generate*, become the new grounding for epistemological validity and such approach attributes to society itself a quasi-transcendental function (Israel, 1990: 112).

In his essay "How is Society Possible" Simmel gives us a further clue about this quasi-transcendentalism: "Kant could ask and answer the fundamental question in his philosophy: How is nature possible? - only because for him nature was nothing else but the *representation* (my emphasis) of nature. This does not merely mean that "the world is my *representation*", that we can speak of nature only insofar as it is a content of our consciousness, but what we call nature is a distinct manner in which our intellect collects, arranges, and forms sense impressions. These 'given' sensations of colors and tastes, tones and temperatures, resistances and scents, which extend throughout our consciousness in the chance sequences of subjective experience, are not 'nature' by themselves, but they become it through the activity of the mind that put them together as objects and series of objects, substances and properties, causal connections" (Simmel, 1908/2009: 40).

Let us stop here for a moment in order to clarify the above citation more clearly before we get to the final answer from Simmel's analysis 'how is society possible'. My deliberate emphasis on the term representation is to point to the Berger's and Luckmann's above treatise ('the foundations of knowledge in everyday life') where the authors wrote something very indicative: "As sociologists we take this reality as the object of our analyses. Within the frame of reference of sociology as an empirical science it is possible to take this reality as given, to take as data particular phenomena arising within it, *without further inquiring about the foundations of this reality* (my emphasis), which is a philosophical task. . . The phenomenological analysis of everyday life, or rather of the subjective experience of everyday life, refrains from any causal or genetic hypotheses, as well as from assertions about the ontological status of the

phenomena analyzed” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 34-35). This refrain, in my opinion has to do with – again - the Kantian theory of knowledge. According to Kant the *a priori* rules for experience is employed empirically in relation to particular perceptions. However, this “transcendental principle” may be misemployed, it may extend beyond the limits of experience or, in other words, it may end up in an essentially different principle - the “transcendent principle”. The latter is not an error of judgment, the wrong use of right principle, “but an exhortation to tear down the boundaries of experience and to seize possession of an entirely new domain which recognizes no limits of demarcation” (Rose, 1995: 3).

What can be discerned from the sociology of knowledge in the *Social Construction of Reality* is that authors implicitly stand firm against the *transcendent* principle in favor of the *transcendental*. The latter reduces knowledge to experience, to the synthesis of appearances, but *not to any knowledge of things in-themselves*. The following citation says it clearly: “In what manner social order itself arises? The most general answer to this question is that social order is a human product or precisely an ongoing human production. It is produced by man in the course of his ongoing externalization. Social order *is not part of the “nature of things”*, (my emphasis) and it cannot be derived from the “laws of nature”. Social order exists *only as a product of human activity*. No other ontological status may be ascribed to it without hopelessly obfuscating its empirical manifestations. Both in its genesis (social order is the result of past human activity) and its existence in any instant of time (social order exists only and insofar as human activity continues to produce it) it is a human product” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 76).

For Simmel, the question of “how society is possible” then, should be approached, or to put it in his own words “it is advisable” to deal with it in Kantian manner: “The decisive difference between *the unity of a society* (my emphasis) and the unity of nature, however, is this: that the latter—for the Kantian standpoint presupposed here—comes about exclusively in the observing subjects, is produced exclusively by them in and from those disconnected elements of sensation; whereas *the societal unity is realized only by its own elements*, nothing else, since they are conscious and actively synthesize, and needs no spectator. That proposition of Kant—that connection might never lie in things because it is brought about only by subjects—does not hold for societal connections, which, in contrast, is in fact directly fulfilled in the ‘things,’ which in this case are individual minds . . . society however, is the objective entity that does not need an observer not included within it” (Simmel, 1908/2009: 41).

What can be summarized from both citations is the following: they reflect the attempt to reconcile the *transcendental* and *transcendent* principle i.e. epistemology and ontology, knowledge and being, essence and existence, form and content, universal and particular, subject and object, against any reference to the *third constitutive element* i.e. History itself. This strict attention to stay within the ‘ordinary consciousness of everyday life’ results in a conception of unity as



synchronic – ahistorical. The sociological *unity* of society is contingent, it is derived from differentiation of various practical interests of social actors resulting in a multitude of *forms of* social interactions which in time “objectivize” i.e. institutionalize themselves thus forming the macro-level phenomena as large social structures over which the social actors start losing control (Ritzer, 2011: 36). From the sociological perspective history is a history of action patterns: “All human activity is subject to habitualization. Any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort and which, *ipso facto*, is apprehended by its performer as that pattern” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 77).

### 3. The Dualism of Action and Reality

With this point in mind we could say that epistemologically, the dualism agency/structure is correctly resolved. Society gets its objectivity from the individual social actors or structures are constituted by the intellectual and practical activity of the former. In other words the ontological status of society is supported by the comprehending subjects, i.e. “our comprehending the object is not something external to the object but inherently determines its status” (Žižek, 1993: 154). This is the moment where my proper critique begins. The abovementioned statement of the authors of *Social Construction of Reality* that the fundamental issues about social reality “should be left to philosophers”, in my opinion gives us the insight to the core of the problem in the sense that the truth about the micro/macro dichotomy of which the very fabric of social reality is made, cannot be carried solely within the process of knowledge. The very fact of this dualism designate that the reality is *not yet a true reality*: it reveals the society not as an assemblage of individual consciousness and reified patterns of interactions, but as a *process*.

I shall begin this analysis by proposing that what is at stake in general is another, more crucial legacy. It is the legacy of positivism, its persistent and omnipresent specter in all sociological paradigms. Whether it is interpretative, hermeneutic etc. or any other non-positivistic sociological-theoretical approach, the “utter secularization of thought” remains a fundamental principle of sociological knowledge. Sociology, since its appearance was committed to resolve the complexity of the new historical transformations and turbulences in Western societies. The scientific endeavor taken to accomplish this enormous task was based on getting rid of theological and metaphysical shell of societies’ ideas in order to get to the objective laws that govern social reality. The social

universe, according to Komte<sup>5</sup>, had to be emptied of these idea systems because they were the main reason for intellectual disorder which was in turn the main source for social disorder (Ritzer, 2011: 18). Let us go straight to the immediate meaning of this: There is no God; there is no any other transcendent(al) source of social reality; Society is no longer a part of the “great chain of being” i.e. Nature is Nature, Society is Society. But they share a structural similarity, namely, both are governed by *laws*. The second issue which is also connected to our analysis of micro-macro relation, concerns the arise of modern society as a society of agency, of the autonomous individual which was previously located in transcendental authority (gods) or in natural forces environing the social system: “Over time these exogenous forces (e.g., godly powers) have been relocated as authority immanent within society itself, enlarging social agency, relocating authority from god to church, from church to state, from church and state to individual souls and later citizens. . .the Western cultural framework reflects the development, expansion, and secularization of the principally religious models of Western Christendom, a sustained cultural evolution extending into the human rights movements of the contemporary period. These models involve a sharp delineation of, and "axial tension" between, society and its natural and spiritual environments. This differentiation is historically associated with the distinctive ongoing "rationalization" of cultural representations of nature, the spiritual domain, and society” (Meyer and Jepperson, 2000: 101-102).

We should pay attention to few important issues in the above citation which in my opinion may serve well in the further elaboration of our topic. These, I think, will enable us to outline in a nutshell the general procedure of sociological interpretation.

The first point to be made here is in direction of discerning a kind of pattern of explanation as in the case of the aforementioned historical development (in the above citation from pre-modern to modern social system). If we look more closely, the “secularization” is due to the implicit a) change in the material conditions (socio-economic forces) expressed in the citation as “over time”. In short, the multitude of materially, *goal oriented* actions of individuals, “over time” are hypostasized in b) an overall tendency, an underlying historical process (“rationalization”) which emerges in c) the reified (structural) forms of the latter (for example, bureaucracy as a form of rationalization) and finally d) the “alienation” caused by the forms. The latter as we all know was not only the result of Durkheim’ research on suicide rates but also initiated the “sociological

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<sup>5</sup> Georg Simmel did not even feel as necessary to cite Comte. He simply took the principle as granted: “Finally, there is the notion that human cognition, on the whole, must go through three stages. In the first, or theological stage, natural phenomena are explained by recourse to the arbitrary will of all kinds of entities. In the second, metaphysical stage, the supernatural causes are replaced by laws which, however, are mystical and speculative (as, for instance, "vital force", "ends of nature", etc.). Finally, the third, or positive stage corresponds to modern experimental and exact science. Each particular branch of knowledge develops by passing through these three stages; and the knowledge of this fact removes the enigmatic character of social development, which pervades areas of all kinds” (Simmel, 1908/1950: 20).

perspective” on social phenomena. From the gradual collapse of moral cohesion in modernity Durkheim deduced the dualism of human condition as: “individual (beast, body, egoism) and society (angel, soul, altruism) - two contending forces between which we are ever pulled. For Durkheim, these two sides have a number of different dimensions, including the material-spiritual, and egoistic-moral. In his discussion of this (egoistic-moral) dualism, Durkheim highlights how Kantian his thinking on such matters has become: what is moral is that which is “open to universalization” (Hart and McKinnon, 2010: 1041). It is clear enough from the preceding citation (which can be designated as an origin of the micro-macro debate), that along the line of materiality of action there is another lateral element, namely, the *values* (moral or religious beliefs). What does sociology thereby acknowledge is that there is always “something” universal, standing behind the particular actions of individuals”. Thus, the individual action is simultaneously particular and universal (material and moral). To put it in Weberian terms, the realization of objective goals is always accompanied by subjective “meaning”. For sociology therefore it cannot be only “the Capitalism” but the ‘Spirit of Capitalism’.

Further, we can see that the passage from the previous to the next social system in the above citation (of Meyer and Jepperson) is not radical, but there is a kind of *repetition*. Despite the “fall of gods”, the transcendental dimension of authority was only “relocated” in modernity. It found its place as an “immanent force”- the Society itself (“God or Society” to put it in Durkheimian terms). So what preserves itself in the transformation is the *unity* of the particular forms of social association. In other words the historical development from one to another social system reveals that the totality of social relations or the forms of social associations are in a certain self-relation as a totality (God or Society) which always stands against them as their negative unity. This negative magnitude (Žižek, 1999: 74) which is capable of mediating its own existential conditions cannot be called otherwise then *subjectivity*.

Nowhere can we find a better exemplification of the preceding discussion than in Simmel’s formal sociology: “society exists where several individuals enter into interaction. This interaction always originates in specific impulses within - or for the sake of - specific purposes. Erotic, religious, or purely social impulses, purposes of defense from attack, the play of commerce, the need for assistance from instruction, and countless other purposes bring it about that human beings enter into fellowship – correlating their affairs with one another in activity for one another, with one another, against one another, activity that both affects them and feels the effects of them” (Simmel, 1908/2009: 22/23). These interactions indicate precisely that the individuals bearing these motivating drives and purposes become a *unity, indeed a ‘society’* (my emphasis). . . Social interaction is also the process, materialized in countless separate forms, in which individuals for these reasons – sentient or ideal, momentary or lasting, conscious or unconscious, causally driven or propelled teleologically – come together as a unity in which these interests are realized (Ibid).

For Simmel, there are two kinds of reality. The first is the immediacy of Life (the content) as actuality in-itself, and the second, the social reality (the Form), is nothing but Life for-itself, Life as subjectively mediated, rendered conscious: "Whenever life progresses beyond the animal level to that of spirit, and spirit progresses to the level of culture, an internal contradiction appears. The whole history of culture is the working out of this contradiction. We speak of culture whenever Life produces certain forms in which it expresses and realizes itself: works of art, religions, sciences, technologies, laws, and innumerable others (Simmel, 1921/1968: 1). These forms, Simmel explains, encompass the flow of life and provide it with content and form, freedom and order. But although these forms arise out of the life process, because of their unique constellation they do not share the restless rhythm of life, its ascent and descent, its constant renewal, its incessant divisions and reunifications. These forms are frameworks for the creative life which, however, soon transcends them (Ibid.). What we can learn from this citation is that again, behind the particularity of forms ("art, religions, sciences" etc.) stands the universality of Life. These forms for Simmel we are told, are "frameworks for the creative life" but the problem is that "an internal contradiction appears" in the sense that these forms take a life of its own: "Objects, in their development, have logic of their own not a conceptual one, nor a natural one, but purely as cultural works of man; bound by their own laws, they turn away from the direction by which they could join the personal development of human souls" (Simmel, 1921/1968: 43). In other words, what was supposed to be only a form (to render it conscious, to intro-reflect) of the "restless rhythm of life" took a path of its own: "The great enterprise of the spirit succeeds innumerable times in overcoming the object as such by making an object of itself, returning to itself enriched by its creation. But the spirit has to pay for this self-perfection with the tragic potential that a logic and dynamic is inevitably created by the unique laws of its own world which increasingly separates the contents of culture from its essential meaning and value (Simmel, 1921/1968: 46). Hence, Simmel derived his famous concept of tragedy of culture: "It is the concept of culture that the spirit creates an independent objectivity by which the development of the subject takes its path" (Simmel, 1911/1968: 43). For Simmel then, there is no way out of this contradiction designated as a substantial characteristic of modern society: the individual is more and more absorbed in the calculating character of life of the modern world caused by increasing division of labor, specialization, growth of technology, money economy etc.; the relationship among people became highly specialized and impersonal; all in all the decisive feature of modern society is that as much as the objective culture grows it further impoverishes the individual (subjective) culture (Ritzer, 2011: 179-180). Out of this limit Simmel derived the need of a science that would implement a new method: "we now believe that we understand historical phenomena from the interaction and the cooperation of individuals, from the accumulation and sublimation of countless individual contributions, from the embodiment of social energies in structures that stand and develop outside of the individual. Sociology therefore, in its relationship to the

older sciences, is a new method, an aid in research for grappling with phenomena from all those fields in a new way (Simmel, 1908/2009: 20-21).

As I said earlier, the problem of agency-structure is not methodological. My metatheoretical approach has been trying so far to demonstrate that the sociological approach to resolve the relation between the individual and society is based on the positivistic principle that everything can be explained by observation and the need to keep the science's independence among other sciences. But what we saw as immanent in the sociological theories dealing with this issue are moments which transcend the positivistic way of seeing the social reality thus paving the way towards a necessary passage: from sociology as a "positive philosophy" to *negative sociology*. The latter of course is not some kind of a new method or sub-discipline but first of all a *re-cognition* that social science must not be only a narrative of what happens but what truly happens. In our case this movement is consisted of recognizing that the way of overcoming the "contradiction" i.e. the limitation of the individual by the objectivized social structures, resides in the contradiction itself. What this opposition truly uncovers is an ontological necessity, a process by which we recognize that the relations, social associations, actions and thoughts between social actors are in essence a negation of the particular identity of social individuals. The reified macro-level of phenomena, the institutions and their exercising of domination, represent the conflictual but universal relation by which the individual overcomes its particularity and realizes itself. The structure is not external to the individual, it is a part of its very identity. The "positive" dualistic sociological approach that the individual is externally limited by the structure implies that it *is not what it should be* i.e. is alienated (in Simmel's view irreversibly). The position of negative sociology therefore, consists in recognition of this immanent *normativity* beyond the wholesale acquiescence of facts and out of it surpasses this dualism by showing that something remains permanent, same and self-identical as a negative unity – the "paramount reality", "Society", "Life". Thus we arrived at the moment when we cannot longer see the history as a simple accumulation of "interactions and cooperation of individuals" and the latter as sublimations or embodiment in "social energies in structures", but as a process consisted in individuals integrating its otherness i.e. conceiving the social world as stage of development of subject as a free human being. Thus conceived, the reconciliation of structure and agency is not a factual (quantitative) but negative (qualitative).

#### 4. 'Sociologization' of Consciousness

According to Giddens (theory of structuration) the theoretical impasse of agency/structure debate begins from an absence, the lack of theory of action in the social sciences (Giddens, 1979: 2). He explains further that there is a lot of philosophical literature dealing with purposes, reasons and motives of action but they do not pay much attention to issues that are central to social analysis, power

and social change (Ibid.). So again, from the very start we are faced with the commitment to the positive interpretative procedure which is concerned with the “component parts”. For example, for Giddens an agent’s consciousness is organized in terms of three sets of relations: the unconscious, the practical consciousness and the discursive consciousness. The unconscious is largely comprised of desires. In contrast, practical consciousness contains what is referred to as ‘stocks of knowledge’, or what Giddens (1984) prefers to call ‘mutual knowledge’. Despite its immediate unavailability to the discursive consciousness of actors, for Giddens practical consciousness plays a crucial role in explaining actions by permitting agents to ‘go on’ within the routines of their everyday social lives. As a result, the content of this practical consciousness is generally non-propositional and consists of taken-for-granted, tacit knowledge which forms the ‘background’ to social encounter (Loyal, 2003: 30). However, this knowledge ability is always bounded. For Giddens, this boundedness takes two major forms. Firstly, the spatial breadth of an agent’s knowledge is circumscribed. Since agents only spend a certain amount of time in specific environments, they become unaware of what goes on in other spheres of social life. This applies not only ‘laterally’, in the sense of a spatial separation of social environments, but also ‘vertically’, in cases in which, in larger societies, for instance, those in elite groups or in less privileged sectors may know little about each other’s lives. Secondly, an agent’s knowledge ability is bounded by both the unacknowledged conditions of action, which include both unconscious and practical knowledge, and by the unintended consequences of action. As a result, the primary task of the sociologist for Giddens is to uncover the boundedness of the actor’s cognitive penetration of social reproduction. Thus the vocation of the sociologist is to elucidate human actions not only in terms of their intentionality, but also in terms of their motivation and subsequent effects (Loyal, 2003: 31). But what would we discover if we subded to this vocation? We have already discussed about the action of the social actors and we find that it is dualistic in the sense that is consisted of the particular part (objective realization of material goals) informed by universal moments. Let us demonstrate if the latter is only a cover up for his true “motivation”. According to the founder of Facebook the multi-billionaire Mark Zuckerberg, the foundation of this social network “was not because of the amount of money. . . For me and my colleagues, the most important thing is that we create an open information flow for people”<sup>6</sup> Of course what is striking in this statement or “confession” is that the founder does not say “not *only* because” but “not at all” because of money. But let us “suppose” that this action was purely “pathological” (“I did it for money, so what?”). I think that exactly here is the true *vocation* of a sociologist or the vocation of a *true* sociologist: if he tries to grasp the intentions, motivations, and the “subsequent consequences” even of the most individual action possible, he will find out that the origin or the source of it does not reside in their “practical consciousness”, the tacit knowledge by which they reproduce the social life: “every social actor knows a great deal about the conditions of reproduction of the society of which

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<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from: [http://www.exeter.edu/news\\_and\\_events/news\\_events\\_5594.aspx](http://www.exeter.edu/news_and_events/news_events_5594.aspx)

he or she is a member” (Giddens, 1979: 5). But what does Zuckerberg reproduce? Yes, we can say that his “noble goal” perfectly matches the preceding definition. His action can be subsumed under “the recurrent social practices that reproduce relations between actors and communities i.e. reproduce the social system” (Giddens, 1979: 66). But what really precedes it is the self-reflected *totality* of intentions and motivations that *change* the relation between the actors and communities and what is reproduced is the social system as a process. “Facebook” is a particular and contingent “form” of an underlying, necessary, universal “content”, a unity which is constitutive of the seeming causal chain of actions. Not the particular action of an individual but the latter is “informed” by its general form i.e. the Internet. But the internet (it was invented during the “Cold War” by the US. Military) on the other hand, as an invention cannot be put solely in the practical consciousness, in the knowledge, *it cannot be separated from the historical struggle between man and his world which is constitutive part of the way to truth.* (Marcuse 95). We can “measure” this truth by the subsequent consequences or the “unintended outcomes” (Giddens, 1979: 66) of Facebook: it *has become*, from an individually and practically motivated “open information flow for people” a main source for mobilizing the masses of “Tahrir square”, “Ukraine Revolution” or “Hong Kong protests”; from process of knowledge to a device of the process of History (Ibid.).

I think here we can elaborate the reason why Berger and Luckmann as well as Giddens insist on everyday reality, the ordinary consciousness, the laymen etc. It is because of its richness in social interactions, their variety of forms i.e. the enormous material for research that helps to sustain sociology as a separate science and profession. But there is no such thing as everyday reality. History (the rational and teleological character of social reality) lurks behind every corner of it, it stalks ordinary consciousness on its save way to the local shop or theater until it runs against a crowd of angry protesters, witnesses terrorist attack or its existence is struck by economic crisis. Accordingly, the method of treating the social action cannot be separated from the method of treating history. Here, we are back again at the beginning of this paper in order to illuminate further the discussion concerning the general division among the sociologists and also to provide a basis for reconciliation of the two opposed campuses, i.e. the theoretical and the empiricist one. If our conclusion is that the analysis of the particular discloses the universal (society seen teleologically, as a process of realization of free subjects), if the rationality and freedom are the true (negative) features of the positive everyday social reality (the ontological necessity which underlies the contingent practicality of social actors) then we should proceed historically-empirically, i.e. our research should be subordinate to the *reality* of historical facts. This of course must not be confused with historiography. The “negative” sociologist approaches the social reality from its real content – history, but the latter is seen as a *form* of the final content – the struggle for freedom (Marcuse, 1955/1941: 226). Thus conceived, the empirical study requires necessarily the guidance of theory in order to organize data in their

true significance, and not a passive reception of the facts in the name of impartial scientific objectivity.

## 5. 'Reconciliation'

The state of objectivity of forms, their reification as macro-level phenomena, refers to the *necessity* immanent in the contingency of shaping the contents, namely, out of pragmatic interests or specific practical reasons. The root of this misconceived contingency resides as we said earlier in the Kantian background of this theory. Despite the difference from Kantian categories in two important respects, in the sense that "they inform not only the cognitive realm but any and all dimensions of human experience", still there is an implicit gap between form and content in the statement that the "contents are those aspects of existence which are *determined in themselves*", meaning that their intelligibility depends on the synthesizing principles (forms) of the experiencing self (Levine, 1971: xvi). In Simmel's view, thus, the principles of thought as in the Kantian theory of knowledge are principles of objects themselves. But, what is implicit in the sociology of form and content, the social constructivism and the theory of structuration is that they still hinge on the Kantian perspective of the couple subject-object, or in other words, the procedure by which the object, by being shaped by synthesizing principles of the knowing subject support the externality of this relation (of the subject-object) putting the emphasis on the subject.

Let us take the competition for example. According to Simmel we should look for a variety of actual instances of competition in many fields or as he calls them the "worlds" (cultural formations, (see Levine, 1971: xxiii) such as the economic history, history of art, history of religion and so on, and then we can abstract the common structural features from these cases in order to determine what competition is as a pure form of human behavior (Levine, 1971: xxxii). But what we can discern from this procedure is that it is *already* posited or mediated by our elimination of its codependent oppositional term – cooperation. What the competition is *in itself* is dependent on what competition is *not*. Thus, the differential properties of competition (the variety of aforementioned fields) only show the simple identity of competition or what remains the same throughout all these differential forms: the competition in economy coincides with the competition in sport, science, art etc. So, in order really to determine the "pure form" of competition we should look for beyond the cluster of juxtapositioned "worlds", the actual or the content instances, and start looking for the *common ground* of the oppositional couple competition-cooperation. This does not mean that we reject the *positive* sociological procedure of abstracting the social processes (in this case the cooperation) from their phenomenal fields. The former can exist only through the latter. All we say is that this approach is not enough.

In order to demonstrate this more clearly let us take the recent social unrests in Macedonia concerning the student protests against the measure taken



by the Ministry of Education for graduates' state-supervised tests as an example. In other words, we are looking for the structural features of education as a field in which we can discern the elements of competition. Clearly, this measure for external evaluation has to do with instigating the competition in higher education for the purpose of increasing the quality of the former, or to put it in Simmelian terms, the measure shows its structural features. But in society, in which the institutions are entirely dedicated to sustaining the *formal image* of it i.e. constantly engaging in numerous implementations of standards, rules and laws in order to conceal the real problems, sometimes the form which was only meant to be a formal measure, needed to support the belief in the system, took a different turn. In other words, the measure as a mere form taken only to improve the education system transposed itself into an *essential form*. That is to say, the form brought about *the totality of relations* in society, and instead of being only a part of measures keeping the society as a *substance* in which there are no subjects but only individuals immersed into the abstract universality (the national-cultural homogeneity, the emphasis on "what we think we are" not what we really are), these measures unexpectedly turned the tables in the opposite direction: In the *cooperation* among students and the subsequent protests, as well as the later (ad hoc) solidarity by university professors. Here we can also notice that the other well-known couple super-ordination/subordination in the stratified system collapse under the weight of the Whole contrary to Simmel's beliefs that the interaction would cease and the stratification system would collapse if a process of mutual orientations (between super-ordinates and subordinates, in our case the professors and students) did not exist (Simmel, 1908/1950: 194). How did the *existence* (the social-economic problems) which was considered as much less important or inferior to the essence (the national substance) express itself as the true state of things. How the external coercion of the structure (institutions) turned from contingent to a necessary one?

According to Simmel, as we saw above, society is only a synthesis, a general term for the totality of specific interactions... Society is identical with the sum total of these relations. But, there are moments when the "totality of the relations" asserts its identity and mediate the very interactions from which it is made of. In other words the Society as a whole expresses its rational structure. As we already mentioned above it shows features of subjectivity. This is not to reduce the society to the Durkheimian concept of it as a real material entity. It is simply the dynamic intensity between what the human society is and what it should be.

Is the social action autonomous or the social structures shape social interactions? Does the social structure create an external circumstance, the structural framework without which the social action is impossible? The only way to answer these questions is when society is approached from the perspective of "coming to its notion" (the negative unity). To put it simply, by virtue of the "disciplinary practices" of the institutional structures the agency finds its particular identity "student" or "professor" as untrue and the autonomy

of university as abstract. There was not autonomy of the university before the 'measure'. It was an empty possibility which was actualized by the measure. The very "limiting of university's autonomy" was its enaction.

So, the only way out of the agency-structure contradiction implies "the research" of transition: the recognition of the "ordinary consciousness" of its "absolute unrest" which is not motivated by its practical knowledge but Reason, that the "everyday reality" is not its time-space matrix in which it is "wide-awake" but on the contrary, when the reality is not in accordance with what the ordinary consciousness properly is – its universal nature, a "member of its species" (species-being) and that is his/her task to make it so. In other words, the transition from everyday social practices to the universal *Praxis*.

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## ДЕБАТА АГЕНЦИЈА-СТРУКТУРА: ГРАНИЦИТЕ НА СОЦИОЛОШКОТО ПОЗНАНИЕ

**Роберт БОСИЛКОВСКИ**

*Апстракт:* Целта на овој труд е да покаже дека дебатата агенција – структура не само што ја нагласува контрадикторната природа на општествената реалност, туку открива преку овие теоретски позиции – вообичаено поделени на волунтаристички и детерминистички – фундаментална контрадикција иманентна за социолошкиот пристап кон овој проблем особено за теоријата на акцијата. Таа исто така ја покажува первазивноста на поитивизмот, без оглед на нивото на социолошка апстракција од фактите, од причина што она што се оневозможува е било какво отстапување од дадениот ред на нештата дури и кога дихотомијата (агенција-структура) е подведена во концептите за промената. Но, тие во целост се изведени од конкретните форми на односи и изведувањето законитости произлегува од претпоставената позната и трајна реалност дефинирана како „секојдневна реалност“. Со други зборови, епистемолошките и онтолошките проблеми врзани за оваа тема, произлезени од стандардните интерпретации, се безрезервно за зачувување на оваа реалност. Во овој труд апстракцијата, напротив, ги врзува множеството форми и односи на општествената реалност со социо-историските процеси во кои тие се конституирани. Со други зборови, тоа не ги занемарува фактите, туку само ги дополнува со процесите во кои овие факти се развиваат и во кои релацијата помеѓу агенцијата и структурата може да биде разрешена.

*Клучни зборови:* метатеорија, микро-макро ниво, негативно единство, авторефлексија на тоталитетот, секојдневна реалност, вообичаена свест, телеологија, онтолошка нужност, форма и содржина, квазитрансценденцијализам.