STRUCTURE AND AGENCY:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE TWO CONCEPTS IN THE LIGHT OF THE GLOBALISATION DEBATE

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2012
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Unpublished Article
Introduction

Throughout history, abstract topics such as structure and agency have been self-enclosed issues that were entirely within the interest of philosophers and sociologists (Hay 2002: 89). However, political scientists and international relations theorists have started to deal with the structure-agency debate and examine their own hypotheses within the frame of this debate (Hay 2002: 89).

There are different approaches in terms of the interaction between structure and agency; however those views which strive to find a compromise between the two extremes might be more beneficial to understanding the phenomenon.

In this article, the concepts of ‘structure’, ‘agency’ and their relationship will be discussed. The topic will be analysed in four sections. In the first section, the meaning and importance of the ‘structure-agency debate’ will be presented. In the second section, the two concepts will be explained by reference to examples. In the third section, different approaches which are related to the structure-agency debate will be explored. Finally, the relationship between structure and agency will be analysed in the context of the on-going debates about globalisation and states. The viewpoint which promotes the strategic-relational approach will be embraced with the help of the migration case in the United Kingdom (UK).

PART I: The Importance and Meaning of the Structure-Agency Debate

Discussing the meaning and importance of the structure-agency debate is important, because such a discussion is the reflection of many basic concerns (McAnulla 2002: 271), the responses to the structure-agency question indicate the position of a person (Hay 2002: 61) and the debate enables people to interpret empirical investigation (Hay 2009: 263).

The structure and agency issue has been the basic element of several deeply rooted and still unsolved discussions from the medieval confrontation between state and individual to current metatheoretical disputes in political philosophy, epistemology and science (Carlsnaes 1992: 245). Basically, issues such as the capacity of political actors to design their fate, the power of the structure to control the actor’s life and the determination of actor’s destiny by
Discussion about the necessity of ontological assumptions in explaining the empirical evidence is important, since the question of structure and agency is directly related to the question of ontology. Ontology refers to “being, to what is, to what exists” (Hay 2002: 61). For this reason, the ontological standpoint of a person reflects his/her views about the nature of the social and political actuality that is researched (Hay 2002: 61).

As an opposition to Hay’s view, Pleasants (2009: 891) indicates that highly abstract ontological discussions may present an obstacle for those who are theoretically less capable. He rejects the view that having inadequate knowledge about ontology, structure and agency causes the risk of making mistakes or weakens the empirical and theoretical explanations.

However, Hay (2002: 93-4) states that “the question of structure and agency is about the explanation of social and political phenomena. It is what is deemed to constitute a valid or adequate explanation of a political effect or outcome”. In other words, seeking the answer to the structure-agency question provides the basis of the explanation of a political circumstance or incident. What is required is the interpretation of empirical investigation and immediate experience; and such an interpretation is inescapably based on ontological assumptions (Hay 2009: 263). Mises (1990: 5) indicates that each reality and experimentation can be interpreted diversely and such experimentations cannot be used for verification of utterances in the social sciences. Hence, the structure-agency debate is important due to providing the basis of interpretation for empirical investigations and experimentations.

**PART II – Definitions and Exemplifications**

**What is Structure?**

One of the components of the structure-agency debate is the concept of ‘structure’. According to a definition put forward by Hay (2002: 94), “structure basically means context and refers to the setting within which social, political and economic events occur and acquire meaning”. Berger (1963: 109, cited in Macionis and Plummer 2005: 29) explained the
influence of structure by stating that “society is the walls of our imprisonment.” Berger’s statement focuses on the constraints posed by structure on human action.

‘Political culture’ might be a convenient example for the concept of ‘structure’. It has been defined as “the pattern of orientations to political objects such as parties, government, the constitution, expressed in beliefs, symbols and values” (Heywood, 2007: 206). Each society has a distinctive political culture which is long lasting, but not static; and each political culture has an impact on political outcomes which affect the survival of political institutions (Inglehart, 1988: 1203).

At this point, it might be beneficial to make reference to the work of Almond and Verba under the topic of political culture. Their work ‘The Civic Culture’ aimed to clarify the reasons behind the failure of governments and the ineffectiveness of democracy in numerous developing countries after 1945 (Heywood 2007: 206). According to Almond and Verba (1989: 3), the formal elements of democracy such as elected assembly, political parties and common suffrage are not adequate for the development of a democratic and participatory political system. At the same time, a political culture which is compatible with this targeted democratic political system is required for the sustainability of this system (Almond and Verba 1989: 3).

Similarly, the correlation between Protestant ethics and the rise of capitalism is another example which might be helpful to comprehending the concept of ‘structure’. Weber (1968: 630) associated Protestant ethics with the rise of capitalism as follows: “The inner-worldly asceticism of Protestantism first produced a capitalistic ethics, although unintentionally, for it opened the way to a career in business, especially for the most devout and ethically rigorous people”. According to Protestant ethics, spiritual salvation can only be achieved by personal endeavour; accordingly, the idea of individualism and merits such as competition, individual liability and studiousness are praised by the social theory of Protestantism (Heywood 2012: 83). Weber (1968: 630) pointed out that Protestantism motivated people to reach salvation by worldly performance. Hence, being successful in business was indicated as the harvest of a rational form of human existence according to Protestant ethics.
What is Agency?

‘Agency’ is the other crucial component of the structure and agency debate. It refers to “the ability or capacity of an actor to act consciously and, in so doing, to attempt to realise his or her intentions” (Hay 2002: 94). Likewise, McAnulla (2002, 271) focuses on the influence capacity of a person or group in this context.

The concept of ‘charismatic authority’ might be a convenient example by which to contemplate and understand the concept ‘agency’ better. Charismatic authority has been defined as the “power legitimised through extraordinary personal abilities that inspire devotion and obedience” (Macionis and Plummer 2005: 398). Charisma is different from traditional power and rational legislation in terms of its relation with the personal characteristics of people and its irrelevance to social context (Macionis and Plummer 2005: 398). The masses can be controlled and mobilised by stimulating the emotions which create the feeling of dedication and allegiance to a charismatic leader (Haralambos, Holborn and Heald 2004: 540). The sources of the authority of a charismatic leader are extraordinary qualifications which are the main reasons for the loyalty of inferiors to that leader (Haralambos, Holborn and Heald 2004: 540).

There are many examples in history of charismatic leaders who withstood the existing situation and transformed it, such as Vladimir Lenin who ended the feudal monarchy in Russia in 1917 (Macionis and Plummer 2005: 398). Mahatma Gandhi was also a charismatic leader who strived for the independence of India from Britain after World War II (Macionis and Plummer 2005: 398). Recently, women such as Margaret Thatcher from the UK, Indira Gandhi from India, Benazir Bhutto from Pakistan, and Golda Meir from Israel have emerged as charismatic leaders who had universal reputations (Macionis and Plummer 2005: 398). In spite of the continuing unequal position of women even in many Western countries (Maynard 1999: 122), the achievements of these women indicate important implications about the capacity of ‘agency’.

PART III: Three Approaches in the Structure-Agency Debate

In the previous section, the concepts of structure and agency were defined and explained by means of several examples. Before discussing the case study about globalisation,
it might be beneficial to indicate the main positions in the structure-agency debate. This part discusses three main positions\(^1\), the structuralist, the intentionalist and the strategic-relational approaches in order to provide a theoretical base for the case study in the following section.

**Structuralism**

The standpoint which prioritizes structure-based explanations has been adopted by many political scientists such as Althusser (McAnulla 2002: 275). According to Althusser, interactive relationship between relatively autonomous structures of politics, economy and ideology administers the societal reality (McAnulla 2002: 275). Therefore, actors do not possess autonomy and agents are perceived as ‘bearers’ of structures (McAnulla 2002: 275).

**Intentionalism**

The concept of ‘intentionalism’ refers to the standpoint which defends the capacity of actors to actualize their purposes intentionally (Hay 2002: 109). Hence, the results of political actions can be understood with reference to the intentional acts of the actors (Hay 2002: 109-110). The main focal point of explication is the person or group (McAnulla 2002: 276). Structure, which has a subordinate position when compared to agency, can only emerge as a product or consequence of personal acts (McAnulla 2002: 276-277).

**The strategic-relational approach**

One of the dialectical approaches is the strategic-relational approach. Rather than dealing with the theoretically abstract aspects of structure and agency, this approach takes an important step towards transcending the dualism of structure and agency by focusing on the interaction between structure and agency in the real setting of political and social interactive relation (Hay 2002: 127). From this point of view, the emphasis should be on the real interaction between strategic action and a strategically selective context (Hay 2002: 127).

\(^1\) There are many other approaches about the structure-agency debate. However, due to the limits of the article, only three approaches are focused.
Jessop (1996: 124) used the term ‘structurally inscribed strategic selectivity’ in order to indicate that “structural constraints always operate selectively: they are not absolute and unconditional but are always temporally, spatially, agency- and strategy- specific”. More clearly, the context is strategically selective, since it prefers particular strategies among many strategies (Hay 2002: 129).

Likewise, Jessop (1996: 124) clarified the term ‘strategically calculating structural orientation’ by remarking the reflexivity and reformulation capability of the agent within the boundaries of his/her character and benefits, and the assessment of his/her existing circumstance strategically. In the ‘strategic learning’ process, the agent is aware of structural limitations/chances and can benefit from this awareness in the formulation process of his/her prospective strategies (Hay 2002: 133).

PART IV: Globalisation in the Light of the Structure-Agency Debate

After discussing the meaning and importance of the structure-agency debate in the first part of this paper, defining the two concepts with examples in the second part and presenting the main approaches in the third part; the globalisation issue will be analysed with reference to the structure and agency debate in this part. The globalisation issue was chosen as a case study in this article, since the state symbolizes agent and the global arena symbolizes structure. Thereby, the discussion about the position of state in response to the global challenge will be an agency-structure debate.

The connection between state apparatus and globalisation has been emphasized by many disciplines in the social sciences throughout the last decade (Hobson and Ramesh 2002: 5). Developments such as economic networks at the global level, the position of national economies in response to these global economic networks, the political collaboration and unification of European states and the emergence of governance opportunities have all raised debates about the fate of the nation state (Sorensen 2006: 190). The debate has been taking place between two opposing discourse: influential ‘globalisation/retreat of the state’ or ‘ineffectual globalisation/influential state’ (Hobson and Ramesh 2002: 5).

According to the structuralist understanding of globalisation, states are forced to surrender to the restrictive logic of the global structure which has been shaped by the
capitalist economical order of the globe (Hobson and Ramesh 2002: 5). The proponents of
globalisation argument indicate that increasing global trade and unification of manufacturing
beyond national borders forced states to apply economic implementations which serve to the
that the instruments which nation-states need for attaining their objectives decreased and the
strength and influence capacity of states were dispersed to the actors of market and global
economic collaborations. Incidences and resolutions which are beyond the territorial field of
the states affect them more than before (Sorensen 2006: 194).

At the other side of the two extremes, the agent-centrist interpretation of globalisation
challenges the assumptions of structuralism (Hobson and Ramesh 2002: 7). According to this
view, states monopolize the violence apparatus, and design the procedures for the actions of
other agencies such as citizens, companies and institutions (Sorensen 2004: 15). The
opponents of the state-centric view also indicate that the new form of state-market
relationship cannot be an indication of the erosion of state power on economy, since the
development of the companies and the market occurs with the consent of states (Sorensen
2004: 16), and market actors need states in order to operate in a foreseeable environment by
benefiting the stable regulation of the state (Sorensen 2004: 38).

Seeking Compromise

However, both the structuralist and the agent-centrist approaches to the globalisation
debate present an unbalanced view of the correlation between the global structure of the world
and individual states (Hobson and Ramesh 2002: 8). A synthesis of these two opposing sides
is required in order to advance a sufficient theory for explaining the connection between state
and globalisation (Hobson and Ramesh 2002: 6). According to the synthesis viewpoint,
significant changes in the mission and importance of the state have occurred with the
emergence of the globalisation process; however these changes can be interpreted as ‘the
transformation of the state’ rather than a ‘retreat’ or ‘rise’.

The main deficiency of the two extremes is that they compel the preference of one
single winner between structure and agency (Hobson and Ramesh 2002: 6). As Hobson and
Ramesh (2002: 8) commented, “states are neither passive victims of global structures nor
purely autonomous agents”. On the one hand, the boundaries of state power are revealed by
new global challenges such as global warming, fowl plague and AIDS (Smith 2009: 257). On the other hand, Gill (2003: 233) pointed out that the foundation of global organizations such as the League of Nation and the United Nations cannot be interpreted as the erosion of state sovereignty, since these entities concede the decisiveness of state power in both the global and the domestic areas.

It might be beneficial to analyse the issue of migration to the UK in order to correlate the strategic-relational approach to the globalisation debate. First, as a consequence of factors such as international migration and cultural globalisation state borders have become easily passable (Heywood 2007: 103). According to the migration literature, people’s decisions to migrate depend on their comparison of their income in the destination country and their economic and social expenditures, in other words economical reasons (Blanchflower, Saleheen and Shadforth 2007: 3). The UK was ranked second in selected OECD and non-OECD states in 2009 in terms of inflows of permanent immigrants (OECD 2011, 41). This is an example of the ‘structurally inscribed strategic selectivity’ concept of Jessop (1996), since the structure (global migration regime, global and domestic economy) forms a special case for the UK.

After the May 2010 elections, a shift in migration policies emerged as a result of the intention of Conservative-led British government to decrease net migration swiftly (OECD 2012, 280). For instance, the scope of Tier 1 has been restricted to ‘exceptional talents’ as assessed by a competent authority (OECD 2012, 280). The inflows as a part of Tier 1 were limited to 1000 entries a year by the implementation of quota in 2011; however the entries based on entrepreneurship and investment were exempt from this quota (OECD 2012, 280). These limitations and preferences about who are allowed to migrate to the UK might be acknowledged as an indication of ‘strategic calculation’ by the Conservative Party as a strategic actor.

The migrants who were accepted within the scope of Tiers 1 and 2 were reduced to 21,700 after the implementation of the new regulations following April 2011 (OECD 2012, 280). Hence, this reduction as a result of the immigration policy of the Conservative Party might be interpreted as the fruit of ‘strategic action’, since it influences the international migration regime, global and domestic economy.

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2 For the explanation of the term, see Hay (2002 126-134)
CONCLUSION

The debate about structure and agency is important since it reveals many fundamental and still problematic concerns; the responses to the structure-agency question indicate the standpoint of a person about the ontological explanation of a social and political phenomenon and the debate creates the basis for the interpretation of empirical knowledge. Structure refers to the context and can be understood better by applying the ‘political culture’ example and the ‘Protestant Ethic-the rise of capitalism’ relationship. Agency refers to the actor in this context and can be understood better by applying to the ‘charismatic authority’ concept of Weber.

In this article, two extremes, structuralism and intentionalism, and the strategic-relational approach which seeks a compromise between the two, have been discussed. The globalisation debate has many implications within these three approaches. On the one side, structuralists support the view of the ‘decline of the state; whilst intentionalists (with the state-centric view) perceive the state as the only actor which is purely autonomous. Finally, the reconciliation of the two extremes might be a better way of explaining how structure and agency are related reciprocally, as can be seen in the case of controlling migration to the UK.
Bibliography:


