

# Structuration Theory: A Third Alternative

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**Abstract:** One of the central problems of social theory is the dualism of structure and agency. Sociological theories are often categorized according to their emphasis on human action (agency) versus structure. We as sociologists, find ourselves between two sides that oppose each other. In more recent years, and especially in Europe, there is a new approach that has been developing; this approach is agency-structure integration. A few examples of this approach are the work of Anthony Giddens (structuration theory), Margaret Archer (culture and agency), and Pierre Bourdieu (habitus and field). In this paper I will critically present and assess Giddens' structuration theory because of its significance in modern sociological theory. This paper will present a brief analysis and assessment of Giddens' structuration theory in terms of its validity as a theoretical perspective and its ability to operate in empirical research. I argue that (1) Giddens fails to apply this integration to the real world, and that this notion of agency-structure integration is an abstract one, which cannot be found in reality, and (2) Giddens fails to present an adequate theory that can be operationalized as a whole, and that could be used in empirical research, and (3) using his study *The Nation-State and Violence* as an example-, Giddens fails to use his structuration concept, but rather he uses a structuralist position in his analysis. Giddens fails to present a theory that could be used in social research, and which serves as a mechanism that can understand, explain, and, accordingly, predict social phenomena. Nonetheless, his theory is still of great significance to social science in the abstract.

**Key words:** Structuration theory, Agency, Structure, Human action.

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## Introduction

This paper consists of three main sections: the **first one** will present examples of theories of structure, **the second** will present an example of theories of agency, and **the last section** will be on structuration theory. The first section of this paper will deal with theories of structure. This approach consists of several theories. Structuralism fits within this approach as well as functionalism and other theories. Both focus on social structure and the social system at the expense of agency. They give structure enormous importance-to the point that proponents believe it can control human action and potentially determine it.

The second section will discuss symbolic interactionist theory as an explanatory case of the agency theories. However, there are other theories in this category such as ethnomethodology and phenomenology. In my paper, symbolic interaction is presented as a paradigm of theories of agency. This perspective presents human action as a meaningful action that obtains its meaning by social interaction, without paying much attention to the social structures which may enable or constrain that action. Human action is not determined through social structure, and the goal of the theory is to understand the meaning of the action, but not to predict behavior. This theory operates only at the interaction level of analysis and fails to present a theoretical concept of structure as an important factor to human action.

The last section will be devoted to presenting Anthony Giddens' structuration theory. This theory proposes agency-structure integration. In the last few decades, some theorists tried to take a middle point in the structure-agency debate. Giddens' structuration theory will be used as a representative model of this new approach. Giddens rejects both earlier approaches because each one of them misses the opportunity to see what the other approach presents. Structuration theory suggests that agency and structure are a duality, and not a dualism, and that social life is not characterized by agency or structure, but rather is structure and agency at the same time. For Giddens, structure and agency are intertwined and they are produced by human subjects in daily life; thus, they cannot be separated from each other.

Thus, my argument is that these two main approaches deal with human action in different ways and take opposite positions. Theories of structure do not allow agency, or at least do not give it enough space in social life. The action of individuals is involuntary, and is mostly reactive to and determined by the social system. In contrast, theories of agency claim that human action is undetermined and individuals interact and choose the action they want to perform in social life. This perspective has difficulty accounting for stability over time, and has an undeveloped conception of structure. Giddens' theory presents 'a new' way of seeing social theory. I will present the main claims and notions of this theory, and critically assess its effectiveness and usefulness to social theory, and its validity for empirical research.

## **Theories of Structure**

### **Structuralism:**

Structuralism is deeply rooted in Durkheim's writings. Such an approach views society as a system, with individuals as its products. Modern structuralism started as an approach to linguistics, especially in the work of Saussure (1857-1913) and in the work of Levi-Strauss in anthropology. In structuralism, social structure has primacy over human action. Structure is usually viewed as separate from, but at the same time determining of, human action. Followers of this approach, in general, believe that the relationships between the underlying elements of structure produce different types of social systems. Furthermore, their focus is not on the elements themselves, but rather on the relationships between them. They also believe that action is the product of the underlying structure.

In his book, *Course In General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure stresses the importance of the linguistic structure. He states, "The linguist must take the study of linguistic structure as his primary concern (1989:9)." The linguistic structure is able to solve various difficulties that face linguistics, and it provides something that can be satisfactorily grasped. Linguistic structure is only a part of the language, but nonetheless, it is, as he emphasizes, "an essential part" of it (1989:9). The structure of a language is "necessary convictions" that are used by members of society to enable them to use their language. In his work, Saussure made a distinction between language and speech which is a

distinction between “(1) what is social from what is individual, and (2) what is essential from what is ancillary and more or less accidental (1989:13-14).” He defines language as “nothing other than a social institution,” and individuals cannot control this institution. Saussure describes language as a product that is “passively registered” by individuals who have no control over it. Speech, on the contrary, is an act that consists of human agency and human will, in which individuals choose, select, and combine words and other elements of their language that help them to express their ideas and thoughts.

Individuals cannot control the language or make it obey their own will because language exists independently from the person. No individual can retain the whole system of language. Therefore, in order to understand how language works, one has to keep its rules in mind. There are grammatical rules that direct the structure of language. Such structure gives language its meaning and makes communication possible.

Another structuralist who emphasized what is collective and universal rather than what is individual was Levi-Strauss, who Kurzweil calls “the father of structuralism (Ritzer, 2000:456).” Levi-Strauss focuses on the relation that exists between units at the expense of the unit itself. He used the same method that is used in structural linguistics, which focuses on the relations between the elements instead of the elements themselves that are integrated into systems and controlled by general laws (Levi-Strauss, 1963). He extended Saussure’s work on linguistics to anthropology, in which he claimed that kinship relationships -just like language- have a system and a structure.

Like other structuralists, Levi-Strauss gives emphasis to the relations between elements, and not on the elements themselves. He stated, “The error of traditional anthropology, like that of traditional linguistics, was to consider the terms, and not the relations between the terms (1963:46).” He does not focus on the terms; rather, he emphasizes their relations, their structure and their order. He does not see any significance in the terms themselves; he is concerned with the framework in which they exist and their structural relations within this framework. Furthermore, Bourdieu criticized Levi-Strauss for his view of social actors; he stated, “My intention was to bring real-life actors back in who had vanished at the hands of Levi-Strauss and other structuralists” (Ritzer, 2000:399).

Writing on structuralism is incomplete without mentioning structural Marxism. I have chosen to write on Louis Althusser because of the importance of his writings and their impact on sociology. Like other structuralists, the writings of Saussure have influenced Althusser. Althusser's attention is directed toward the social totality, and not the individual; individuals are only occupiers of positions in the social system. He believed that the analysis of any social formation (capitalism, socialism, etc.) should be conducted by studying the whole totality, not its objects and their actions. Generally speaking, actors, from the structuralist point of view, are more or less passive vehicles for the power of the structure and the system (language, economic, or any social system). Giddens (1979) criticized Althusser for not giving enough credit to human agency: he states:

If we understand the social totality as a structure, according to Althusser, and thus as 'self-determining' or, as he puts it, 'determining its elements', it follows that human actors are never more than occupants of positions within the structure; they are in his now notorious terms, 'supports' or 'bearers' of the structure (1979:157).

Furthermore, we can see Althusser's idea of structuralism clearly in his analysis of ideology. From this point of view, ideology can be defined as "a system of representations" that "impose" themselves on individuals, and ideology is not produced by the will of the individuals, but by institutions (Swingwood, 1984:291).

### **Functionalism:**

The functionalist perspective and the structuralist perspective are almost in the same position regarding structure and agency; they both put more emphasis on structure at the expense of agency. Durkheim claimed that social institutions exist to satisfy some social needs. Moreover, he uses biology as a model to explain the functioning of the social system. In the biological organism, each part does its (job) function in order to operate the system. Functionalism differs from structuralism in its perspective on individuals. Instead of seeing the individuals occupying and filling specific positions in structures, and individuals' actions as determined by those positions, functionalism understands the role of the individuals differently. In functionalism, individuals act in the

social system to satisfy the society's needs. These needs are fulfilled by the social system through the individuals.

Durkheim thought of society as a whole, an entity, which has its own characteristics that are different from those of the individuals who compose it. Society exists above the individuals who are born into an already existing society (Durkheim, 1951). The basis for Durkheim's functional theory is social solidarity, integration, and regulation of the society (Wallace, 1995). In his major work, *Suicide*, Durkheim focused on the effect that the degree of social integration has on individuals. This integration has a function; when it functions properly individuals act and react normally, but when some individuals either fail to integrate with, or over integrate with their society, suicide rates will increase. This integration keeps the society in 'normal' conditions. Solidarity is integral to society, and its function is to keep people together and to keep societies in normal conditions.

Durkheim thought of society as an organic whole that functions to satisfy its needs. In his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he claimed that religion has a function; religion helps people to be integrated into their society and into each other. Durkheim (1995) viewed social institutions as wholes that function to promote social solidarity. Yet, he did not view individual behavior from the point of view of the individual, or what that behavior means to the individual. Rather, what really was at stake for Durkheim is the consequences of that behavior or action on society.

Talcott Parsons, the leading American functionalist, picked up on Durkheim's concern with solidarity and society as a system. One of Parsons' major works was his book *The Social System* (1951). In this book he tried to put into a general form the main outlines of the structure of the social system. Parsons claimed that the social system is constructed of individuals who interact with each other. He stated:

A social system consists in a plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors who are motivated in terms of tendency to the 'optimization of gratification' and whose relation to their situation including each other, is

defined and motivated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols (Parsons, 1951:5-6).

Here, Parsons emphasized the idea that individuals interact with each other in situations in which their motivations and their relations to each other are determined by the system. Parsons' main focus was on the system at the expense of the individuals, and how society or the system controls them. Parsons is criticized for his assumption that actors are merely "passive recipients" in the process of socialization (Ritzer, 1992).

As a structural functionalist, Parsons agreed with structuralists in that the relations between actors are central to the social system. He said, "It is the structure of the relations between the actors as involved in the interactive process which is essentially the structure of the social system (1951:25)." Furthermore, in a social system, the act is the primary unit in the process of social interaction. However, Parsons believed that it would be more useful if we look at a higher level of unit than the act; we should look at the structure of relations between actors.

Thus, in the previous pages I have presented some of the structuralist and the functionalist theorists' arguments which focus on structures and systems and, to a great extent, disregard actors and their agency. In such approaches, the emphasis is on the importance of structure and the system over the actors who act and participate in these systems. If this is so, then how could social change possibly happen? Is the social world that static?

## **Theories of Agency**

This section will focus on theories of agency that emphasize the undetermined nature of human action and oppose the determinism of theories of structure. Theorists in this approach believe that action is voluntary and originates from the actor. They focus on the social interaction at the individual's level and ignore large-scale social structure. There is a tendency in this perspective in general to deny the impact of social organizations and institutions on human action. Interactionists believe that actors are aware of the conditions of their action and they act voluntarily and purposely. Action is not a product of external social forces.

### **Symbolic Interaction:**

Herbert Blumer originated the term symbolic interaction. Symbolic interaction is a social-psychological approach. The individual is its main focus, and it also focuses on the interaction between an individual's internal thoughts, emotions, and behavior. The individual, according to symbolic interactionism, is the one who constructs his/her own interpretations, evaluations, and actions (Wallace, 1995). Regarding symbolic interactionism, the person is an active constructor, not "a passive recipient," as Parsons claimed. In this theory, there is a great emphasis on the actor's interpretations of social life.

George Herbert Mead presented a way of analyzing human action that is not structured and not influenced by already existing "conventions" (Wallace, 1980). People do not just simply follow the system, but engage in processes of making their own decisions. Mead's concept of the self is significant to the symbolic interaction theory. The self for him was an active and creative organism. The individual receives values, norms, roles, and status in his/her social life; then the individual practices them in self-interaction. In this process, individuals within a situation think about and react to that situation. Interactionists emphasize the thinking that the individual does, and they claim that this thinking shapes the action. Furthermore, they think of socialization as a process in which individuals are allowed to develop their ability to think. For interactionists, individuals actively receive, shape, adapt, and develop the means that they use in their social interactions. Interactionists in general emphasize the ability to think; symbols and language are means that improve the ability to think. Their concern is how people learn meanings during interaction and socialization.

As mentioned earlier, Blumer coined the name symbolic interaction. He focuses on the meaning of human action, and he stated three premises: (1) Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. (2) The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. (3) These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (1969:2). The meaning of an object is derived from social interaction. Human action is a meaningful behavior. Blumer claimed that sociological study should be empirical, and that social phenomenon

should be studied within its context, so it will not lose its meaning. He stated, "The meaning of things is formed in the context of social interaction and is derived by the person from that interaction" (1969:5). The meaning is derived from the interaction by the person who interprets it and acts upon that interaction. The individual is not made to act in a particular way; he/she acts according to his/her understanding and interpretations of the social conditions. Blumer sees individuals as active actors, rather than those being acted upon. The individual interacts with others according to his/her interpretations of them. The individual acts and responds to others' actions.

Neither Mead nor Blumer denied the existence of structure, but neither of them believed that this structure could determine action. Interactionists study the action from the point of view of the actor; therefore, they are unable to present a theoretical metaphor that can explain where social structure came from. Blumer stated, "From the standpoint of symbolic interaction the organization of a human society is the framework inside of which social action takes place, and is not the determinant of that action (1969:87)." What is at stake for symbolic interaction is action and the actor- not the social framework in which this action existed. Structure is the framework in which human action occurs. That framework does not determine this action.

Erving Goffman is considered the last major sociologist from the Chicago school. In his major work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, he claimed that the individual is an actor who performs a play for his/her audience to give them impressions that are consistent with his/her desired goals. The actor tries to make his/her audience believe what they see; Goffman stated, "They (the audience) are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess (1959:17)."

Like interactionists, Goffman believed that the individual can avoid being controlled by social structures. He also believed that structural conditions are important, but they do not sufficiently explain human action. Thus, human action cannot be completely determined by the social institutions.

### **Agency-structure integration**

That being mentioned, we find ourselves between two sides that oppose each other. Besides the two traditional polar approaches, agency-structure integration is a third perspective of looking at sociological theory, and one which might be seen as a solution for this dilemma. This relatively new alternative has been mainly developed in Europe. A few examples of this approach are the work of Anthony Giddens (structuration theory), Margaret Archer (culture and agency), and Pierre Bourdieu (habitus and field). In this section I will present Giddens' structuration theory. I have chosen this theory for its relevance in modern sociological theory.

Giddens rejects the Durkheimian way of viewing society as a reality in itself that is independent from the individual, and yet he is reluctant to be a Weberian that reduces society to the individual. In his new rules of sociological method, Giddens tries to make sociology a science that captures both subjectivism and objectivism. Sociologists, he argues, should not be observers that watch society from a distance, and yet they should not be active participants that subjectively interpret social action. He argues that sociologists cannot make social life as an observable phenomenon independently of drawing upon their knowledge of it as a resource, whereby he constitutes it as a topic of investigation. Giddens claims that sociology should go beyond the polarity of subjectivism/objectivism. He tries to extend the scope of sociology to go beyond the dichotomy of qualitative/quantitative methodological division. This dichotomy was the promise of French positivism that regarded society as a natural phenomenon that can be studied through natural science research tools. Giddens empathizes that sociology should not be science that studies a 'pre-given' universe of subjects, but with one which is constituted or produced by the active doings of subjects. These productions and reproductions of society have to be treated as skilled performances of those subjects.

While dealing with the notion of bridging objectivism and subjectivism in social science, we have to mention the work of Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. *An Outline of the Theory of Practice*, 1972, and *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, 1979). Bourdieu tries to make this connection between his two concepts of *habitus* and *field* through practices. He has a different view regarding structure and

agency. Habitus for Bourdieu are the cultural structures that exist in the actors' minds, and fields are the sets of relations that through practices condition habitus, and habitus, in turn, inform fields. Bourdieu tries to incorporate what is objective into subjectivity in the actors' mental experiences. The agency of actors is limited to the experience of the subjectivity only-

not in the practices nor in the habitus, which some might interpret as Bourdieu's bias to objectivity at the expense of subjectivity.

### **Structuration Theory:**

In his Structuration theory, Giddens tries to explore the question of whether it is the social forces or the individuals that produce social reality. He argues that individuals act upon some degree of planning, knowledge, and intended goals for their action, which means that society evolves from human agency that is intended and planned, and is not a mere evolution. In social life individuals produce and reproduce social norms, values, and rules; yet those very individuals act within the structures and limits of these norms and rules. Individuals in society use these norms and structures to enable and guide them in their interaction with each other. The processes of structuration involve interplay of meanings, norms and power. Individuals, collectively, produce a society that has sets of rules and structures that organize and regulate interaction, and those individuals become regulated by their own products. Giddens states that structures should not be conceptualized as simply placing constraints upon human agency, but as enabling. He argues that structures have both rules and resources and they are both crucial to human agency. Rules guide and constrain action, yet action is not possible without resources. In social interaction, social agents use both resources and rules that are at their disposal; however, Giddens alerts us to the fact that these resources and rules are not deterministic, but are used by knowledgeable and conscious actors. Therefore, the outcome of their action is not totally predictable. Social agents employ the rules that are appropriate to their society and culture which they have internalized through life experiences and process of socialization.

Giddens' structuration theory is very relevant to social theory in general, and to sociological theory in particular. This theory presents a relatively new theoretical way of thinking. Its importance lies in its ability

to function as an abstract and as a theoretical perspective. This theory has been the subject of many critiques for its irrelevance to social research, but, nonetheless, I see the centrality of this perspective to sociological theory in its ability to enable us to view theory differently.

For Giddens, the problem of action in sociology has to be understood within the traditional division in social theory, “a dichotomy between objectivism and subjectivism” (1987a:59). He believes that each side of this division has its attractions, and at the same time has its shortcomings. Each side is privileged to see things that the other side cannot see or even ignores. People on the objectivist side give primacy to society or social institutions, and they correctly, according to Giddens, believe that the social object has “structural properties stretching beyond the activities of individual members of society” (1987a:59). However, because they overemphasize social institutions, objectivists fail to capture the qualities that have been attributed to actors (motivations, meaningful actions). People from the subjectivist side, on the other hand, give priority to human agents over society and believe that those agents have priority in social analysis. Those people have rightly, according to Giddens, realized that actors are capable of understanding the conditions of their actions and that they act upon those intentions and reasons. However, subjectivists fail to see and understand the structural properties that spread beyond the individuals and beyond their actions (Giddens, 1987a).

Giddens opposes the idea that structure and action are dualisms; rather he believes that they are a duality. The structural properties of social systems, for him, “are both medium and outcome of the practices that constitute those systems” (1982:36), which means that actors use structures to perform their actions and by doing so, they reinforce and reproduce these structures that shape their actions, keeping in mind that these structures were produced in the first place by human action and practices. He claims that the connection between structure and agency is a crucial element in social theory. They are a duality that cannot be conceived apart from each other, and that which he calls “duality of structure.” Actors make society and yet they are constrained by it.

Giddens rejects the two approaches to theory; he says, “there is no sense in which structure ‘determines’ action or vice versa” (1984:219). He is neither interested in structure itself nor in action itself, but rather, the

relationship between agency and structure (Ritzer, 2000). Giddens places great importance on actors. He believes that actors have the ability to make a difference and that they have power over their actions. They act upon their intentions and motivations; however, some of their intended actions may have unintended consequences.

People, through their routine actions and practices, develop forms and rules for their actions. These forms and rules are produced and reproduced to form and shape subsequent practices. However, Giddens does not think that those rules and forms are the forms of human action itself; they shape it, but they are not the shape of the human action. Structure is not outside social action, but rather it exists only because of it. Giddens argues that human action should not be reduced to social forms; action produces and reproduces these forms. He sees structure differently from other theorists. Structures for him are not outside and external from human action, but rather they are the “medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize” (1984:25). Nonetheless, for Giddens, the space of human agency is limited and bound. Individuals produce society, but they do so as historically located actors; they do not choose their own conditions.

Giddens focuses on both agency and structure and he believes that they cannot exist without each other. Structures cannot exist by themselves in time and space. Accordingly, human action and practices exist in time and space and they produce and reproduce structures and rules that organize them. However, in his writings on modernity, Giddens finds it somehow troubling to locate human action in time and space. In traditional societies time and space were confined; the latter was the actual area in which agents existed, and time was reduced to the experiences that those agents accumulated while moving in that space. Yet, in modern society these notions are very eluding. Time and space can be extended to reach areas that agents have never experienced, which Giddens calls virtual time and virtual space.

Giddens narrows it down to the basic concept of structure, which is a set of expectations that are produced and reproduced by people’s everyday actions. He states, “Society only has form, and that form only has effects on people, in so far as structure is produced and reproduced in what people do” (Giddens and Pierson, 1998). Giddens argues that human action and practices are continued and enduring, and it is the

continuity that makes social systems and social structure occur. He states that:

The basic domain of study of social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of totality, but social practices ordered across space and time. Human social activities, like some self-reproducing items in nature, are recursive. That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves as actors. In and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible. (Giddens, 1984).

Giddens tries to make this integration between human agency and social structure, social systems and social institutions possible. The constant repetition of human practices and interaction in habitual forms is what constitutes these large social forms.

Giddens believes that this view rejects the “identification of structure with constraint” (1982:37). He empathizes the notion that structure is both enabling and constraining to human action. He uses language as an example in that individuals use language to express themselves. The individual has to follow the rules and the structures of the language to use it, so this individual is constrained by the structure of this language, but at the same time this language enables the individual to express his/her self. Also, when people use their language they reproduce the structure of their language. Structure might constrain action, but it also enables it by providing common frames of meaning. In the performance of everyday tasks, social actors grasp the idea that language is governed by rules with the existence of a wide range of possible moves and potential outcomes. The discourse of everyday actions, speech-acts, and habits mobilizes reflexive knowledge. Giddens views social life as something more than random individual acts, and yet it is not simply determined by social forces. Rather human action and structure are intertwined, and it is the repetition of the actors’ acts that produces and reproduces social structure (Giddens and Pierson, 1998).

### **Assessment of Structuration Theory:**

Structuration theory has a great theme of agency-structure integration and an important concept of the duality of structure. Through the notions it presents, structuration theory is a theoretical alternative for the two main theoretical approaches. However, it is difficult for us to apply this alternative because, in reality, it is hard to find that integration between agency and structure. Real world does not work as Giddens may wish or expect. I am arguing that Giddens fails to (1) apply this integration to the real world and this notion of agency-structure integration is an abstract one that cannot be found in real world, and (2) use his structuration theory in his study *The Nation-State and Violence*, (1987b), but rather he falls into a structuralist position in his analysis, and (3) present an adequate theory that can operationalize as a whole and that could be applied to empirical research. He fails to present a theory that could be used in social research, and which serves as a mechanism that can understand, explain, and, accordingly, predict social phenomena. Giddens himself fails to take the concepts of structuration theory beyond the abstract to reality.

Giddens repeatedly talks about actors as 'knowledgeable agents' who know what they are doing and who are not 'cultural dopes,' but he hardly, if ever, explicitly explains how the duality of structure happens. We agree with him that individuals usually act upon their understanding of the various situations, and also agree with him that social structure is not external to the individuals, but we are left here without an appropriate explanation of the relation between the actions of the individuals and the framework of these actions, which is the structure.

I also agree with him that social structures are produced by the repeated actions of those members of society and are not posed from the outside. Nonetheless, these structures constrain the actions of those actors who produce and reproduce them. He claims that structures are both enabling and constraining the actors. I would say that this notion does not contradict what the structuralists may say. People who are in controlling positions in the social structure are able to take actions that they wouldn't be able to take without their positions, and at the same time, their actions have limits that they cannot exceed.

In his book the *Nation-State and Violence*, (1987b), Giddens focused his analysis on the state, either the modern state or the pre-modern one.

He argues that modernity has four institutional aspects: capitalism, industrialism, surveillance, and military power. His analysis is a structural one that ignores the agency of the actors; his analysis is on the macro level. In a contradiction to what he says in *The Constitution of Society*, (1984), “Analysing the structuration of social systems means studying the modes in which such systems are grounded in the knowledgeable activities of situated actors who draw upon rules and resources in the diversity of action contexts” (1984:25), Giddens spends no time explaining how state systems are grounded in the individuals’ activities. He presents a comparison between the nation-state and the class divided state. Giddens elaborates on the notion of power, which is significant to his study of the means of violence, at the level of the social system. He argues that power is “the capability to effectively decide about courses of events, even where others might contest such decisions,” He also claims, “To be an agent is to be able to make a difference to the world (1987b:9).” However, he doesn’t develop this argument in his study. All his focus is on the structural institutional level, especially the military.

Giddens, in most of his writing, argues that there is a duality of structure- not a dualism; however, in this study of the state, he examines and analyzes the structure without developing the notion of duality. He does not show us the role of agency in controlling the means of violence. Therefore, I believe that agency and structure are not necessarily intertwined, as Giddens argued. I also agree with many of his critics on several issues. Thompson, for example, says, “While structure and agency are not antinomies, nevertheless they are not as complementary and mutually supporting as Giddens would like us to believe” (1989:74).

Nonetheless, I still believe that structuration theory is of great importance to social science; probably it is not as helpful as we want it to be to social research. We can refer to it as a philosophical perspective- not as an empirical one. As mentioned above, Giddens believes that this theory works on a high level of abstract, which does not contradict our need in social science for ‘theory.’ Also, this abstract theory can be a source of concepts and themes that might be useful for our social research. In other words, we should not be on the extreme sides of the equation; we don’t have to expect all social theories to operate in empirical research, and at the same time, we don’t have to disregard

abstract theories. There is no need for us to declare either the 'irrelevance' or the 'centrality' of structuration theory to empirical research. Giddens is trying to give us a theory that can be used in a selective way, and it should be seen as "a sensitizing device;" he is not presenting a "structurationist programme." In sum, Giddens presents structuration theory as a theory that "has its own logic and development and... is relatively autonomous from research." He also says, "Nevertheless, I [Giddens] do think my writings have some direct applications to research work" (1990:299). Giddens presents his theory as a theoretical alternative or an abstract approach to social science, and not as a research program or a research tool. Structuration theory, which "operate[s] at a high level of abstraction," is more of a theory that can be compared to schools of thought than it is a theory for explanatory generalizations (Giddens, 1989: 295). However, he tries to refute the claims that structuration theory is irrelevant to empirical research. He bases his argument on the ability of structuration theory to provide some notions and concepts that might help us to understand social phenomena.

## **Conclusion**

This was a brief presentation of the main approaches in social theory regarding structure and agency debate. I compared the two main theoretical approaches to social theory (structure vs. agency) in terms of the conception of agency and human action, and I presented the third approach (structuration theory) and assessed it in terms of its validity as a theoretical perspective and its ability to operate in empirical research. Each side took a different position from the other regarding agency and human action. Theories of structure focus on structure and the social system as determinants of human action, and they don't give enough space for agency and voluntarism. Theories of agency, on the other hand, tend to ignore the effects of social structure. They consider human action as a meaningful action and that individuals are, to a great extent, free in their actions. Moreover, they reject the idea of determinism, and they deny a primacy of social institutions over the human action. Giddens wants to present a new alternative that is different from the two main approaches. His structuration theory introduces the idea of agency-structure integration, and promotes the idea of the duality of agency and structure. As cited in Ritzer, Giddens stated, "The basic domain of the

study of the social science, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but social practices ordered across time and space (1992:430).” He assumes that the study should be on the relations between agency and structure rather than being on one of them (Ritzer, 1992). Giddens tries to capture the advantages of these two perspectives in his structuration theory; however, reality is more complicated, and it is not as Giddens wants it to be. Nevertheless, structuration theory expands our theoretical views, and gives us a perspective that operates on a high level of abstract.

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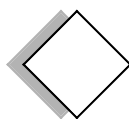
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## النظرية البنوية: بديل ثالث (\*)

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**ملخص:** إحدى المشكلات المركزية في النظرية الاجتماعية هي ثنائية البناء والفعل. والنظريات الاجتماعية غالباً ما تصنف بحسب تركيزها على الفعل أو البناء، وهي تنقسم إلى معسكرين رئيسين. نحن - الاجتماعيين - نجد أنفسنا بين هذين الجانبين المتضادين. وفي السنوات الأخيرة، وخصوصاً في أوروبا، ظهر اتجاه جديد قيد التطور، هذا الاتجاه هو اندماج البناء والفعل. بعض الأمثلة لمثل هذا الاتجاه: أعمال أنطوني جيدنز (النظرية البنوية) (Structuration Theory)، مارجريت آرتشر (الثقافة والفعل)، وبيير بيوردو (الطبع والميدان). في هذه الدراسة، أقدم نقداً لنظرية جيدنز البنوية بسبب أهميتها في النظرية الاجتماعية الحديثة. وأقدم عرضاً مختصراً وتقويماً لها من حيث صلاحيتها بوصفها منظوراً وقابليتها للتطبيق العملي. أنا أجادل أن جيدنز فشل فيما يأتي: (1) تطبيق هذا الاندماج في العالم الحقيقي، وهذا الاندماج للبناء والفعل هو اندماج نظري وغير حقيقي، (2) في تقديم نظرية مناسبة تستطيع أن تعمل بصورة كلية وتستخدم في البحث الميداني، (3) في استخدام مفهومه البنوي في كتابه الدولة القومية والعنف، و عوضاً عن ذلك استخدم موقفاً بنائياً في تحليله. جيدنز لا يستطيع أن يقدم نظرية يمكن استخدامها في البحث الاجتماعي وتوظف وسيلة لفهم الظواهر الاجتماعية وشرحها وتوقعها. عموماً، لا تزال هذه النظرية مهمة للعلوم الاجتماعية نظرياً.

**المصطلحات الأساسية:** النظرية البنوية، الفعل، البناء، الفعل الإنساني.

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(\*\*) هناك أكثر من ترجمة لهذا المصطلح الذي صاغه أنتوني جيدنز، منها مصطلح نظرية التشكيل، ونحن نميل إلى استخدام المصطلح المستخدم هنا.