Chapter 1
NGOs and Empowerment of Poor as a Problem of 'Structure and Agency': A Framework of Analysis

"If even one goes without food we will destroy the world"

- Subramania Barathi

This verse succinctly captures in its fullness the problem of 'structure and agency', the subject matter of this chapter. The poet posits the question of 'individual' versus 'society' squarely when he visualizes the possibility of the "we" (individuals) destroying the "world" (society). This individualist projection depicts the humanist predilections characteristic of modernist thinking. Ever since the renaissance thought followed by the epoch of enlightenment triumphed in Europe, 'The Human' has dislodged 'The Creator', becoming the maker of his/her own destiny.

Subsequently, western philosophy and science have systematically placed the modern man and woman centre stage by reversing the staunch disposition of the medieval scholastics to the divine and its 'uncritical' subjugation of humans to it. The creative ability of humans – both individually and in groups – to affect the physical and social surroundings in one's favour, has been the subject of several inquiries. Perceptibly, the whole enterprise is preoccupied with the question of the creative and created nature of humans – do individuals create the social world, or are they mere creatures of it? Though it looks manifestly simple at first glance, the issue has eluded a definite answer and has resulted in and continues to be the cause of much theoretical wrangling, in essence revealing its innate complexity.

In this context, a survey of the literature on NGOs in general demonstrates three distinct positions on social theories – criticism, agnosticism and optimism. The critics, the category to which nearly all the activists and practitioners belong, but certainly not limited to them, are mostly inclined to limit themselves to descriptions of NGOs and their activities based on the implicit assumption and unequivocal belief

---

1 The problem of 'structure and agency' will be referred to as the 'problem' wherever possible in the following discussion for the sake of brevity and convenience, without compromising on clarity.
2 Interest in this issue of importance has now been revived primarily due to the pioneering efforts of British philosophers and sociologists – Roy Bhaskar (critical realism), Anthony Giddens (structuration theory) and Margaret S. Archer (Morphogenetic approach).
3 The following account does not differentiate between NGOs, voluntary organizations and non-profit organizations, so that the various theoretical positions can be freely included and dealt with. They are defined and differentiated in Chapter 2.
that praxis is more important than theoretical preoccupations, and that theory cannot capture the complexities of the former. Even while not refuting the latter claim it needs to be emphasized that theory cannot be divorced from praxis, as both necessarily inform each other. This is more than evident in the common usage of concepts like micro-credit, self-help, social capital, participation, institution-building, and empowerment. These concepts have underlying theoretical assumptions and employing them essentially implies affirming our faith in certain propositions against others. We contend that unrestrained use of concepts and empirical analysis uninformed by theoretical content lack purpose and substance, and severely impedes a proper understanding of the social phenomena at work. Moreover, all attempts at empirical analysis and grassroots practice bear in them an implicit allusion to theories, which prescribes the understanding of social life and its varied aspects including the possibility of transforming it. Hence, it would only serve the purpose better if we allow theory to direct our empirical studies and explicate the possibilities and problems of the praxis, even while not undermining the significance of the praxis for theoretical enterprises. The well-meaning criticism that the available theoretical propositions are not complex enough, should propel us to look for more sophisticated theories reflecting the reality, rather than dismissing theories altogether. More importantly, any effort at the praxis essentially entails some knowledge of the social reality we inhabit. The manner in which we are going to conceive the social reality necessarily informs, aids and limits any efforts at transforming it. Hence, any successful effort at the grassroots necessitates a clear perception of the social reality and adoption of suitable strategies, be it micro-credit, participation or empowerment. It becomes the onerous task of social sciences to suggest the possibilities a practitioner can successfully adopt and employ. The argument here is that both theory and praxis should necessarily inform the other and accordingly the study is premised on the understanding that philosophical and theoretical debates within social sciences have a lot to offer such empirical engagements.

The second group – the agnostics, are engrossed with various concepts and secondary-level theories, without much concern about the underlying fundamental theoretical assumptions. One can at least confidently assert that even if these studies rely on primary theories like rational choice, new institutionalism, systems approach etc. they are seldom stated and dealt with explicitly. This is despite the fact that one
or the other primary theory essentially informs all such secondary theories.⁴ These studies are basically engaged with theories of, and theorizing, NGO-state relationship, civil society, social capital etc. Some of these studies emphasize the significance of the external environment for the NGOs.⁵ Nonetheless, these references are left at that, and there is seldom any elaboration on the terms of this relation and the constraints and possibilities available, and the relative influence of external factors vis-à-vis NGOs. They do not attempt to answer how and when the environment influences the NGOs. Other than these, there is an increasingly growing literature on the relationship between NGOs and state which emphasizes the importance of the environment provided by the state for the growth of NGOs.⁶ Despite such references to the state, these studies do not account for the complexities involved, by essentially conceiving the state and NGOs as homogenous entities and thereby masking their internally differentiated nature. There is seldom any place in these explanations for the larger environment of this relationship, and the international actors and participants in NGO activities are not accounted for. At times these external agents exercise considerable influence over NGO activities, even as the latter also influences them. Furthermore, NGOs are predominantly cast in a responsive mode in relation to the state activities. It needs to be emphasized that the NGOs too have the ability to act on the state policies and programmes.

Finally, the optimists who, convinced that the various primary theories have something to offer in the study of NGOs, employ these differently in two distinct, but related fields of NGO studies – to explain their origin/existence and characterize several aspects of their functioning. Weisbrod offers a functionalist explanation for the existence of NGOs by maintaining that they function to meet the unsatisfied demands arising due to the failure of the state and market to provide collective goods.⁷ A closely related approach contends that NGOs come into existence not due

---

⁴ For example, there are repeated references to the determining effect of the "New Policy Agenda" on the NGOs, the latter increasingly changing themselves to meet the requirements generated by the former. Such a conceptualization reflects the basic assumptions of sociological institutionalism. See M. Robinson, "Governance, Democracy and Conditionality: NGOs and the New Policy Agenda", in A. Clayton, ed., *Governance, Democracy and Conditionality: What Role for NGOs?*, Oxford: INTRAC, 1993.


to the failure of markets and governments to supply a sufficient quantity and range
of collective goods that results in satisfaction of society's needs, but because of
another "market failure," namely "contract failures" arising from "information
asymmetries" often facing public.\(^8\) Hence, NGOs function as trustworthy
organizations, essentially resulting from their non-distributional character, which the
public can rely on. The "partnership theory" advanced by Salamon argues that NGOs
do not originate due to conflict or competition with the state, instead they cooperate
with the state, where the latter lacks expertise, and are in turn aided by the state
when they face problems.\(^9\) The theory proposes that a partnership is forged to
secure the best of both sets of organizations, even while avoiding their inherent
problems. These three theories are essentially functionalist in orientation as they
explain the existence of NGOs by reference to their function in relation to the
society.\(^{10}\) A theory that insists on the insufficiency of structural conditions alone to
explain founding of NGOs has been put forward by James.\(^{11}\) This rightly argues for
the important role played by "social entrepreneurs" in this regard. Nevertheless, the
enabling nature of the structure is stressed to the neglect of its constraining
character, limiting the possibility of the theory to explain various circumstances.
Contrary to these, Salamon and Anheier have proposed a "Social Origins" theory,
which emphasizes the social embeddedness of NGOs and the historical
conglomeration of a set of social factors that determine the nature of the NGOs and
their strength in different countries.\(^{12}\) Probably this is the most sophisticated theory
available, but it too suffers from limitations as it does not have any place for agential
action and seeks explanations solely in systemic terms.

Systems theory is employed by many authors to explain the various aspects
of NGO functioning: Land develops a model of social indicators to measure
performance; Aubrey studies the inter-organizational partnership; and Fowler

---

\(^8\) H. B. Hansmann, "Economic Theories of Non-profit Organizations", in W. W. Powell, ed.,
\(^9\) L. S. Salamon, "Partners in Public Service: The Scope and Theory of Government-
Nonprofit Relations", in Powell, ed., _The Non-profit Sector_.
\(^10\) The functionalist tendency is not explicit in the partnership theory, but such a leaning is
evident in its implicit division of societal functions and the advantages of state and NGOs.
\(^11\) E. James, "The Nonprofit Sector in Comparative Perspective", in Powell, ed., _The Non-
profit Sector_.
\(^12\) L. M. Salamon, and H. K. Anheier. "Social Origins of Civil Society: Explaining the Nonprofit
Sector Cross-Nationally", _Working Papers of the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit
conceptualizes the performance of aid chain. These applications conform to the systemic conceptualization of social reality as comprising of inputs, activities, outputs and feedback. Nevertheless, they carry with this the basic limitation of the systems theory, which is not attentive to the politics within the systems whereby the inputs are continuously contested, negotiated, and reformulated into outputs (mostly unintended). Though systemic openness and lack of equilibrium are ideas that offer a broader perspective on NGOs, the mechanistic conception of social reality wherein inputs are automatically converted into outputs is a debilitating limitation.

Henderson utilizes a rational choice institutionalism framework to analyze the growth of civil society in Russia in relation to the western aid. She finds that the extant institutions, interests, and incentive structure inhibited the growth of a vibrant civil society in Russia, as they encourage a certain manner of behaviour from the donors and recipients of aid. Though she maintains that such behaviour was related to the "set of incentives and sanctions", her assumption of self-interested rational actors always ready to take advantage of the situation has inherent limitations for at least two related reasons: first, actors are not always driven by the goal of rational self-interested maximization; and secondly, though the framework might explain the situation in Russia, its applicability across different societies is arguably limited.

The latter point also holds true for DiMaggio's perceptive analysis of the problems and effects of the performance measures, which he argues has more ritualistic than scientific rational purposes. Here he employs the sociological institutionalist framework to emphasize the cultural scripts and templates generated informing the organizational field and thereby ensuring organizational isomorphism and stability. Despite the current emphasis on the "New Policy Agenda", and its determining influence on NGOs, the field is far from homogenous, as evidenced in

15 Ibid., p.140.
17 Robinson, "Governance, Democracy and Conditionality".
the variety of issues raised and increasing popularity of the World Social Forum, its regional incarnations, and other international fora. This only shows that the influence of the structural constraints cannot be taken to be a given and of the same measure always. Rather, we need to realize that there is an appreciable amount of variability in it and has to be seen in relation to agential action.

In their study of transnational advocacy networks, Keck and Sikkink employ the constructivist approach with rationalist elements incorporated into it yielding what they term as "strategic activity of actors in an intersubjectively structured political universe". They adopt this hybrid approach to accommodate the rationalist emphasis on incentives, constraints, strategies, institutions and rules, and the constructivist stress on norms, social relations, and intersubjective understandings arrived at in the interactions. Evidently they want to steer clear of the limitations of adopting either of these approaches exclusively, since their underlying assumptions would considerably limit their study. This notwithstanding, their approach is markedly individualistic, without taking into account the structural conditioning which pre­exists and conditions any such social construction or rational endeavour. It is important to note that the rationalist emphasis on institutions and constraints is in any case a rationalist understanding of them as subject to individual agency, denying the structures any "emergence" and independence.

Bebbington, in his account of indigenous agricultural knowledge and the role of NGOs in this arena, seeks to employ the structuration theory of Giddens. He argues that these "organizations have to be viewed as responding to, and being part of, more structural processes and changes in society", since these wider relations set constraints and conditions for local action and what they can achieve. Hence, he

20 "Emergence" implies the emergent nature of structures, whereby they attain qualities of their own independent of the agential action which it was originally dependent upon. This concept is drawn from the morphogenetic formulation of Archer dealt in detail below.
maintains that we have to essentially "address both the local and the non-local, the spatially present, and the absent but influential". While this approach definitely regards agency as creative and situated, the reference to constraints is merely to the spatial and ignores its temporal component. Consequently, the structures are often reduced to the present since they are constrained only by the actions of the "other people" and their pre-existent constraining character is ignored. This framework cannot explain when the NGOs will be able to engineer social change as it has a reduced notion of the structural limitations which condition the actions of the former.

The above review shows that the problem in NGO studies is two fold. First, for too long it has been confined to the limits of descriptive orientation and secondary-level theoretical enterprises. Second, the extant theoretical underpinnings suffer from various explanatory limitations rendering problematic their applicability across various societal conditions on a comparative scale. This calls for an urgent need for more sophisticated explanatory frameworks that have the ability to answer critics and overcome the inadequacies present in the existing ones based variously on social science theories like structuralism, functionalism, systems theory, constructivism, rational choice theory, etc. Probably this would compel us to shift the terms of the debate currently prevalent in the NGO studies.

In short, the academic debate in NGOs is far from settled. Basic questions and doubts still remain: what are NGOs – voluntary organizations, civil society, independent sector, or third sector? Why do they come into existence? Does their origin lie in state failure, market failure, social entrepreneurship, trustworthiness, religious influence, charity, or societal values? How effectively do they function with respect to – poverty, participation, empowerment etc.? Finally, when can they act as change agents – of their own accord or when conditions permit them? Each of these fundamental issues need to be answered to satisfaction. It is our contention that any plausible framework to address these subjects has to be premised in terms of the structure-agency debate.

Accordingly, this chapter explores the arena of social theorizing to ascertain how various explanatory programmes relate individuals and their actions to the social structures and their influences. The basic intent of this theoretical excursus is to examine the ability of these propositions to explain the empowerment of the poor in

23 Ibid.
24 The terms social structure and structure are interchangeably used here, unless they are employed in a particular connotation by theorists, in which case it has been pointed out.
relation to their structural environment and NGO efforts to empower them. The central argument advanced here is that to understand these phenomena any reasonable explanatory proposition should account for the fundamental components of social reality – structures and agents – their interaction and variability in any given situation, without rendering either of them epiphenomenal.

The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section seeks to establish the necessity and appropriateness of exploring the problem of ‘structure and agency’ to arrive at a plausible explanatory framework to study NGOs and empowerment. The second section examines the major frameworks in social sciences to delineate the various standpoints on the ‘problem’. The ‘problem’ will be approached from the perspective of three distinct approaches – methodological holism, methodological individualism, and methodological situationalism. The third section analyzes various attempts to go beyond this unhealthy strict dualism of structure and agency (or triad when situation is included) and their claims to offer alternative frameworks of analysis. The focus will be on the theoretical synthesis proposed by New Institutionals, and the duality of structure and agency suggested in the writings of Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, and Bob Jessop. It is argued that while these alternatives definitely offer a more sophisticated understanding of social reality by not rendering structure and/or agency epiphenomenal; nonetheless, they too have limitations in offering a plausible explanatory framework to study the phenomenon of empowerment because of their problematic ontological assumptions. The fourth section will review the alternatives proposed by Habermas, Mouzelis and Archer from a broadly dualist platform and evaluate the usefulness of their propositions to the study of NGOs and empowerment. Areas where the Morphogenetic approach of Archer provides an advance over the other existing alternatives, and the characteristics that give it a distinct advantage over the latter in explaining social change, are explained. In the final section, a framework which accounts for both structures and agents and their relationships and variability under differing circumstances, is proposed. The framework suggests that multiple-relational levels of structures and agents are involved in the functioning of NGOs and their efforts to empower the poor. For the purpose of this study, at least two levels of agents – NGOs and the poor women – and their respective structural conditions are identified.

\[\text{Ontology is the enquiry into the nature of the beings and their existence.}\]
1.1 Relevance of the Problem of 'Structure and Agency'

How is the problem of 'structure and agency', a primary preoccupation of philosophers and at best of those concerned social scientists, related to the apparently empirical concern of this study – NGOs and empowerment of poor? It is the fundamental assertion of this study that NGOs as social agents, and the process of empowerment furthered by them, have to be essentially understood in terms of the 'problem', contrary to those readily inclined to characterize NGOs as either free-willed saviours or admonish their institutional supineness. Accordingly, it is maintained that a theoretically informed account, similar to the one proposed here, would help us to arrive at a better understanding of the NGOs and critically appreciate them as a social phenomena. The relevance of the problem of 'structure and agency' to us is reinforced by the following reasons: the basic nature of social reality, its immanence in everyday human existence, centrality to all enquiries on society, essential manifestation as a problem of power, subordination and powerlessness of the poor, and the social embeddedness of NGOs.

The complex and comprehensive nature of the 'problem' derives from the uniqueness of social reality, i.e., the society. Significantly different from the natural and transcendental realities, the social reality is humanly constituted, alterable and depends on human beings for its very existence, since it lacks any absolute form or a favoured state of its own. The nature of society at any point of time in history is dependent and a reflection of the human activities and its consequences. But, having come into existence, society in turn evidently constitutes its components, i.e. human beings, in one way or another. Society enables and constrains what the humans do in their capacity as social agents. This influence notwithstanding, humans are not merely social automatons; rather, the feeling of freedom is an inalienable part of the human condition. The idea of humans as 'sovereign artificers' responsible for their own destinies and capable of remaking the social environment to befit their capacities, has not only found a following among philosophers, but has been an intrinsic part of human thinking and everyday experience. This gives rise to the question whether humans are the creators or creatures of society and the accompanying ambivalence. This ambivalence where "(W)e are simultaneously free and constrained and we also have some awareness of it"\(^{26}\) is a real and defining feature of the social existence. Given this fundamentally dynamic nature of the

society, where humans are simultaneously the creators and the created, the natural question of interest is – when do humans influence the society; and conversely, when are they influenced by society? An answer to this question essentially involves statements about the relationship between social structure and human agency and has deep implications for the understanding of NGOs and empowerment of poor.

Following from this, the everyday existence of human beings is inextricably entwined with the structure-agency problem. The feeling of creative freedom and helplessness is part of daily life for any given individual. Even those who are dominant are not free from this ambivalence, which manifests both in human reflections on action and in actions themselves. Archer affirms by that the issue is of everyday practical experience and not merely one for philosophers and social scientists to savour,

For it is part and parcel of daily experience to feel both free and enchained, capable of shaping our own future and yet confronted by towering, seemingly impersonal constraints. Those whose reflection leads them to reject the grandiose delusion of being puppet-masters but also to resist the supine conclusion that they are mere marionettes then have the same task of reconciling this experiential bivalence, and must do so if their moral choice is not to become inert or their political action ineffectual. Consequently, in facing-up to the 'problem of structure and agency' social theorists are not just addressing crucial technical problems in the study of society, they are also confronting the most pressing social problem of the human condition.27

Hence, it is not a problem confined to those explicitly studying society, but an inescapable part of our social condition confronting us every day compelling us to be aware of the constraints, sanctions and restrictions on our varied ambitions.28

The essentially social character of humans ensures that this problem retains its character and significance. Naturally, the social sciences, committed to study society and its human components have been irresistibly preoccupied with this problem. Here, the anxiety to discover order out of the chaotic 'war of all against all' strengthening the social, and conversely the unflinching support to human fecundity have ensured the liveliness of the debate on whether social structure determines human action or human action determines social structure? Naturally, all accounts of society carry at least an implicit reference to this question irrespective of their inclination or comfort to do so. It is argued and will be confirmed in the following theoretical exposition that this 'problem' is inescapable for any reasonable account of

27 Ibid., p.65.
28 Ibid., p.1.
social science and there is no reason for us to avoid it. On the contrary, we have other compelling reasons to conceive it as the vital foundation of this study.

It is a basic contention of this study that the theme of power lies at the heart of the 'problem'. Giddens writes approvingly:

'Power', along with 'agency' and 'structure', is an elementary concept in social science. To be human is to be an agent – although not all agents are human – and to be an agent is to have power. 'Power' in this highly generalized sense means 'transformative capacity', the capability to intervene in a given set of events so as in some way to change them. The logical connection between agency and power is of the first importance for social theory... (emphases added).

Naturally, for a study committed to understand empowerment and by implication power relations, the elements of structure and agency assume inevitable and foundational import. Simply stated the issue is, which of the two – structure or agency – has the power to determine the other? Empowerment is essentially a matter of progressively increasing the agential capabilities of the poor to tackle, transform, change and overcome the variously disempowering structural conditions they inhabit. Despite the asymmetrical distribution of resources and power structures, power is not to be seen as something 'given' which the agents inherit or possess. Instead, it is contended that power should be viewed in relational and realizational terms. The prevalent distributional structures are to be seen as potential power, and not as something that is already and ever-realized. Hence, the dynamic process of empowerment should be seen as an outcome of the interaction between the differentially enabling and constraining social structures, and a creative and indeterminate agency.

Furthermore, this is reinforced by our endeavour to understand the agential power of the poor. The poor as a 'category' experience the adverse effects of powerlessness, which is in no small measure due to the exploitative character of the dominant structures. Any enquiry into the empowerment of poor is necessarily juxtaposed against these social structures and has to address the 'problem' of agential capabilities of the poor in relation to the structures.

Finally, our primary purpose to understand the possibilities of NGOs to empower the poor makes the structure-agency problem one of critical importance to us. We argue that given the socially embedded character of NGOs any analysis of their claims and opportunities needs to be placed within the reality of constraints and

possibilities posed by the existing social structures. Here NGOs are seen as social agents who are committed to effecting change in the prevalent structures in the process of empowering the poor. Empowerment is distinctly a process with multiple levels, each having a significant influence for the other – we can talk in terms of empowering the individual poor, a household, a grassroots organization, a community, an NGO, a donor and possibly even a state (in its capacity as an actor). It is our argument that at all these levels the issue has to be essentially conceived in the form of the structure-agency problem, with merely the agents and structures changing at each level, depending upon the focus of the enquiry.

The significance of accounting for both structure and agency in the empowerment process can hardly be overemphasized. It follows from the essential nature of society and the recognition of four interrelated assertions. First, empowerment does not take place in a vacuum. The social world is replete with structures of dominance, which contain in them the basis for powerlessness or disempowerment, and there are people who being in an advantageous position have a considerable stake in the maintenance of these structures in their present form. Consequently, any effort to alter this status quo is bound to attract attention and response from the privileged. It is our contention that empowerment has to be located at this point of interaction of the powerless with the powerful structures and individuals, each essentially arrayed on the opposite side of the power divide.

Deriving from this, secondly, the diversity of actors involved and their interests need to be taken into account. When NGOs enter the scenario to empower the poor, this means in all probability the involvement of several other actors, each with distinct interests and stakes in the process – state officials at various levels of governance and donors of varied hues, in addition to those who are to be empowered and the local population. All these actors have a particular position in the existing structure and have to be viewed from that vantage point. Any explanatory framework should necessarily give scope to and account for all these various actors and their relationships. This means that explanations should not be limited merely to the relationships among different actors or the interaction of actors with the structures, but should rather include both.

Third, when we talk in terms of agents or structures, the reference naturally presupposes the existence and interaction of each with the other – structure with the agents and agents with structures. Since empowerment has to be essentially located in their interaction, it is only pertinent that explanations include and give a full
account of them avoiding the reduction of one to the other. The issue here is not about the (mere) inclusion or exclusion of structure and agency in explanations, for even the structuralist reification of structures and individualist reductionism respectively suggest representations of agents and structure, however passive and subordinated they are; rather, it is about the terms of their inclusion.\textsuperscript{30} Stated differently, our concern is/should not be limited to the inclusion or exclusion of structures and agents, as essential elements of explanations but should necessarily extend to attribute full play to each of them in their interaction.\textsuperscript{31}

Finally, it is a feature of social reality that neither the structures nor the human agents exercise temporally unlimited power over the other and to the total exclusion of the other. This essential social indeterminacy entails that explanations necessarily allow for diverse patterns of interaction involving both, namely, \textit{weak structure-strong agency and strong structure-weak agency}.\textsuperscript{32} The fundamental argument of this chapter is that the explanatory framework on empowerment should essentially account for this social variability and give scope to the full play of both the fundamental elements of social world – structure and agency, and accommodate the transformative capabilities of human agents even while recognizing the limits imposed by the structures.

In other words, the basic contention is that neither structure nor agency should be seen merely as effects of the other. Instead, it is proposed that the framework should cater to the \textit{variable interplay} between them. Explanations should also eschew simple reductionism of three varieties. First, human agents should not be seen as mere economic or social animals; the fact that their thoughts and actions are propelled by a variety of reasons, including important ones like emotions and affectivities should be recognized. Second, structures should similarly be understood in all their complexity, rather than by privileging one structural element as the determinant of all social happenings on all occasions. Third, neither structure nor agency should be rendered epiphenomenal in comparison to the other.


\textsuperscript{31} Following this wherever we talk of exclusion of structure or agency, we positively imply the terms of their exclusion or inclusion in explanations, and the stress is on giving them more active representation.

\textsuperscript{32} This does not mean that only these two possibilities exist in social world. On the converse, these should be construed as two distinct extremes in a continuum, with the structure and agency in the polar positions.
The basic questions of concern remain the same: do social structures influence and constrain actions or do actions produce and reproduce these structures? And following this, how and when are such influences exercised? These give rise to three broad sets of questions concerning social agency in the context of our study. One pertains to the NGOs themselves and the other to the agential capabilities of the rural poor who are in association with the NGOs and finally the nature of the relationship between the NGOs and the poor they seek to empower. How are we to approach the NGOs as active agents in the society? Are the NGOs capable of acting as independent agents? How much of independent ‘agency’ do NGOs have to achieve their set aims and objectives? What are the factors that enhance and inhibit their agential capabilities? Do the poor have agential capabilities or are they entrammelled by the structures they encounter in their lives? Is it possible for NGOs to enhance the abilities of the poor to actively engage themselves to bring about favourable changes in such disempowering structures? What effects do the relationship between the NGOs, who are normally the ‘service-givers’, and the rural poor, who happen to be the ‘beneficiaries’, have on the general objective of empowerment? The answers to these questions are significant if we are to understand the empowerment process as such, and the role of NGOs and the rural poor in it. Any framework that does not answer, or skirts, these issues cannot sufficiently explain the intricacies of the empowerment process. Consequently, the adequacy in terms of suitability and adaptability of the theoretical offerings in place is examined, their shortcomings identified and plausible alternatives sought.

A caveat has to be entered as the following discussion is heavily influenced by the theoretical developments in sociology because, with the exception of philosophy, this problem has been most explicitly stated and dealt within its disciplinary confines. It is our contention that this debate is as crucial to any aspect of politics as it is to the other facets of life, and the neglect of this has stymied theoretical advancements in political science, where the systems approach and rational choice approaches, polarizing towards structure and agency respectively, have been dominant. It is vital to go beyond the limited ontological assumptions which underlie these theories to arrive at more complex explanations of social phenomena. These theories at best provide a partial explanation of social life and fail to account for the complexities resulting in a mammoth unexplained et cetera.
1.2 Approaches to the 'Problem' in Social Sciences

'Society' is the focal point of various approaches in social science. Even while they cohere on this, there remains considerable disagreement as to the nature of society. Naturally, questions of ontological import have come to occupy a place of fundamental significance – what does society consist of, and what is the relation between individual and society? To rephrase this in terms of the structure-agency problem – is society simply the sum of the actions of individuals, or does society exist independently of individuals? This has remained a foundational question for the various approaches in social science, though explicitly dealt with only in few. Even in those instances where the ontological issue was left largely unattended there were implicit ontological commitments that dictated the nature of the specific theoretical and methodological formulations. Hence, following Archer and Giddens, we contended that issues of ontology occupy greater significance in the structure-agency problem. In other words, the conception of the nature of social reality directs and delimits the course of enquiry differently. When we undertake to study the process of empowerment, which involves both these elements and their interaction, it is of considerable import whether we ontologically conceive NGOs and poor women as free-willed agents who can alter the structural conditions at will or as mere puppets of the structural conditions in which they are ingrained.

This section considers some of the dominant trends in social science and analyzes their perspectives on social reality. We would desist from restating the well-known general positions and ensuing criticisms of these various frameworks, and instead confine ourselves to their stand vis-à-vis the 'problem'. The intention here is to examine the tenability of these frameworks to provide an explanation of the social reality and the relationship between its two primary constituents. To state the argument better and with clarity, we would proceed to study them as methodological versions of holism, individualism; and the purportedly 'middle path' of situationalism, respectively representing the various positions of structure, agency and the situation.

1.2.1 Methodological Holism

Holism signifies any approach that accounts for individual agents in terms of some larger structure. In its extreme version this approach maintains that social reality can be understood solely in terms of structures, without any reference to individuals,

since social structures were independent of and influenced the individuals. The holist contends that these social structures have distinct aims and interests, and at the same time denies any such autonomous aims and interests to the individual. Holists denude the individual of any innate substance, leaving him/her as nothing but "indeterminate material that the social factor moulds and transforms". They bundle the personal properties of individuals into the 'structure' in the form of "collective conscience", reducing the former in effect to mere social predicates. The holists dismiss the contention that society can only be humanly constituted, and it is therefore reducible to its components (see figure 1.1). They contend that social structures are irreducible to their individual constituents. The argument is to not treat society as a "mere sum of individuals. Rather, the system formed by their association represents a specific reality which has its own characteristics". So we have "social facts" as distinct entities "general throughout a given society, while existing in its own right, independent of its individual manifestations (emphases added) above and beyond "psychological facts" about individuals or aggregates of individuals. Hence, Durkheim implores us to consider social facts as "things" and proposes that the autonomy of "social facts" and the interrelated character of the social whole establish an anti-reductive methodology in the social sciences.

How then should we construe the relationship of these structures with the individuals? The holists contend that the structures exercise a constraining influence on the individuals. Thus, for Durkheim "social fact" is "every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising over the individual an external constraint." Hence, holists insist on objective social forces and "collective consciousness" as an unobservable "thing", which dictated the consciousness of each individual agent.

As the 'society' denotes an irreducible totality independent of human agency, an anti-reductionist explanatory programme is envisioned - a "social fact" can be explained only by reference to another "social fact". Accordingly, social structures are configured as real and concrete entities, independent and severely constraining individuals who lack any innate qualities or influence on these structures. Holists,

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., ch.2.
37 He defines "social facts" in two ways: by their relation to individual actions and by their generality among all members of a social group.
39 Ibid., ch.2.
40 Ibid., ch.5.
with their strong ontological inclination to see society as structurally determined, explain social phenomena in terms of the underlying laws, forces and mechanisms, and render humans as passive automatons. Their position in the structure-agency conundrum is explicit — a strict dualism, denial of human agency and reduction of everything human to effect of structures. As a result, structures and their *sui generis* properties alone are considered variables of explanation and hence, the object of social enquiry. Consequently, social theories have been advanced in exclusively holistic terms and without reference to individual human motivation, which in effect preclude any possibility of sophisticated explanations. We can identify at least three distinct theories which pursue the holist path — Orthodox and Structuralist Marxism, Functionalism and the Systems theory.

Orthodox Marxism based essentially on the writings of Karl Marx\(^\text{41}\) conceived society in terms of relations of production as its "real foundation" and a legal and political "superstructure" built over it devoid of human aspirations. Marx acknowledges that society is constituted by the "life-process" of "definite individuals under definite relations of production". Though activity-dependent, society is not a conscious construction of humans as it "appear(s) in their own or other people's imagination". On the contrary, it evolves out of individuals "as they *really* are; i.e., as they operate, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will".\(^\text{42}\) The notions of "contradiction" and "conflict" occupy central position in Marx's analysis of change.\(^\text{43}\) This conceptualization fails to account for human interests, emotions, motives and activities, and instead treats them as structural dopes or dupes. By explaining change without any human intervention and alteration, it produces a teleological history. Even for material conditions to exist and revolutions to happen there has to be a human agency which analyzes and acts on the circumstances. Moreover, the narrow conception of humans as class animals is problematic — human interests cannot be limited to class perception alone and there are a significantly large number

\(^{41}\) In his later writings Marx exhibits an overtly structuralist conception of social change. Commentators on Marx have found temporal difference in the writings of a young and mature Marx, which has been characterized as "epistemological break" by Althusser.


\(^{43}\) K. Marx, "Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy", in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, vol.1, pp.503-04. The notion of contradiction receives more attention from Marx in *Capital* and *Grundrisse*. Marx primarily emphasized the contradiction which existed within the "real foundations" of the society.
of indeterminate affectivities. The economic determinism of Marx also leads to a limited concept of structure, wherein all structural elements are reduced to, and determined by, economic structures. Orthodox Marxism undermines both the structure and agency with its limited conceptualization, and further denies agency to individuals by rendering them structurally determined.

Contrary to Marx, Althusser proposes that "superstructural" elements can be as important, if not more important than those of the economic substructure. This effectively produces a "multi-causal theory of history", which rejects any concept of historical necessity or predetermination in the social process. But the agency granted to non-economic structures is denied to humans. Social change, for Althusser, depends upon the type and extent of "contradictions" in the social formation. The agency for change is found only in the interrelationship of particular contradictions at a given point in time which surface as perceptible socio-economic crises. Accordingly, revolution depends upon particular conjunctions of "contradictions" and "overdetermination" rather than on human agency. He even argues that the Marxian concept of the "dialectic" represents a "process without a subject". Structuralist Marxism locates change within the structural elements of societies and is evidently 'anti-humanist' as individuals are treated as social material - as passive "bearers" - that performs its designated social function. Structuralist Marxism thus totally ignores and denies any agency for humans in the making and unmaking of social reality.

Though starkly differing from the Marxist theories in its commitment to social change, functionalism exhibits the same ontological deception of denying human agency. The basic contention of the functionalists is that all social parts belong to social wholes, and the former relate to each other in ways that contribute to the activity of the whole. Parsons conceptualized individuals as 'actors' who were free to make choices about desired ends and adopt the means to achieve them. He saw the necessary presence of a "normative" element in the society which essentially "de-

46 Ibid., pp.88-116.
47 Callinicos defines "overdetermination" as "the idea of a structure whose complexity, the mutual distinctness and interdependence of its elements, is expressed through the way in which the economy displaces the dominant role within the structure to a particular instance, organizing the other instances in terms of this structure in dominance". A. Callinicos, Althusser's Marxism, London: Pluto Press, 1976, p.51.
48 Althusser, For Marx, p.112.
randomizes" individual choice, constrains freedom and integrates the members in favor of social order. The result is the socially provided values which structured and socialized individual motives to ensure social stability, and the individual conforming to these social norms in all his/her actions. Parsonian social theory, though it has a "voluntaristic" intent, ultimately provides a deterministic content due to its overemphasis on the integration of functioning social orders and the relations between the parts of any society. The result is an over-integrated vision of society. Shorn of all their autonomy, individuals are conceived of in solely norm-obeying terms, severely limiting their varied and indeterminate behaviour even within a unified culture. Norms being more or less uniform in any given society, in the final analysis, we end up with normative human clones. Thus, in functionalist conception, societies are seen as entities with "self-forming", "self-regulating" processes, with humans providing the essential energy when they fulfil the expectations of the given social roles. Individuals are attributed agency only to the extent that they are the "representatives" of the "allocated" social roles and positions, without any agency in the formation of social expectations. Interactions amongst reflexive, cognitive actors become norm-determined function in social systems. In proposing "end-seeking systems" any possibility for the explanation to account for human agency is definitely foreclosed. Parsons' view of norms as the causes of social action renders individuals as passive and does not account for the relation between human cognition and action, limiting them to mere aspects of normative behaviour. Thus, it fails to accommodate the reflexive character of human beings and the fact that actors themselves sometimes intelligibly produce social order.

In contrast to the closed system conception of functionalism, systems theory, offers a more sophisticated approach with its emphasis on the fundamentally open nature of systems. All social phenomena are conceptualized as a system of input, throughput, output and feedback functioning in an environment that provided the 'energy' required by the system. Its emphasis on the indefinite and relatively complex nature of systems is a definite theoretical advance. Nonetheless, systems

50 Layder writes that in Parsons' conception, "people passively assimilate the rules and roles that they have been socialized into and unthinkingly behave in accordance with the established cultural guidelines. People's own reasons, accounts, justifications, and so on, play no part". D. Layder, Understanding Social Theory, London: Sage, 1994, p. 22.
theory too fails to offer a wholesome explanatory framework, with its stress on the systems, subsystems and their environment. Human agency is not accounted for, since it resorts to restrictive explanation centred on the system, which forms the basic unit of analysis in this theory. The theory fails to recognize that it is the human agent who converts the inputs into outputs exercising specific independent judgements in the process. Given that all social activities are ultimately dependent on human decisions – both as individuals or groups of individuals, the failure to build in more realistic assumptions about how humans influence system behaviour is a serious shortcoming of this theory. Systems are conceived to be inanimate entities capable of acting on their own, resulting in systemic reification.\textsuperscript{52} While it does well to look above and relate to the environment, it grossly falters in failing to relate to the human agents who inhabit the systems. Though the relationship between system and environment is seen as one of mutual influence, systems are cast in a responding role, only acting on the input from the environment and at best sending a feedback. The emphasis is upon the environment acting upon the system rather than the other way around. More significantly, the activities which occur within the system – in the process of the conversion of inputs into outputs – and are fundamentally dependent on human activity are ignored. In effect, the functioning of the system is conceived to be an \textit{automatic} process independent of any human agency.\textsuperscript{53}

Their internal differences and theoretical thrust notwithstanding, these perspectives, which have had a significant influence on the development of social science, share a common holist orientation to the structure-agency problem. All of them try to explain social phenomena in terms of structures to the exclusion of the role of human agency. If we consider the structures to be independent from all human intentions at all times, then these structures automatically cease to be \textit{social} in all respects. Such a move would only demote social structures to the level of appreciably rigid physical structures and natural forces, effectively denying us any opportunity to appreciate the differences between them, and defeat any attempt at useful social analysis. At this stage of our discussion, it is essential to reiterate our argument that mere inclusion of agents in an explanation is not enough – it is rather the terms of their inclusion and the nature of their interaction with the structures,

\textsuperscript{52} Hindess points out to the explanatory "fantasy" of attributing agency to the collectives, since the latter cannot take decisions and act on them. See B. Hindess, \textit{Political Choice and Social Structure: An Analysis of Actors, Interests and Rationality}, Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1989, ch.5.

which are important. To explicate this contention, let us reserve our final opinion on
the holist position for now and devote some attention to Winchian sociology.

Winch belongs to the hermeneutics tradition and affirms that all practices are
necessarily rule-governed.\textsuperscript{54} He claims that meaningful action is "\textit{ipso facto} rule-
governed" and in this context advances the "concept of the social": the public
character of following a rule. The rule-governed character of action shows that ideas
are constitutive of the relations between persons in which they are expressed. In a
way Winch restates Parsons' argument, whereby social norms cover all social
situations and are exhaustive in their regulation rendering actors as creatures of
norms, provided that they are fully obedient. This account fails to account for the
ability of the individual agents to negotiate and renegotiate such conventions, even
while remaining subject to the normative demands of social life. Even if we accept
the contention that the norms as rules of the game ought to be followed by agents,
it fails to account for change in the norms and does not tell us how these norms
change; and if it accepts that individuals do change norms, it fails to tell us when
they exercise their agency to change these norms. The basic flaw is not in the
suggestion of rule-governed behaviour, but in the assumption that all actions of all
individuals are on all occasions \textit{determined} by rules. It is this rigid conception of
rules, denying the indeterminacy involved in rule-following, which denies scope for
not so insignificant human agency, when people do not follow rules or use them
strategically,\textsuperscript{55} which pushes Winch distinctly towards the holist position. In short, all
human actions cannot be explained or reduced to rules, which as interactionists tell
us, are flexible, negotiable and subject to expectations.

To reiterate the difficulties with the holist approach to structure-agency
problem, they tend to prioritize structure over human agency, posit a remote
structure absolutely independent of human will, refuse to allow any autonomous
human agency and subordinate all facets of human life to the determination by
structures. As a result all their explanations start and end in structures, with
negligible or no reference to human agency and potential. Structures, be they the
Marxist "real foundation" and "superstructure", or functionalist "norms" and "self-
generating" systems, or the "systems" of the systems theory, are treated as beyond

\textsuperscript{54} P. Winch, \textit{The Idea of Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy}, London: Routledge

\textsuperscript{55} A. McIntyre, "The Intelligibility of Action", cited in J. Bohman, \textit{New Philosophy of Social
human control, existing and functioning independent of human agency. They (except Winch) to a large extent refuse to acknowledge the effectively activity-dependent character of structures. At least in the first two the individual is treated as structural dopes and dupes, devoid of any autonomy; he/she finds no place in systems theory and is subjugated to "rules" by Winch. Structures may be dominant and influential on certain occasions, but individuals have a large scope of indeterminate space to manoeuvre. It is essential to recognize the complexity involved and acknowledge the vitality of allowing for those occasions when the human agency 'asserts' itself against these constraining structures.

The psychological aspects of human behaviour are also rendered insignificant. Their intentions and motives, affectivities and emotions find no place in the explanations, and are unceremoniously subordinated to the 'triumphant' structures. The teleology inherent in some of these accounts disallows human cognition, reflexivity and the room for manoeuvre as aspects worthy of consideration in explanations. Holist approaches fail by holding individuals to be "indeterminate material", unilaterally moulded by society with complete monopoly over causation, and operating in a unilateral and downward manner. As Archer complains, in this mode of theorizing, the solution of the 'problem' consists in rendering the agency epiphenomenal. This neglect of human agency in favour of structures means that these theories can at best offer partial explanations of the empowerment process, for they surrender the agential power in essence and fail to account for it. Here empowerment can only be seen as a top-down one-way process, with the structures distributing power and individuals with no capacity to alter it. Adopting the other extreme stand, some theories seek to explain social reality solely in terms of human agency with their individualistic approach, and will rightly concern us next.

1.2.2 Methodological Individualism

Methodological Individualism connotes any approach that accounts for structures in terms of individual agents. A staunch individualist maintains that all that exists in the social world can be practically reduced to individuals, "all social phenomena – their structure and their change – are in principle explicable in ways that only involves individuals – their properties, their goals, their beliefs and their actions". Social reality is construed as composed only of individuals in their capacity as its sole and

---

56 Archer, Realist Social Theory, pp.33-64.
ultimate constituents, and their makings. Hence, the existence of any structures independent of individuals is denied. The ontological basis of individualism, is the assumption that society is "not some unimagined sort of organism, but really consists only of people who behave fairly intelligibly and who influence each other directly and mediatel, in fairly comprehensible ways" (emphasis added).\textsuperscript{58}

Individuals, in their capacity as the ultimate constituents of the social world, are seen to "act more or less appropriately in the light of their dispositions and understanding of their situation".\textsuperscript{59} Here the individual and his/her dispositions assume importance for they alone are granted a 'real' existence. They are considered to be prior to any social structures – the latter coming into existence only as a result of individuals’ activities. Emphasizing the individuals and their activities, this approach eschews any reference to the existence of any structure independent of and above the individuals, and on the contrary dismisses any such attempt as nothing but hypostatization. Thus, the Individualists contend that in relation to people, social structure is not: autonomous or independent, pre-existent or causally efficacious.\textsuperscript{60} The structures cannot have their own aims or interests, which are not primarily the aims or interests of some of its specific components, i.e. individuals. Individuals alone, in their personal or representative capacity, have interests and aims; and social structures may have these only in and through them. In short, social structures have no life of their own (see figure 1.2).

Consequently, all social process is considered as a series of individual actions linked by beliefs more or less commonly shared by the individuals concerned: "There are no societies, only individuals who interact with one another."\textsuperscript{61} Even if the individualist admits that to explain human actions one must take account of the structures involved, they contend that these structures are not material substances, which are present out there or 'given'. For an individualist, social structures are at best "quasi-permanent systems of situations", as they are essentially human creations – created by human dispositions, anticipations, actions, and the like.\textsuperscript{62} Hence, when the individualist does not outrightly dismiss social structures, he/she

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{60} Archer, \textit{Realist Social Theory}, pp.42-46.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Chattopadhyaya, \textit{Individuals and Societies}, p.3.
\end{itemize}
tries to explain it in terms of their individual components and outcomes of their interrelations. Any reference to the social context becomes in actuality an allusion to the "other people".

...the social environment by which any particular individual is confronted and frustrated and sometimes manipulated and occasionally destroyed is, if we ignore its physical ingredients, made up of other people, their habits, inertia, loyalties, rivalries and so on.63

The actions of the individuals are determined by the significance which they themselves and others concerned attribute to those actions. Hence, social phenomena have to be necessarily understood through the "fixed laws" of human nature.64 If society is an aggregate, then however complex, it can be understood only by a process of disaggregation, and explanation therefore consists in reduction. This results in the methodological assertion that all social phenomena be analyzed in terms of the interests, activities, etc., of individual human beings, since ultimately only individuals are responsible, purposive human actors. For instance, Elster insists that, "The elementary unit of social life is the individual human action. To explain social institutions and social change is to show how they arise as the result of the action and interaction of individuals."65 As in methodological holism, a strict dualism is evident, only this time it is the turn of structure to be ignored and reduced, by explaining all social phenomena in terms of individuals and their actions.

The theory that exemplifies this individualist position best is that based on the idea of individual rational choice. This theory is fundamentally based on the assumption of a self-interested rational individual who has a set of fully ordered preferences, complete information on them and the ability of perfect calculation to arrive at decisions aimed at maximizing his/her benefits.66 Based on this conception of homo economicus it is insisted that actions always result from the desires and beliefs of the agent and not from any external cause such as social structures.67 Therefore, it attempts to explain all social phenomena in terms of individual agent's

63 Watkins, "Methodological Individualism and Social Tendencies", p.278.
64 Mill, A System of Logic, cited in Hollis, The Philosophy of Social Science, p.12. Contrary to Mill's emphasis on the existing laws to be discovered, other theorists belonging to the action-oriented stream stressed on meaning.
67 The same assumptions underlie game theory, which concerns itself with rational choice-making in situations of strategic interdependence between actors. Hence, our discussion extends to game theory too.
choice of the best means available, given one's beliefs, desires and utility maximization. Though parsimonious and logical, this theory runs into problems when faced with explanations of slightly complex situations, and has attracted much criticism.\(^{68}\) It prefers to explain all phenomena as consequences of rational maximizing individual action and denies the existence of any constraining structure, which limits such an action. Is this inclination to ignore the structures sustainable?

The theory does not concern itself with the origin of preferences, what they are, and the rationality of their ends. This is where the structure-agency problem becomes relevant, for any reference to the origin of preferences necessarily entails some social structure in positions and roles. Similarly, any reference to the character and outcome of choices automatically leads to doubts about the appropriateness of regarding all actions as exclusively rational. It is a truism that all individuals do not have the same preferences. Then how can we account for the differences? Rational choice theory does not consider this question: it takes the preferences as 'given' and is only interested in maximizing the realization of them. Evidently, this can only at best be a partial explanation. For, any further enquiry into preferences has to necessarily include references to roles and positions – as social structures – which the homo economicus inhabits. The reason for this is the conditioning effect structures have on these preferences. Choices that seem inferior when considered in abstraction from social positions can become entirely rational if one relates preferences to roles. This points to the significance of norms. The rationality of all actions and outcomes is also a problematic assumption since it fails to account for elements like affectivities, non-rationality, and bounded rationality, which play as significant a part in individuals' intentions and actions if not more than rationality.\(^{69}\)

The theory also does not allow for the existence of any norms independent of individuals, since that would amount to acknowledging the existence of constraining structures. Hence, it either resorts to the idea that, norms are generated as solutions to problems in game situations involving repeated interaction,\(^{70}\) or treats them as part of individual preferences. When norms do find a place in the analysis it is more as generative of costs and benefits figuring alongside other incentives. But, this fails

---

\(^{68}\) For example, see, Hindess, *Political Choice and Social Structure*, ch.2, 6 and 8.


to account for the problem of free-riders and situations of conflicting interests, which necessitate the existence of a "meta-norm" system.\textsuperscript{71} Rational choice analysis, indeed, fails to provide us with any explanations of instances which necessitate the inclusion of a constraining structure or where actions are not based on avowed rationality. But, will the \textit{mere} inclusion of structures in such an individualist account result in more robust explanations? An analysis of Weberian action theory tells us not. Weber's conceptualization of action is certainly more reflective of social reality. His approach is distinctly individualist as evident in his notion of action, though he interprets social phenomena from the actor’s perspective laying greater stress on meaning. He differentiates between individual and social action.\textsuperscript{72} And, more importantly, following this, he delineates four ideal-types of action – instrumental-rational (\textit{zweckrational}), value-rational (\textit{wertrational}), ‘traditional’, and ‘affective’ action.\textsuperscript{73} Though, he offers a sophisticated action theory where norms, tradition and affectivity play a significant part, his inclination to explain all social phenomena in terms of individual's perspective, ontologically, an individualist position, denies the effective limitations imposed by structures on the free-willed action of individuals and there seems to be more emphasis on the instrumentally-rational actor to the neglect of the other aspects. Hence, the mere inclusion of aspects of structures within the individualist approach, in our contention, fails to fare any better than the 'pure' individualist solution to the structure-agency problem. The problem, it needs to be reiterated, is not merely with the inclusion of structures, rather the issue is about the \textit{terms of inclusion}, wherein the varied influence of structures on individuals in their dynamic interaction is acknowledged. It is also our contention that the ontology of methodological individualism does not permit such a possibility.

This inadequacy stems from their basic ontological assumption that social reality is constituted \textit{only} by individuals, their dispositions and interrelationships; and a concurrent denial of the independent existence and influence of structures on individuals. This individualist position, though it fixates social analysis on the individuals, runs into difficulties when faced with the complexity of social phenomena. Reliance on an empiricist epistemology, and thereby on sense perception, renders the individualist emphasis on the individual's dispositions

\textsuperscript{71} R. Axelrod, "An Evolutionary Approach to Norms", \textit{American Political Science Review}, vol.80, pp.1095-1111.
\textsuperscript{73} These are pure types of action, whereas most everyday actions, according to Weber are of mixed type.
problematic, for the individual's dispositions are no simpler than that of a complex organization nor are they easily understood, in addition to most of them being non-observable.\textsuperscript{74} The possibility that structures may exercise a constraining influence on the individual, casting the latter as a dependent variable in explanations, is precluded by the individualist position of prioritizing the individual and his/her dispositions as \textit{a priori} to all structures.\textsuperscript{75} In fact, most of these dispositions can be identified and become meaningful only if the social context is taken into account. In addition, when we talk in terms of anonymous people it would be difficult to account for all their dispositions, and in such instances we can only define them with respect to social context and their social role/position.\textsuperscript{76}

Responding to such problems, the individualist indeed 'softens' his/her ontological rigidity. For example, Watkins admits that the "rock-bottom explanations" about individuals are neither solely individual nor solely dispositional and instead they include "statements about the dispositions, beliefs, resources and interrelations of individuals" as well as their "situations...physical resources and environment".\textsuperscript{77} Nonetheless, this ontological shift does not render the individualist position any more tenable, and in effect makes it more problematic. The individualist emphasis is retained here, but everything that is characteristically non-individual is superficially subsumed within the ontologically bloated individual, with the effect that the individual is denied his/her personality. Even such a move fails to account for all the structural elements, for instance role relations.\textsuperscript{78} The individualist attempt to define social structures merely as effects of the activities of "other people", as evident in Watkins' statement above, does not solve the problem either. All aspects of social reality, though they are activity-dependent, cannot be positively reduced to the activities of people, past and present. When one considers, the various roles and positions in society, they pre-exist and are autonomous from the occupants once they are created, and more often than not condition their activities. Hence, social phenomena can only be ill reduced to the activities of contemporary free-willed agents. Despite these difficulties, methodological individualism retains its problematic ontological stance within the structure-agency debate, thereby denying the due for

\textsuperscript{75} E. Gellner, "Holism versus Individualism", in Brodbeck, ed., \textit{Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences}, p.260.
\textsuperscript{76} Archer, \textit{Realist Social Theory}, p.37.
\textsuperscript{77} Watkins, "Methodological Individualism and Social Tendencies", pp. 270-1.
\textsuperscript{78} Archer, \textit{Realist Social Theory}, pp.37-8.
structures in explanations of social phenomena. A methodological approach that advances claims to having effectively 'linked' the two elements of structure and agency, avoiding the pitfalls characteristic of holism and individualism, is situationalism.

1.2.3 Methodological Situationalism
This term refers to any approach that explains all social phenomena, and by implication structure and agent, in terms of situation. This approach differs from holism and individualism in the structure-agency debate, for it refutes the rigid dualism inherent in both of them. Though, it draws inspiration from the "cognitive turn" in social sciences, similar to individualism, it distances itself from the inclination of the latter to prioritize individual dispositions. Instead, this approach emphasizes the "interactively and contextually accomplished" character of actors' meanings. Situationalism does not draw upon actors' avowed intentions as the first step towards explanation, but rather shows that actors' meanings are themselves constituted within social relationships. Accordingly, the inclination is to replace the individual with the situation – that is, the reciprocity and the situated character of social action – as the ultimate unit of social analysis. In fact, the individual is redefined here as a situated individual, in contrast to the individualist's actor who treads untrammelled with a willing consciousness – individual purposeful action becoming a derivative rather than a constituent of the situation (see figure 1.3).

The situation replaces individual intentionality as the determinant of social happenings. In fact, individual intentions themselves are seen as formed in relation to and in certain instances "accomplished" only in relation to "others" in an interactive situation, and as tied to particular occasions. Individual behaviour in every sense is made contingent upon "others" who complete the situation; thereby privileging the notion interacts over that of acts. Effectively, situations are construed to be sui generis and independent of individuals, which cannot be predicted based on individual's attributes and at the same time determinant of individuals. Here lies the ontological innovation of situationalism: creating a new element – the situation, and prioritizing it vis-à-vis the individual. Compared to

80 Ibid., pp.9-10.
individualism this appears to entail some effort to think beyond the individual and account for the complexity of social reality. However, optimism dissipates when one examines their idea of a structure. As much as they readily look above the individual, the situationalists refuse to look beyond the situation. Their accounts begin and end with situations. Structures are deemed unknown and unknowable unless they are based upon knowledge derived from the micro-social situations. The autonomy of structures is refuted and they are seen to exist only "in and through" their reproduction in micro-social interactions "always open" to reinterpretations.\textsuperscript{81} Beyond this general agreement at least three different conceptions of a structure can be discerned in situationalism. Structures are viewed as aggregations and repetitions of many similar situations,\textsuperscript{82} unknowable unintended consequences of situations which are emergent and constitute the structural properties that confront future action as its selection environment exerting a diffuse but significant influence upon the course of social events,\textsuperscript{83} and as representative constructions within the situations.\textsuperscript{84} This situationalist ontology, with its emphasis on interaction in social situations, has spurred many social theories and methodologies "characteristically concerned with micro-processes of social life, such as with face-to-face interaction, with everyday routines and classifications, with strips of conversation, or with definitions of the self and of situations"\textsuperscript{85} – ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, and social phenomenology, to name a few. Rather than dealing with them separately and in detail, we limit ourselves here to examining the viability of their shared ontological position in respect of the structure-agency dispute.

\textbf{Note}

The thickness of the circles in the following and subsequent figures indicates the robustness of either structure or agency (also systems) in various theories represented by the figures. The dotted circles represent the epiphenomenalization of either structure or agency in that particular theory.

The unidirectional arrows in the following figures indicate the influence of either structure or agency upon the other, flowing only along the direction of the arrows. In contrast, the bi-directional arrows indicate interplay of the influences of both structure and agency.

\textsuperscript{82} R. Collins, "Micro-Translation as a Theory-Building Strategy", in Knorr-Cetina, and Cicourel ed., \textit{Advances in Social Theory and Methodology}; A. V. Cicourel, "Notes on the Integration of Micro- and Macro-Levels of Analysis", in Knorr-Cetina, and Cicourel ed., \textit{Advances in Social Theory and Methodology}.
\textsuperscript{83} R. Harre, "Philosophical Aspects of the Micro-Macro Problem", in Knorr-Cetina, and Cicourel ed., \textit{Advances in Social Theory and Methodology}.
\textsuperscript{84} Knorr-Cetina, "The Micro-Sociological Challenge of Macro-Sociology", pp. 30-40.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., p. 1.
Seemingly, the distinct move of situationalism is to convert the social dyad of structure and agency in the 'problem' into a triad by harnessing the situation to it. One positive outcome could have been a stratified ontology more reflective of the social reality, but this opportunity is lost in the denial, to both structure and human agency, of their full play, and their derivative situated subordination to the situation. Individual motives, emotions and other aspects of psychology are denied any place in explanations, with a concomitant reduction of structure to various incarnations to be strictly realized only in the present situation. In dissolving the individual into a situation, the approach tends to simplify the variability of individuals. Even if we concede that individuals and their dispositions are in most instances "accomplished" only in situations, this hardly entails the latter as a determinant of individual behaviour. There are numerous occasions when individuals fail to understand the situation, to attempt and succeed in manipulating it, and even defy it. Casting individuals in a responsive and account-taking role vis-à-vis situations is problematic. All individuals and their activities are not always determined by situations.

The situationalists fail to acknowledge that situations attain their form and derive their content only within and with respect to the extant structures, which are autonomous, pre-existent and condition the situation. The situation is definitely an important element in the structure-agency interaction, but it is not the sole essence of it. There is a temporal dimension wherein the past actions and conceptions manifesting themselves in roles and positions condition the present. Hence, situation is not the structure per se; rather it is located within the structure. The reduction of structure to compounded situations is a problematic move. Conceptions of structures as aggregations and the unintended consequences of situations do suggest the emergent nature of structure; but the real quality of emergence is missed by the narrow conception of emergence as a phenomenon only accomplishable in the present. Autonomy of structures from the present-ness of the micro-episodes is not appreciated. Since both these conceptions do not regard macro to be of another kind than the micros taken together they cannot be regarded as strictly emergent. The structures are not reducible to a sum of known (aggregation) or known and unknowable (unintended consequences) compound of micro-situations. The problem realizes itself more fully in the conception of representative construction where the existence of structures apart from the macro-representation routinely accomplished in micro-social action is denied. In short, situations are not as random as they are made out to be vis-à-vis structures and not as determinant opposite individuals.
In the final analysis, situationalists ignore structure, reduce it to the *present* situation, merely strengthen the interaction aspect in individualist account against the individual’s disposition and subordinate the latter to the situation. All these complications result undoubtedly from the faulty ontological preference to ‘link’ or ‘build’ the macro from the micro, a predilection they share with the individualists. This stems from the situationalist enthusiasm to overcome the dichotomy between the structure and agency. Rather than teasing out the dynamic interaction of structures and human agents, it has merely given rise to a new level denying the importance of the existing two. As a result, the situationalist fails to capture both the structure and the individual intentions within its frame by emphasizing only on the situation. There is no necessity to do away with the juxtaposition of individual and structures, by linking or bridging, which here takes the form of introducing situations as a linking entity, thereby effectively reducing and denying the real nature of structure and agency. This in our opinion is destined to be a failed enterprise, despite being wasted labour, for it only refutes social complexity instead of attempting to capture it. On the contrary, the need is to give both structures and individual their due in social analysis – recognize their essential juxtaposition and allow for their interaction, not in conflated but in realizational terms, each allowed its potential and accounted for in social analysis.

All the three important approaches to the structure-agency debate dealt with above share a common trait despite the appreciable differences in them. They tend to prioritize one aspect of the complex social reality in opposition to the rest. In doing so they refuse to concede the essentially variable character of these elements. Hence, just as for the holists all explanations necessarily have to be in terms of structures, similarly for individualists it is the individual, and for the situationalist the situation. Our contention is that we need to go beyond this rigid dualism/triadism and appreciate the definite part each of the constituents of social reality have in its final constitution, and by extension in any process of social change like empowerment. In short, individuals, the structures which they inhabit and the particular situations in which they interact are all essential part of any social explanation. Recognizing this would enable one to desist from “ontological cannibalism” so characteristic of the approaches examined above. What then are our explanatory options? One is naturally tempted to suggest the ‘solution’ readily

---

86 Ibid., p. 19.
87 Archer, *Realist Social Theory*, p. 38.
available – an admixture of all these three approaches, which privilege one or the other essential constituent of the social reality. It is our contention that such an idea is fraught with intractable difficulties, which primarily originate from their distinct ontological standpoints. To prove this contention we will examine the synthesis proposed in new institutionalist approaches to the problem of 'structure and agency'.

1.3 Synthesis and Duality as Alternatives

1.3.1 Theoretical Synthesis in New Institutionalism

Despite the ambiguities and confusion caused by the lack of unified approach, the theoretical refinements associated with new institutionalism require us to consider the possibilities it offers to overcome the structure-agency conundrum. At least three distinct variants have been identified under this rubric – rational choice, sociological and historical institutionalisms. These approaches exhibit divergent ontological bases and differing perceptions of social reality. The commonality among all these versions, it is that, institutions play an important role in the determination of social outcomes, which they take as the focus of their enquiry. The origin of these new institutionalisms as a reaction to the dominance of behavioural perspectives in social sciences situate them squarely within the structure-agency debate. Since,


89 There is no unanimity in the varieties of new institutionalism either. For various classifications see, P. A. Hall and R. C. R. Taylor, "Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms", Political Studies, vol.44, 1996, pp.936-957; J. Kato, "Review Article: Institutions and Rationality in Politics – Three Varieties of Neo-Institutionalists", British Journal of Political Science, vol.26, 1996, pp. 553-582; Lowndes, "Varieties of New Institutionalism", pp.181-197. There is also a fourth approach concerned with economics. Hall tells us that, this version with its focus on property rights, rents, and competitive selection mechanisms, overlaps heavily with the rational choice institutionalism where the stress is on strategic interaction. Following this, we will not deal with the new institutionalism in economics separately.

90 Jessop refers to this orientation in social sciences as the "institutional turn. See B. Jessop, "Institutional (Re)Turns and the Strategic-Relational Approach", published by the Department of Sociology, Lancaster University at: www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/soc046r.html

91 For a detailed exposition on how it differed from behavioural perspectives, see, March and Olsen, "The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life".

92 Many commentators recognize the relevance of the structure-agency problem to the new institutionalism. See T. A. Koelble, "The New Institutionalism in Political Science and Sociology", Comparative Politics, January 1995, pp. 231-43; C. Hay and D. Wincoo, "Structure, Agency and
they were reacting against the atomistic tendency to view social phenomena as an aggregate consequence of individual behaviour, one of their fundamental arguments is the autonomous character of institutions and their capacity to act independently as decision makers. This leads to questions about the nature of institutions and individuals, and the various aspects of the relationship between them.

Rational choice institutionalism relies on the same conception of human motivation that informs rational choice theory in general that has been discussed above – the rational goal maximizing individual with a fixed set of preferences. This rational behaviour is considered to result in collective action dilemmas when each individual attempts to maximize his/her own interest culminating in collectively suboptimal outcomes similar to “tragedy of commons” which necessitate collective action. Institutions are perceived as the means by which individuals can prevent such problems and arrive at collectively beneficial outcomes. Institutions are therefore conceived as deliberate creations of instrumentally oriented individuals. Institutions, thus created, provide the context and thereby limit the range of preferences and choices available to individuals and affect social outcomes. Consequently, institutions are considered to structure the interactions between individuals. Efficiency and the continued provision of benefits to the concerned actors determine the survival and change in institutions. Although, difficulties are recognized in most instances, in general the institutions are viewed as readily susceptible to change by individuals. The identifiable advance in the new institutionalist version over general rational choice theory is the incorporation of the

References:


Shepsle, "Studying Institutions", p.3.

Hall and Taylor, "Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms", p.945

determining institution which enables and limits the individual’s maximizing ability. Nevertheless, the conception of the rational maximizing individual and the individualist ontology are retained at the core, only that he/she is now constrained by the institutions, which does not alter the set of preferences and merely limits the possibilities. What is the usefulness of this approach in the problem of ‘structure and agency’? This can be gleaned from the rational choice institutionalist’s conception of structure, agency, and their relationship.

Structures, in this approach, have been rendered epiphenomenal by their ontological subordination to the individuals. Institutions are conceived only in terms of human agency and are denied any independent character (see figure 1.4). Institutions are formed for the realization of efficient collective action and their survival too is dependent on this criterion. It has to be recognized that even while this might be true in many cases, all institutions are not created for purposes of efficiency alone and that inefficient and ineffective institutions do survive. Viewing institutions only in terms of efficiency repeats the functionalist fallacy we dealt with above. This is a very narrow view of institutions, wherein efficiency is privileged against inefficiency and the various characteristics of an institution are subordinated to the efficiency factor. It also assumes the process of institution creation to be a highly purposive one and provides for agents who are highly knowledgeable to perceive all the possible outcomes accounting for all the relevant factors. Therefore, institutional formation is visualized to be under the control of actors who correctly perceive the effects of the institutions they are to establish and create them precisely in order to secure these effects. In short, an institution is what agents want it to be.

Intrinsic to such an analyses is an idealistic conception about the cognitive capabilities of agents and their capacity to control the course of events. This fails to acknowledge that institutional creation and change happens within a larger structured environment, which influences the process. Individuals, on the other hand, are largely free from the influence of institutions. It is true that institutions are conceived to constrain the individual activities; nonetheless, the preferences of individuals are fixed and unchanged. Hence, there is a gross undermining of the influence of institutions on human agency, which is at best limited. There is also a dominant streak of voluntarism inherent in this approach as it tends to view institution creation as a quasi-contractual process marked by voluntary agreement.
among relatively equal and independent actors – much as one might find in a ‘state of nature’.\textsuperscript{101}

The essence and differentiae of sociological institutionalism have been effectively summed up by DiMaggio and Powell when they write,

The new institutionalism in organization theory and sociology comprises a rejection of rational-actor models, an interest in institutions as independent variables, a turn toward cognitive and cultural explanations, and an interest in properties of supraindividual units of analysis that cannot be reduced to aggregations or direct consequences of individuals’ attributes or motives. (emphases added)\textsuperscript{102}

Sociological institutionalists pivot their position on two interrelated dimensions – cognition and culture. They emphasize the limits of cognition, the significance of cultural elements and the influence of culture on cognition. Most human behaviour is seen as unreflective, routine and taken-for-granted.\textsuperscript{103} Actors retrospectively assign a rationale from sets of pre-existing scenarios to understand and make sense of their actions. Consequently, habits, routines, rules, institutions, and not rationality determine human action. According to this conception, individuals and institutions are embedded in a context replete with pre-existing macro-culture and other institutions which provide the “frames of meaning” for all human action.\textsuperscript{104} There is a progressive downward cultural influence; whereby pre-existent culture influences the institutions and the latter in turn influence the individuals.

Where do the sociological institutionalists stand in the structure-agency debate? For sure, they offer us a robust conception of structure, but simultaneously render the human agency epiphenomenal (see figure 1.5). Their stress on the cognitive and cultural dimensions, wherein institutions derive their legitimacy from the larger institutional field and the individuals theirs from institutions, results in the effective submission of agency to the structure. Institutions are allowed an independent existence, largely free from agential influence. This is achieved by juxtaposing institutions within the institutional fields, wherefrom they derive their cultural elements and legitimacy. The institutions are conceptualized in responsive terms to these macro-fields and not to the agents who inhabit them. Seemingly, the appropriate essentials are drawn from the larger cultural environment by institutions

\textsuperscript{101} Hall and Taylor, “Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms”, p.952.
\textsuperscript{102} DiMaggio and Powell, “Introduction”, p.8.
\textsuperscript{103} L. G. Zucker, “The Role of Institutionalization in Cultural Persistence”, in Powell and DiMaggio, ed., The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis.
\textsuperscript{104} In relation to the agents these scripts play a similar role as rules do in Winch’s conception of rule-governed society.
and the individuals do not have much agency, and if they have any it is only in the act of adopting them from the pre-existing culture. The sociological institutionalists see institutions solely in integrative terms much similar to the normative order of Parsons and also share the same problems.\textsuperscript{105} Institutions produce a common purpose, shared values, and thereby shape and provide opportunities for individual development.\textsuperscript{106} Such a conception is "too focused on stability rather than change, and too slow to see conflict or change as endogenous".\textsuperscript{107} If all actions have to conform to cultural scripts how are these scripts themselves changed? The sociological institutionalists fail to offer any answer to this. Consequently, we are left with a static conception with an undue emphasis on stability. Here, individuals are given the possibility of interpreting and conforming to the 'given' script, not changing it. This conceptualization cannot offer a robust notion of change, because any change oriented action will essentially not conform to 'given' scripts and hence fail to be "socially appropriate". Therefore, when they are able to offer plausible explanations for institutional stability and inertia, their emphasis on cultural determination defies any possibility of explaining institutional change, and in effect denies change itself.

Closely related to this notion of a strong structure is the weak agency. The institutions are seen as determining the activities of individuals. The cognitive dimension is overstressed to the extent that human behaviour is seen only in terms of habits, routines and taken-for-granted actions. They are denied the discursive power intrinsic to them, whereby they deliberate and act on the institutions. Actions are not the products of calculated decisions; rather they are embedded in the institutional structures of rules, norms, expectations and traditions that severely constrain the behaviour of social actors. Here, individuals do not exist in a vacuum and all their activities are oriented towards that which is socially appropriate. This leaves humans too submissive and obedient, for the agency given to individuals is very little, resulting in a passive agency. Though this might be the case on certain occasions it need not be so in all. It needs to be recognized that though there may be such cultural scripts which influence the actions, the existence of multiple scripts and the ability to act on or against these scripts offer more agency to the individuals.

\textsuperscript{105} This is despite the attempt of the sociological institutionalists to differentiate from Parsons. See DiMaggio and Powell, "Introduction", pp.15-18.
\textsuperscript{106} March and Olsen, \textit{Rediscovering institutions}, pp.117-142.
Related to these conceptions of structure and agency is the question of structural change. The sociological institutionalists argue that existing institutions structure the field of vision of those contemplating institutional reform. Though they do not limit the chances of such change to efficiency alone, the existing institutional world is seen to circumscribe the range of institutional creation. Again agential power is relegated in favour of structural features. New institutionalists in sociology seem so focused on macro-level processes that the actors involved in the processes seem to drop out of sight and the result begins to look like 'action without agents'. The approach fails to recognize that frames of meaning, scripts and symbols emerge not only from processes of interpretation, but also from processes of contention.

Historical Institutionalism, which is more inclined towards the explanation of social phenomena in terms of happenings at the macro level, relies on concepts like asymmetric power relations, the ineffective and inefficient nature of social institutions, historical contingency, unintended consequences, path dependence and the importance of ideas for institutional analysis. When it comes to the relationship between institutions and individuals, they adopt an eclectic approach and conceptualize in terms of what are referred to as the calculus and cultural approaches. There is some contention regarding equating the calculus approach with rational choice institutionalism and the cultural approach with sociological institutionalism. If one sifts through the basic assumptions and arguments posited by these approaches, the similarity of the calculus and cultural approaches within historical institutionalism to the rational choice and sociological institutionalisms is clearly evident. Following this, instead of repeating these assumptions and arguments, we would concern ourselves with an issue of greater significance – can these two approaches (calculus/rational choice and cultural/sociological) coexist? Of interest to our discussion are the suggestions emanating to explore the possibilities of integration or synthesis (though not a crude one) of these two approaches, which in our opinion is an important move vis-à-vis the structure-agency debate.

There is a general trend to argue that since these two approaches individually capture different and essential dimensions of social reality, they have much to learn

109 Hall and Taylor, "Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms".
110 For a detailed discussion see: Ibid., Hay and Wincott, "Structure, Agency and Historical Institutionalism"; and the reply of Hall and Taylor, "The Potential of Historical institutionalism".

68
from and offer each other. It is envisaged that only if there can be more interaction and relaxation of their extreme theoretical positions, it would result in theories with greater explanatory potential. The approach of historical institutionalism marks an advance over the other two variants of new institutionalism, for it recognizes the necessarily variable character of all social phenomena. We would contend that this call for interaction and possible integration stems from the recognition of the inadequacy of both of these approaches to explain all social phenomena.

While Hall and Taylor recognize this, Junko Kato's extensive review of new institutionalism concludes that both the approaches have their merit and that "Researchers choose a certain approach from several alternatives, based on their interest in their subjects and the purpose of their investigation". We would certainly not dispute Kato's contention that the rational choice and sociological institutionalist approaches have their own merit and that they explain many instances of the social reality. Nevertheless, we contend that they at best explain only certain instances of social life and are based on narrow ontologies, which inhibits any possibility for more sophisticated explanations factoring in the innate social variability. This leaves us with three alternatives to this theoretical confusion and explanatory inconsistencies, within the ambit of historical institutionalism – to assert the adequacy of one of these approaches, to attempt a synthesis of them and finally, to look for a new ontological base, shedding the problems inherent in the calculus and cultural approaches.

As stated above, the most travelled of these paths is to adopt one of these approaches; and the problems inherent in each of them have already been explicated. That leaves us with two paths, the easier one being a synthesis and gives rise to the original question about the co-existence of the two approaches. We contend that such a synthesis is not possible, because the real problem is ontological and not theoretical, whereas the synthesis is sought at the theoretical level ignoring their ontological incompatibility. The implication of such a theoretical argument for the structure-agency debate is the synthesis of two ontologically faulty and epiphenomenal approaches, namely, methodological holism and

111 Hall and Taylor, "Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms".
112 Ibid., p.571. He suggests a "middle path" in bounded rationality, which is problematic in our opinion because bounded rationality too is part of the variable social reality and all phenomena cannot be understood to be characterized by it.
individualism. This seemingly relies on two contradictory ontological bases and attempts to resolve the ontological quarrel at the theoretical level. Mere theoretical adjustments are not sufficient, for any such effort will be a superficial adjustment so long as the present ontological positions are retained. This would only relocate these approaches largely outside of their ontological home, circumscribing their heuristic capabilities. Instead, to avoid their limitation of partial explanation we need to broaden our ontological understanding. The need is to account for the ontological anxieties and hence, for a new ontological base for historical institutionalism. Hay and Wincott suggest such ontology; but we would agree with Hall and Taylor that such a distinct ontological base, as claimed by the former, has not yet been realized within the folds of historical institutionalism.

Nonetheless, Hay and Wincott’s proposal of a complex duality of structure and agency as the formative ontology of historical institutionalism is persuasive suggestion and warrants some attention, though the basic concepts it derives from - duality of structure and strategic relation - are dealt with later in detail. We will for the time being remain within the institutional confines and examine this proposal. Most importantly the schema addresses the ontological anxieties. It sees the institutional world as composed of institutional 'architects', institutionalized subjects and institutional environments and their interaction in dynamic and mutually constitutive terms. It seeks to link the subject in a creative relationship with an institutional environment, where change is not the prerogative of either the actor or the structure to the ontological subordination of the other, but rather resides in the relationship of the two. Actors are seen to be strategic, knowledgeable and reflexive always seeking to realize complex, contingent and often changing goals. They monitor their actions and the context routinely, and act accordingly, either for intuitive or instrumental reasons, however informed or misinformed they may be. Meanwhile, the structure is also given greater scope, as it favours certain strategies, actors and perceptions over others. In this structured institutional context, the actors formulate their strategies, whereby they calculate and act based on this calculation, though it is always based on partial knowledge of the structures. Though the results

114 Hay and Wincott, “Structure, Agency and Historical Institutionalism”.
115 Hall and Taylor, “The Potential of Historical institutionalism”.
116 Hay and Wincott, “Structure, Agency and Historical Institutionalism”.
might be unintended, there is a definite effect on the institutions and institutionalized contexts and the actors also strategically learn for their future actions.

This formulation, as Hay and Wincott rightfully claim, offers a far improved ontology of social life, wherein both structure and agency are recognized on their own terms. Agency is seen in creative and transformational terms, but at the same time located within a structure which is complex and contingent, offering differential access to strategic resources for various actors. Here, unlike those approaches dealt with before, there is no effort to make either structure or agency epiphenomenal in relation to the other and the social variability is also taken into account. Social change, therefore, is the effect of the interaction of the structure and agency and is also path-dependent,

(t)he order in which things happen affects how they happen; the trajectory of change up to a certain point itself constrains the trajectory after that point; and the strategic choices made at a particular moment eliminate whole ranges of possibilities from later choices while serving as the very condition of existence of others. 117

However, this schema is not free of problems. The stress laid on strategic action is problematic as its assumption that all actors act on all occasions strategically, based on calculation, however misinformed or based on partial knowledge it may be, is flawed. Such a conception may accommodate rational, non-rational and even irrational actions, but it ignores the tendency of individuals to act based on routine, habit and in taken-for-granted manner. This results from the inclination to attach much significance to the knowledgeability of the actors, to the evident exclusion of the human tendency to view situations as not strategic. Another tricky issue is the conception of the relation between structure and agency as a duality. We will review these concepts in more detail when we deal with the structuration theory of Giddens and the strategic-relational approach of Jessop. Suffice it to mention here that these concepts contain difficulties, which render Hay and Wincott’s ontological suggestion unwieldy. This lengthy account of the ontological difficulties in historical institutionalism has shown that the approach has not offered us any plausible explanatory tool to study empowerment of poor. The nascent attempt to synthesize the calculus and cultural approaches is also fraught with problems as is the only suggestion to base historical institutionalism on a broader ontological terrain.

117 Ibid., p.955.
New institutionalism in general has failed to offer any plausible explanatory framework. The attempt of rational choice and sociological institutionalisms to factor in structure and agency respectively has been fruitless due to their original ontological commitment to methodological individualism and holism. The synthesis proposed within rational choice institutionalism is merely a theoretical amalgamation of the structural limits, which in this case are the institutions, with staunch ontological individualism. At best it serves to arrive at better theoretical understanding of the rational choice theory. The theory fails to give full play to the institutions and subordinates them to the individuals. Such a position derives from its ontological individualism and a superimposition of theoretical amalgamation over this fails in the ultimate analysis. Structures and agency are treated as epiphenomenal –
in the rational choice institutionalism institutions are seen as dependent and a mere reflection of individuals, and conversely in the sociological institutionalism individuals are made dependent on and a reflection of the extant culture. The result is a superficial inclusion of structure into rational choice theory and human agency in the structuralist approaches. This inclusion does not offer the included elements much scope and they are included only in terms of the other element and not in their own terms. Hence, the variability of the interaction between structure and agency is missing and this can be brought in only by adopting a different and broader ontology. Historical institutionalism has also failed in this regard and its attempt at retaining ontologically incompatible approaches or to synthesize them is also found wanting. These variants of new institutionalism have difficulty in retaining the original ontological assumptions in their analysis and tend to dilute them, which do not augur well for their distinctiveness and does not make possible any comprehensive shift towards a more reasonable ontological position.

In attempting to emphasize the importance of institutions in social life, the new institutionalists have stressed merely one aspect of social phenomena, that is, the impact and influence of structures on human agency. This is evident from the assertion of Hall and Taylor that institutionalists must remain structuralists. New Institutionalism is oriented towards studying “how social choices are shaped, mediated, and channelled by institutional arrangements”. It is true that on many occasions institutions determine individuals, but not on all occasions. There is an essential element of variability which has been ignored by this one-sided emphasis. They have attempted only to stress the importance of structures to agency and have failed to recognize the variable opposite. The issue here is not about the importance of institutions per se; rather it is the relationship between the institutions and individuals. By denying human agency its due, along with their rebuttal of the behavioural approach, they have only thrown the baby along with the bathwater. The result is a sense of institutional inertia which pervades most of the new institutionalist explanations. Hay and Wincott do suggest an ontology that moves beyond this institutional impasse and accounts for the variability of institutions; but, they fail to take account of the repetitive character of human existence. Therefore, the need is to shift away from these partial explanations and the ontologies which they entail to more sophisticated ones. The point in short is that a crude synthesis is

---

118 Hall and Taylor, "The Potential of Historical institutionalism", p.959.
119 DiMaggio and Powell, "Introduction", p.2
neither possible nor necessarily desirable. A definite possibility is to grant structure and agency some ontological respectability and identity, by recognizing their essential juxtaposition, and even to attempt a more refined synthesis of them. Next we deal with those approaches which proceed in this direction and offer suggestions in relation to the structure-agency problem worthy of consideration.

1.3.2 Duality of Structure and Agency

Giddens views society as a structuration process, whereby human actions structure and are simultaneously structured by society. Fundamental to this concept are the notions of mutual dependency and internal relatedness of structure and agency, wherein structure no longer determines individuals' actions and similarly social structures are not reduced merely to the sum of individuals' actions. Moreover, production and reproduction of society is seen as the skilled accomplishment of the agents, who achieve this under pre-existing structural conditions which are not of their "own choosing".  

Hence, structure and agency are seen to be in some inseparable relationship – a duality of structure and by implication also a duality of agency, where "social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution".  

Central to this formulation of the structure-agency problem is Giddens (re)conceptualization of terms like systems, structure, and agency, implying a new ontological base from where to approach the debate. Giddens’s makes an important distinction between systems and structures. According to him, “social systems” consist of sets of practices, patterns of interaction and social relations between individuals or collectivities which are relatively enduring. On the contrary, structures are characterized as “rules and resources”, having a "virtual" existence, a potential yet to actively manifest itself and notable by the absence of acting subjects. The structures do not have a real external existence independent of agents. They attain their form as structures only because of the “recursive” implications of agential activity. Social practice performs most arduous task of linking all the three important constituents of Giddens social conceptualization, namely, agent, structure and system. It is only in the social practice of the agent performed by “instantiating” the

---

121 Ibid., p.121.
structural "rules and resources" that systems are produced and reproduced, structures are realized and exist, and agents realize their power to act.

Thus, agents and structures gain equal importance in the constitution of society. Agents need "rules and resources", which have come into existence because of the unintended consequences of past actions, to realize their agential power, and the "virtual" structures require practical, knowledgeable agential activity to render them real and for their continued sustenance. This subjectification of structures and the concurrent objectification of agency enable Giddens to propose, in place of the traditional dualism, a duality of structure and agency, where neither of the related elements have any independent existence (see figure 1.6). How tenable is this suggestion from Giddens, and more importantly what is its explanatory value in explaining the social change of which empowerment is an aspect? Though the possibility for social change is recognized, Giddens severely limits it by viewing it as unintended and unplanned. This stems from his conception of agential activity as primarily repetitive informed by practical consciousness. With his inclination to explain social integration and order, Giddens tends to underplay the importance of change in social life. It is true that human activity is significantly repetitive resulting in social reproduction, but there certainly are undeniable opportunities for change. Even when change is accounted for it only appears as effect of unintended consequences. Naturally, the question whether intentional change — as in our case undertaken by NGOs and poor women in their capacity as social agents — is ever possible, looms large. Giddens evidently denies such a possibility, and thereby fails to account for a significant part of the social reality and the possibility of any explanation of it.124

This tendency to ignore or deny intentional change stems from the ontological duality proposed by Giddens, which has in its essence a predilection towards reproduction as opposed to production. The incompatibility of ontological duality with historical and social reality is more than evident in Giddens's own explanatory dilemma. This problem can be best exemplified by invoking two of his central concepts — "instantiation" and "distantiation". While the former is the engine of the recursive reproduction of structures by the agents in their time-space location, the latter denotes their efforts to overcome the time-space limitations guided by their interest to prepare for the future. Agents, therefore, not only use structures, but also

use them to increase their power to make a difference in the future, escaping the restrictions of time-space oriented towards the present. It follows that agents try to enhance their power and control over resources, and there is no mere "instantiation" of structures as they are/were. When one goes beyond Giddens's narrow conception of "rules and resources" as virtual structure existing only in the memory and knowledge of agents, and account for the material resources, the "distantiation" process acquires added significance – it simply denotes that contrary to Giddens's contention, all agents do not have equal access to rules and resources. In other words, it exemplifies the distributional variation inherent in social life.

In similar vein, Giddens's notion of power as a logical property of all agents, not necessarily determined by position in a social distribution of power or relations of domination\textsuperscript{125} is problematic. This idea of an indeterminate agential power stems from the mistaken derivation of the characteristics of all structures from that of language.\textsuperscript{126} Evidently, language is not a characteristically and relatively scarce resource, where the use by one limits its availability to others. On the other hand, social life is replete with scarce resources that originate and sustain the differential distribution amongst actors. Giddens's schema ignores this essentially differential nature of social life marked by relative scarcity of resources, problem of supply and pre-existence of resources in relation to agents. "Distribution of power relations are logically and ontologically prior and external to instances of situated social activity".\textsuperscript{127} In short, Giddens fails to recognize the variable nature of agential power necessitated by the differential access to resources and enforcement of rules. These problems inherent in Giddens's theory contradict the mere randomness of social change which is seen as no more then contingent, unplanned and unintended, thereby denying two essential characteristics of social reality – the differential distribution and application of resources and rules, and the possibility of intentional agential action. The duality of structure in effect implies that at every moment anything is equally possible, but the distributional variation in structures makes this claim untenable. Giddens's formulation of a duality effectively masks the real nature of the structures, because its independence and causal properties are denied. This is achieved by his (re)conceptualization of structures narrowly as mere "rules and

resources” and the attribution of a patterned and extended character of structures to systems. Though he argues for a duality between structures and agency, the dualism between the systems, which in conventional understanding are structures, and agents remains intact. Giddens’ ontological demotion of structures renders his proposition less innovative, as the dualism exists at a different level, between systems and agents. Rather than doing away with dualism, Giddens has merely managed to shift it to another level by virtualizing the structures. Another version of duality, which differs from that of Giddens’s and gives more prominence to structures, has been proposed by Bourdieu.

Bourdieu shares much with Giddens: his rejection of the structure-agency dichotomy, the emphasis on social reproduction, the importance of practice, and finally, duality as the organizing relationship. He proposes a different schema anchored in the interaction of two histories – a past which is frozen and objectified in “habitat” revealed in societal aspects like positions, laws, machines, etc., and an “embodied history” which manifests in the “habitus” of an individual. Consequently, Bourdieu reformulates the problem of structure and agency as the problem of interaction between agents’ “disposition” and institutional “positions”. This interaction is located in the practice of embodied beings, wherein the objectified history (structures) is sustained and kept “alive”. These three concepts – embodiment, practice, and temporality of practice – and their relationship, form the fulcrum of Bourdieu’s theorization and the essence of his contribution to the debate. It is evident that Bourdieu does not seek to epiphenomenalize structures or agency.

In his dialectic of position and disposition, Bourdieu suggests a rather strong notion of structures. This is realized through his notions of “habitat” and “habitus”, signifying the social position and the disposition related to the various positional specificities. Of central importance to this schema is the embodied character of human existence. Bourdieu converts the pre-reflexive disposition into the generative principle of practice by fastening it to the social position. Thereby, he establishes a close relation between the existing structures and action through the principle of practice. For, practice derives from the extant structures and it is through practice that the structures are made bearing on the agents. Only practice satisfies his requirement that understanding must be relational, and has the capacity to subvert

the structure-agency dichotomy. Thus, the notion of practice occupies a central position in Bourdieu's formulation. Practice necessitates agents; because, it is through them that history (structure) is realized, reproduced and rendered meaningful. Bourdieu argues that the "habitus" both produces and is produced by the social world. People internalize external structures, and they externalize things they have internalized through practices. Bourdieu sees individual behaviour in a primarily repetitive and taken-for-granted manner, and not as a rational action with a distinct orientation. Such a conceptualization essentially derives from his identification of two constraints on unrestrained individual action: the individual position in the structure, and what Bourdieu calls "the urgency of practice", the necessity to respond immediately to the demands of the situation.

Though the essentiality of the basic social constituents – structures and agency – is acknowledged, Bourdieu characterizes their relationship as one of duality, wherein both act on each other and are simultaneously constituted and reproduced (see figure 1.7). This leads to an inherent contradiction in this formulation, where structures are historically embedded with pre-reflexive dispositions. If the latter holds true, then the relationship can hardly be a duality, as at any point of time the "habitus" conditions the actions of agents, though it could be transformed by the same action. Despite this predilection for the duality of the structure-agency relationship, Bourdieu tends to make agency weak against structures through the holistic "conditioning" of dispositions and desires by the "habitus". Individuals are denied any agency other than that 'forced' upon them by competing collectivities and are constrained to seek their ends without any escape. This reduction of individuals to specimens of their collectivities effectively ignores the individual idiosyncrasies and variability of their behaviour. Even the indeterminacy recognized to arise from the irreducible differences among agents is surrendered to the collectivities, rendering individuals as dispositional dopes conditioned by objective teleologies. Moreover, this conditioning character of the "habitus" also influences the agents' estimation of their own activities. These positional dispositions, though not reified, are assumed as 'given' and agency's behaviour and strategies are thereby curtailed and made determinate. Individuals are believed to have inculcated their dispositions and thereby anticipate and calibrate all their responses according to their dispositional logic resulting in "ontological complicity". While such formulation

successfully captures reproduction and the impasse in societal structures, and agential inertia, with its insistence on routine and repetition, it conveniently ignores and fails to address social change. The repetitive nature of human existence reinforced by social norms as causal conditions of agency is highlighted to the near elimination of cognitive rational goal-maximization component of individuals. Bourdieu is particularly concerned with how powerful positions within a “field” can perpetrate symbolic violence on less powerful actors. Probably, it is this concern which has directed his attention towards reproduction rather than social change.

The inclination to see individuals as typical examples of their collectivity too results in self-contradiction, as he also talks of the plurality of “habitus”. With many “habitus”, an individual will necessarily respond in a distinct manner according to the assortment of “habitus” he/she possesses. “Habitus” acquires its meaning only from the inhabiting individuals, and since each individual has many “habitus” at any given point of time and a different combination and ordering of them, it results in more agency in prioritization and response. This means that each individual will seldom be an identical example or specimen of any particular “habitus” when the assortment, which he/she inhabits, rather than a specific “habitus” is taken into account. The influence of each “habitus” on the other is not properly recognized. Individual inhabits different habitus at the same time which are contextual and relational and responds to any situation based on an understanding or misunderstanding possibly based on partial knowledge. Hence, viewing individual in relation to one particular “habitus” results in compartmentalized understanding of humans.

Along with this devaluation of agency, Bourdieu also engages in a reduction of structures. This is due to the centrality he accords to power and his characterization of all forms of social differentiation as essentially structures and struggles for power. Power is an important organizing basis of the dispositions, but all structural features cannot be reduced to that. It needs to be recognized that the issue of power is essential part of the relationship of structures and agency; the latter can be reduced to aspects or forms of power relations, only at the cost of ignoring the variability of social life. Nonetheless, in Bourdieu’s theorizing we find an alternative where structures and agency are not epiphenomenalized and their ontological existence is realized. Though more sophisticated and inclined towards structure, his notion of duality with its overemphasis on the conditioning function of “habitus” makes his approach to the structure-agency problem problematic.
The duality proposed by Giddens and Bourdieu have many things in common, which can be construed to be the effect of such a conception. They establish this duality by invoking the element of social practice, which links agent, structure and system for Giddens, and position and disposition for Bourdieu. Structures are conceived as realizable only through the activities of agents, and the self same activities sustain the structures. In the social practice both agent and structure are empirically and experientially indistinguishable. This leads to a lot of difficulties in the conception of duality. Employing the concept of practice to escape the reification-reduction impasse prevalent in social sciences, the theorists resort to a trimming of both structure and agency. Giddens and Bourdieu reduce structures to “virtual” entities and hierarchies of power respectively. They also reduce agency by reducing its object and by making it dependent on its “habitus”. Thus, while practice brings structures and agency into a close inseparable relationship, that is done only by reducing both structures and agency. Such a conceptualization denies the full play of both structures and agency and their variability. Both the theorists lay considerable emphasis on the concept of temporality in relation to these social practices. Nonetheless, their notion of temporality is a highly compressed one as pointed out by Archer, since all activities of the agents in relation to the structure happens only in the present. The duality effectively compresses the various temporal dimensions of past, present and future into one, i.e., the present. This leads to the emphasis on reproduction over production, “practical” consciousness over the “discursive” consciousness, convert agents into prisoners of their “habitus”, which effectively denies the rational component of agential activity. Hence, a weak conception of agency emerges from the duality schema of Giddens and Bourdieu. There is also a simultaneous demotion of structures, as they are rendered to be real only by agential activity. Such a limited notion of temporality, even while it recognizes the interplay of structure and agency, unhelpfully reduces the interplay to the present, denying the variability and richness of the interplay.

Among the two, Giddens tends to virtualize structures and make agency relatively strong and thereby inclines towards an agential duality; while Bourdieu, on the other hand, strengthens structure and virtualizes agency proposing a structural duality. In Giddens’s duality of structure, the concept of structure itself is placed within the knowledgeable agent. On the contrary, Bourdieu places his agent within the bounds of dispositions. Thus, though both propose a duality where structure and agency are dissolved into the temporal moment of practice, they tend to lean either
towards structure or agency, possibly exposing the untenable nature of an ideal duality they intend to establish. Giddens and Bourdieu also put forth an unstratified view of structure and agency. While Giddens pays no attention to the differential access to resources or the unequal application of rules, and thereby ignores the power relations in which agents are embedded, Bourdieu identifies the differential nature of the structures. When it comes to agency both theorists tend to project a 'flat' notion of agency, dissolving the person in the social self. Another conception of duality which avoids the "flat" conception of structures in Giddens's structuration and possibly offers more scope to the agency is proposed by Jessop.

In his strategic-relational approach, Jessop attempts to thoroughly and dialectically relativize both structure and agency to establish a "genuine duality" as opposed to the structurationist duality proposed by Giddens, which he terms as "dualism masquerading as a duality".¹³¹ This dialectical relativization is to be achieved through a conceptualization of structure and agency, in which both are rendered more strong and simultaneously implicated in an interdependent relationship within a spatial-temporal strategic context. Structures are viewed as structurally inscribed strategic selectivity, where structural constraints always operate selectively. Likewise, agency is seen as strategically calculating structural action, which reflexively takes account of the possible strategies and act accordingly.¹³²

Evidently, Jessop conceives both structure and agency in more robust terms than that allowed for by other duality formulations discussed above. Now, this raises an interesting question: does his conception of structure-agency as a duality which does away with the limitations inherent in the other conceptions of duality ensure that the strategic-relational approach transcends the structure-agency dichotomy and can be the basis of an explanatory framework to study empowerment. To phrase it differently, does a robust conceptualization of structure and agency render a duality solution to the 'problem' any more tenable? Though at first glance such a possibility seems to exist, a more intensive survey of the essentials of Jessop's proposition brings out the innate difficulties and stifles any theoretical enthusiasm. The reason for this failure is the centrality accorded to duality as the defining relationship between structure and agency. It is our contention that any conception of duality necessitates some amount of ontological trimming of both the elements of social reality. Similar to

¹³² Ibid., p. 124.
the two propositions of duality we examined before, the ontological trimming here takes two interrelated forms: first, reduction of the temporality to the present; second, invoking a notion to link the elements in a duality rendering them interdependent. If social practice served the latter purpose for Giddens and Bourdieu, Jessop despite his emphasis on structural strategic selectivity and agential strategic action dissolves both in the binding strategic context, necessitated by the limited spatial-temporal conception. In this approach, structures are seen as generating strategic action contexts, within which the agential action occurs. On the other hand, the strategic selectivity gains any meaning only within the context of agential action. The duality is hence achieved by contextualizing structure, the context itself determined by agential action; and by subordinating agency to structural strategic selectivity. Thus, the strategic selectivity of structure and the strategic action of agents are conjoined at the strategic context, which has any meaning only within the spatial-temporal context occupied by specific agents pursuing specific strategies. It is in this supposed relativization within the spatial-temporal strategic context, which ensures duality that, the robust conceptualization of structure and agency suffer ontological reduction (see figure 1.8). The two essential features of Jessop’s duality: spatial-temporal dimension and strategic context, defeats his aim to relativize the relationship and renders the framework inadequate.

The move to deny structure any causal power outside the agential action within specific spatial-temporal boundaries is problematic. Structures have real existence and causal power even if the agents do not act, and affect the outcomes of agential action and on occasions do so by even precluding any thought of action. Jessop lays too much emphasis on the agential action as the factor determining the causal power of the structures. Though Jessop conceives structures as a crystallization of past strategies, he simultaneously renders them ineffective by making them reliant on present agential action. While it is true that structures are activity-dependent, it is erroneous to underplay their pre-existence by overemphasizing the spatial-temporal present. Eventually, limiting structure to the

133 Here, it would be pertinent to point out that any conception of duality as a solution to the structure-agency relationship entails a limited notion of temporality confined to the present where both the elements interact. In fact, instead of teasing out the possible varied patterns of interaction this effort binds the elements in a strong relationship in the present.


135 There is probably a necessity to differentiate between the discourse on action and the action itself. Some structures may constrain only when the action is committed, while others may prohibit even before action is committed.
temporal present enervates its pre-existent character. This reduction of structures is complimented by a concurrent reduction of the agents. The possibilities of agential action are severely circumscribed, as the range of strategic options are defined again by the spatial-temporal context and there does not seem to exist any chance for agential action beyond this or to alter the current strategic selectivity. Agential action is strictly limited only to the possibilities allowed for by the "conjunctural" moment, and any action against the constraining "structural" moment is precluded. The identification of "structural" and "conjunctural" moment in all strategic contexts means that change is both an impossibility and an ever-present possibility; but Jessop tends to highlight the "conjunctural" aspect over the "structural" and gives the impression that agent is always change oriented.

A similar reduction derives from the narrow characterization of all structures and agential action as strategically oriented. It is unrealistic to presume that all structural conditions are strategically selective and by implication defining the strategic options left for agents. While this may be true on a great many occasions, there are also significant instances where the options are ill-defined or ambiguous, leaving room for agential interpretation and manoeuvre. Jessop tends to limit such possibilities to the "conjunctural" moments and in a sense reifies the "structural" moment. The dynamic nature of structural conditions and the openness cannot be surrendered to the strategic selectivity. The implication of regarding all agential action as strategic is questionable. This presumes that actors exercise their cognitive capabilities always and considers action to be the predominantly reflexive and intentional. It needs to be stressed that intentional action, even if it is qualified by partial knowledge, is not the universal characteristic of agents. A more sophisticated approach necessitates avoiding these extremes and the recognition that agential action is both reflexive and recursive. It is our contention that the duality position of these theorists vis-à-vis the structure-agency problem necessitates such a reduction of agential action to either recursive or reflexive behavioural confines. This strategic orientation and ontology essentially means that, despite the later incorporation of recursiveness, this approach would explain social change better than reproduction. Hence, despite the sophistication attached to his conceptualization of structure and agency, Jessop commits the twin fallacies intrinsic to a duality notion and dissolves past into present and simplifies all

136 The origin of this approach probably has contributed to this. The strategic-relational approach is employed by Jessop to essentially explain state, where the options of each individual or group is much more clearly defined and definite.
agential action as strategic. In the final analysis, the strategic-relational approach gives the impression of positing a strong notion of structure, but eventually subjects it to the strategic context generated by agential action; and likewise, it also gives the impression of a strong agency and eventually subordinates it to the strategic context in the form of strategic selectivity. This conflation of the two discrete elements of social reality only strengthens the duality and enfeebles structure and agency.

As a result of the duality, Jessop also fails to explain when the constraining structural conditions in the "structural" moments can be transformed by the agents. He allows only for the change enabled by the "conjunctural" moment, and does not talk about the change of the constraining "structural" moment. This results in the reduction of agential action to the "conjunctural" moment alone. He fails to explain when a "structural" moment or a "conjunctural" moment ensues in relation to the agent. He does not recognize that there are moments when the constraining structures prevent any agential action and the equal possibility of the agents transforming these constraining structural limitations in their interests. Hence, the need is not to merely conceive structures as constraints and opportunities as Jessop does, but also the degrees of constraint and opportunity extant on a given social occasion. This in effect means that his formulation cannot explain when change is possible and when it is not. Moreover, when he stratifies structure, he fails to stratify agency, and sees it merely in relation to the structural strategic selectivity. He thereby denies agency any independent emergent property. As a result of this duality, Jessop’s aim to thoroughly and dialectically relativize structure and agency and the relationship between them suffers. Though he attempts to emphasize the strategic selectivity and concomitant differential capabilities of agents, the relativization is crippled by placing them in the spatial-temporal confines of the present allowed for by the duality concept of strategic context. That is, the reduction of these elements means that any relativization based on them should also be a limited notion. Therefore, the relativization offered by Jessop is in effect a 'crippled relativization'. On the contrary, what is needed is a greater allowance for structure and agency, which would result in a more rich but ‘qualified relativism’.\(^{137}\) Though perceptibly more refined than the other duality propositions, Jessop's approach also essentially fails to overcome the ontological reduction intrinsic to duality conceptions and in the final analysis enfeebles both structure and agency.

\(^{137}\) A thorough and unqualified notion of relativism is advocated by the post-modernists, and this position has many problems.
1.4 Dualist Conceptions

1.4.1 Mouzelis's Conception of Duality-Dualism

An attempt to overcome the limitations of the duality conception of structure-agency relationship by incorporating the dualistic elements within it is made by Mouzelis. In a way, Mouzelis occupies a unique position in this entire debate, as he tends to conjoin the two distinct conceptions of duality and dualism into a single explanation. Accordingly, he contends that both duality and dualism are relevant to conceive the social reality. This complex idea emerges from his inclination to retain the duality intrinsic to Giddens' structuration theory, where the stress is on the actor's routine reproduction of social structures; and further, to overcome its limited conception with a dualism where the actors distance themselves from the structures for strategic/monitoring purposes. In doing so, it is his basic contention that the structure-agency relationship as conceived in a duality notion "by no means exhausts the type of orientations actors can and do have vis-à-vis rules and resources". 

Parallel to this is Mouzelis' disaggregation of structures to consist of two dimensions: paradigmatic and syntagmatic, signifying respectively the virtual rules and resources existing as a potentiality, and the concrete practices and interaction of/among agents in time and space produced by giving effect to the paradigmatic potential. By clubbing the twin conceptions of duality and dualism with these two dimensions of structure, Mouzelis proposes a typology of social relationship with four possibilities: paradigmatic duality, paradigmatic dualism, syntagmatic duality and syntagmatic dualism. In proposing such a typology, Mouzelis intends to account for the variability of the structures and power of agents in their interaction. This is

---


139 Paradigmatic duality denotes the situation where the agents are internally related to the structures with no distance from it and thereby engage in a practical, taken-for-granted utilization of paradigmatic potentialities resulting in recursive reproductive orientation. The paradigmatic dualism specifies a situation in which the agents are not internally related to, and are able to maintain a strategic distance from, the structures. This distance enables them to reflexively analyze, criticize and change the paradigmatic elements. Syntagmatic duality is seen as an internal relation of constitutive necessity between agents and their forms of social interaction, where the latter could not exist independently of the former. It is the relationship where the agents exercise their skills to give effect to the interaction, the outcomes of which affect them either as gain or loss. In contrast to the syntagmatic duality, is the relationship of syntagmatic dualism, where the structures limit and determine the agential power. Here the agential action is external to the structures, in the sense that it denotes a situation where agents as single actors do not significantly contribute to the neither reproduction nor transformation of the structures, without radically altering their present power position.
achieved through the concept of *hierarchy*. What results is a non-reified notion of structural constraint, primarily conceived in terms of the differential positions actors occupy in their relations with each other. Though the positions in the hierarchy actors occupy are provided by the social systems, these positions themselves do not determine the outcome. Rather, they are potentialities to be realized in the interaction of the actors occupying the various positions.

The ingenuous proposition from Mouzelis offers interesting theoretical prospects to capture the variability of the structure-agency relationship by rendering degrees of constraints and agency a possibility (see figure 1.9). Nonetheless, when viewed from the vantage point of the variability of structure-agency interaction, his proposition as a whole suffers from limitations. In his conception of paradigmatic dualism, Mouzelis only refers to the ability of the agents to alter the structures and fails to recognize the other distinct possibility, where the structures can determine the agents. He fails to acknowledge the objective autonomy of paradigmatic structures and the constraints they can exercise independently of agential power. Hence, Mouzelis leaves the paradigmatic dualism orientation under-theorized, accounting only for part of the possible variability. In his notion of syntagmatic duality, the agents have direct effect on the conduct and outcomes of the interaction and are in turn affected by it. This means that the actors involved do not have the possibility to distance themselves from the social interaction for the latter to exist. Healy argues that such an unstratified notion of agents, despite the otherwise considerable emphasis on hierarchy, is problematic. If one brings in the hierarchized notion of agents, as Healy forcefully suggests, then syntagmatic *duality* as a type of relationship becomes untenable, as it has to necessarily include a notion of *dualism*.140 For the micro-actors, Mouzelis’s contention of a syntagmatic duality might apply for they have an internal relationship with the social interaction by the virtue of their co-presence. On the contrary, the macro-actors, despite their external relationship to the social interaction at the lower levels of hierarchy, have significant ability to influence them. Perceptibly, this is a relationship of dualism and rhymes similar to the one in Mouzelis’s paradigmatic dualism. Mouzelis only allows for the constraining influence of the structures on agents, and not for the influence of the macro-actors on the structures within syntagmatic duality. If the latter holds then syntagmatic duality as conceived

---

by Mouzelis becomes redundant, as it is described by syntagmatic dualism itself.\textsuperscript{141} In the final analysis, Mouzelis's typology suffers as it fails to fully describe the variability at the levels of paradigmatic dualism and syntagmatic dualism and the conception of syntagmatic duality is unconvincing and redundant.

Furthermore, the notion of distance, as conceived by Mouzelis, has important and different consequences at paradigmatic and syntagmatic dualisms. While in the former distance enables actors to distance themselves and influence the structures, in the latter distance has an opposite effect and denies the agents any ability to influence the structures. On deeper analysis both these levels seem to miss out the variable possibilities resulting from the same distance, i.e., the influence of structures on agents at paradigmatic dualism, and influence of actors on the structures at syntagmatic dualism. Hence, Healy comments that the metaphor of distance makes these categories less exclusive than Mouzelis proposes them to be.\textsuperscript{142} Mouzelis's inclination to conceive social relations solely in terms of hierarchy is also problematic as it fails to account for other basis for relationships. It is certainly true that hierarchy depicts most number of cases, but it would be reductionism to refute other basis of relationships. Mouzelis is also accused for not explaining the origin of the hierarchy.\textsuperscript{143} The temporal dimension is missing in Mouzelis's account of hierarchy and probably that is the reason why he is unable to account for the independent influence of the hierarchy on the agents. Archer's Morphogenetic approach provides a distinct advance in this regard.

\textbf{1.4.2 Habermas's Colonization Thesis}

Habermas proposes a dualistic understanding of the structure-agency relationship based on distinct components of social reality: social systems, institutions and "lifeworld", and the agential action.\textsuperscript{144} Central to this is the idea of idealizing presuppositions which permit actors a sufficiently critical distance for them to suspend the boundaries of contexts and situations in second-order reflection termed as "discourses".\textsuperscript{145} Habermas sees this critical capacity for reflection on the contexts of social interaction as part of the "discursive" or "communicative rationality" intrinsic to social action. It is this critical distance rendered possible by the secondary level of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{142} Healy, "Conceptualising Constraint", p.512.
\item \textsuperscript{143} Ibid., p.515.
\item \textsuperscript{144} J. Habermas, \textit{The Theory of Communicative Action}, vol.1, Cambridge: Polity, 1984.
\item \textsuperscript{145} The similarity to Mouzelis is conspicuous.
\end{itemize}
communication on the primary communicational context that prevents agents from becoming “situational dopes”. Consequently, Habermas grants human agency autonomous reflexive power, contrary to the recursive emphasis in situationalism. Nevertheless, despite the emphasis on reflexive agents, the social context is not rendered epiphenomenal and conversely, Habermas introduces the concept of "lifeworld" – the shared and taken-for-granted presuppositions – as the background and context for social action, which enables actors to interpret each other’s actions and to participate in common institutions. The institutions that exist in this sphere are informed by its normative and cultural rules, and thereby reflect the orientations and purposes of the agents. A third distinct ontological level in Habermas’s formulation with regard to the structure-agency problem is the social systems, existing at a higher level in relation to the “lifeworld”. Though innovative, his conception of the systems is ambiguous. Nonetheless, two interrelated propositions advanced by him, in the course of his historical thesis on the emergence and pathologies of modernity, which locate systems in relation to “lifeworld”, make matters less ambiguous. First, he employs Marx’s concept of base-superstructure to establish the distinction between systems and the “lifeworld”. In this formulation he argues that the systems as superstructure must be necessarily “anchored” in the “lifeworld” through institutions. Second, he argues that when the “lifeworld” is less differentiated or rationalized than the systems, this results in the “uncoupling” or “detaching” of systems from “lifeworld” and they become “blocks of norm-free sociality”, wherein some aspects of social life may become “uncoupled” from the normative or cultural order. Following this, the systems “invade” and “colonize” the “lifeworld” and thereby adversely affect the latter whose function is to reproduce society and to socialize its members. These twin propositions mean that system and “lifeworld” are distinguished from each other.

Now that it is clear that the three constituents of social reality are autonomous and simultaneously interdependent, the mode of their relationship assumes importance for the structure-agency debate (see figure 1.10). Habermas proposes a method of relationship between these three distinct social entities, characterized essentially by dualism and deriving from the respective ontological descriptions. For reasons of clarity, we can approach this issue on two levels of relationships: agency in relation to

---

146 This is similar to the Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus”; but for Bourdieu “habitus” is neither external nor internal, whereas Habermas considers “lifeworld” to be both external and internal to the agents as it is the shared presupposition which is implicated in the “discursive” of the agents.
"lifeworld" and systems respectively. Habermas's conception of the relationship between "lifeworld" and agency has difficulties, which are essentially ontological. He narrowly conceives "lifeworld" as a domain of language and culture. He gives the impression that it consists solely of norms and beliefs, which function as rules for agential action. Following this, the cognitive acceptance of the rules by the agents and the justification they provide in their "discourse" to these rules as reasons for their action assume importance. Hence, challenge to rules may be a challenge to the institution, which is embedded in the "lifeworld" and provides the larger context of its justification. This appears to be a logical formulation since "lifeworld" is a transformable indeterminate enabling constraint vis-à-vis the agents, the latter possessing the transformative communicative rationality. On deeper analysis difficulties arise: even if we concede that the institutions embedded in the "lifeworld" are culturally and normatively oriented, it is difficult to think of them as being contingent to the extent Habermas proposes they are. It is true that institutions are made up of rules, but these rules do not exhaust the character of institutions as they also define and contain in them roles, positions which are much more concrete, permanent and constraining than the rules are; and in most instances influence and exist independent of agent cognition, acceptability or realization. If institutions are less contingent and not as indeterminate as Habermas would have it, then the description of agential power against the contingent "lifeworld" is inadequate, since institutions are necessarily embedded in the "lifeworld". Furthermore, while Habermas recognizes different types of social action, he fails to differentiate between different types of social actors. Probably this difficulty too arises from his narrow definition of the "lifeworld" and concomitant undertheorization of institutions. As a result all actors seem to have equal access to rules and institutions based on them. While he grants too much agency against the narrowly defined "lifeworld", the agency is rendered virtually powerless against the systems.

At another level a relationship between the systems, institutions in the "lifeworld" and agents is posited in his colonization thesis. Despite conceiving systems and "lifeworld" as two distinct interdependent processes of integration, which in effect rules out the latter being a passive medium for the causal effect of the former, and making the nature of system contingent on the institutions, Habermas tends to explain the social change exclusively in terms of the systemic forces and change. Though the systemic "invasion" depends on the character of the "lifeworld", once the former gets "uncoupled" they attain a reified proportion and then the influence virtually becomes one-way – from
systems to “lifeworld”. Hence, Habermas conceives this systemic “invasion” in highly constraining mode, since it increasingly occupies the cultural space of the “lifeworld” and the institutions in “lifeworld” are systemically integrated and the systemic influence renders these institutions unresponsive to agents’ orientation and purposes. Habermas does propose that the systems can still be channelled through undetected cultural structures that have not been replaced by systemic imperative.\footnote{He gives the example of the continued influence of gender roles on areas of family law and labour markets.} The opposition to the systemic “invasion” necessarily depends on learning process – the cognitive competence of the agents; but utilization of this cognitive potential necessitates establishment of a new institutional framework.\footnote{J. Habermas, “Toward a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism”, in Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel, ed., \textit{Advances in Social Theory and Methodology}, p. 268.} Thus, agents do have the potential to influence the systems through the resources provided for in institutions.\footnote{Habermas sees “new social movements” and democratization pioneered by them as a way to stem this systemic oppression.} But Habermas himself expresses doubts about the capacity and sufficiency of any institutional change to deal with massive and complex systemic order.

In the final analysis, with respect to the systems the agents become passive bearers of systemic influence through the institutions. As a result social change is offered an exclusively structural explanation, explaining one structural pattern (cultural fragmentation and the disruption of socialization) by another (the spread of bureaucracies and markets). Activity-dependence of the systems is underemphasized and finally disappears after the colonization process. Though he employs the concept of systems to avoid an individualistic reduction of social phenomena to face-to-face interaction, this requirement does not mean that systems are in reality separated from institutions and human action. Such a conception offers us no means to tease out the interaction between the agents and the systems. It only results in a severe reduction of agential power to counter the emergent systemic conditions culminating in an implicit teleology at the systemic level. In the schema, systems colonize institutions, institutions enable and limit the agents, and agents influence and even transform these institutions, but the influence of agents on systems is curtailed – to channelize it merely through institutions is very limited conceptualization. Probably a more adequate account of all the three levels of explanations in a triangular conception of their relationship, instead of a vertical one would show greater awareness of possibilities for change and locations of struggle and serve as a better explanatory framework.
Figure 1.9 Mouzelis’s Conception of Duality-Dualism

Figure 1.10 Habermas’s Colonization Thesis

Figure 1.11 Archer’s Morphogenetic Approach
1.4.3 Archer's Morphogenetic Theory

In her morphogenetic approach Archer proposes an analytical dualistic mode of conceptualizing structure-agency relationship. Her basic contention is that structures are real and can be conceived and incorporated into social analysis in a non-reified manner, as they are the "emergent", relatively autonomous products of past action of individuals. Hence, the conceptualization of individuals and structures as both distinct and different from each other and at the same time interdependently related. Archer, therefore, proposes an approach wherein both the structure and agency are conceived to be possibly strong and implicated in interaction. Distinct from duality conceptions, she maintains and explores the possibly various relations between structure and agency in order to explain why particular cases are the way they are. Simultaneously, she rejects the ontological separation of individual and society argued for by philosophical dualism. Central to her conception is the idea that there are no social realities without people. Social reality manifests itself in the behaviour of people, and is activity-dependent. Hence, she maintains that "no people no society". Such a conception does not entail reification, since it is only through agents that structures are rendered "emergent". Having accepted the ontological co-existence and inseparability of structure and agency, she proposes a dualistic explanatory methodology which distinguishes them analytically, allowing their variable relations to be investigated (see figure 1.11).

Key to this position is the idea of a "stratified reality" derived from Lockwood. Lockwood conceived social reality as comprising of two kinds of relations, the systemic and the social, each with their own necessary and internal relations. Archer adopts this as relations between "parts" and "people", and further develops it by identifying three kinds of reality – the structural, cultural and agential, each with its own irreducible internal and necessary relations. This stratification is made possible by the concept of "emergence", which implies that though at any given time the extant structural, cultural and agential properties are essentially activity-dependent; they acquire autonomous properties from these activities and come to have their independent "emergent" properties that are not those of the individuals

---

150 Morphogenesis implies a process of social change, while Morphostatis denotes social stability.
who produced them.\textsuperscript{154} As a result, the three realities have the properties of pre-existence, autonomy, durability and causal efficacy, enabling them to individually contribute to reproduction or transformation of social life.

At any given time structure is conceived as the "result of the result" of prior social relations conditioned by an antecedent structural context, maintaining the importance of the internal relations among its constituents independent of the agential action despite being activity-dependent. Arguing against any conception of the structures as virtual, Archer maintains that identification of structures is possible not only because of their irreducible character, autonomous influence and relatively enduring character, but above all because this means that they pre-date any particular group of occupants.\textsuperscript{155} Agency does not create structure, but only reproduces or transforms it in any "generation".\textsuperscript{156} Her conception of structure involves two different kinds, having structural and cultural properties. The former signifies those material – both physical and human, resources we encounter as distributions, roles, institutions and systems. The cultural properties are present in the ideas, beliefs, values, and more importantly in the "propositional register" that emanate from and contains these various elements. These are what she terms the "first-order emergents", with each constituent of the structural and cultural "part" characterized by necessary and internal relations. They are the material conditions and distribution of resources among the agents, and are the results of the prior agential action on the pre-existing structures. These "first-order emergents" constituting both the "parts" have relations within and between them resulting in the "second-order emergents" or the results of the results of agential action. These "second-order emergents" have both necessary or contingent and complementary or contradictory relations among them leading to the four types of "situational logics" – necessary complementary, necessary contradictory, contingent complementary, and contingent contradictory. These respectively offer the "strategic guidance" of protection, compromise, opportunism and elimination, bearing different "opportunity costs" for any given agent and simultaneously differential costs for different agents in relation to their position in the distribution. Archer grants much importance to the "second-order emergents" for the influence they bear on the agents.\textsuperscript{157} She also

\textsuperscript{154} She differentiates between the "emergent" and the aggregate or combination. Archer, \textit{Realist Social Theory}, pp.177-178.
\textsuperscript{155} Archer, \textit{Realist Social Theory}, p. 166.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., p.215.
conceives of “third-order emergents”, which are the “results of the results of results of agential action” from the relations between the structural and cultural emergent properties themselves, with much greater effect due to their systemic character.

By providing differential “opportunity costs” and “strategic guidance” the “situational logics” arising from the structural conditions independent of the agential action conditions the latter. Having been involuntarily placed in the situation and given the need to respond to the “situational logics” the degree of interpretation and action available to any given agent is conditioned. Though, she emphasizes the conditioning power of the structures, Archer desists from making the agents prisoners of the “situational logics”, when she maintains that given their independent “emergent” nature the people are capable of conceiving projects which can “imaginatively outstrip the social possibilities of their times”.\(^{158}\) Given these conditioning possibilities intrinsic to structures, Archer contends that it is quite inadequate to denude this kind of relatively autonomous contributor to the process of social change. In short, structures constrain, whether agents actually recognizes this or not, and consequently condition the vested interests in change or stability for those sharing a position of relative advantage or disadvantage.\(^ {159}\) But, structures do not determine agency overwhelmingly for two reasons. First, any form of socio-cultural conditioning only exerts its effects on people and is only efficacious through people, and second, agential relations themselves have “emergent” powers.\(^ {160}\)

Fundamental to dualist social theory is a more robust and stratified concept of agency, one that differentiates between people in terms of their power and responsibility for what actually happens. This entails conceptualizing agency as dependent on structurally conditioning factors which differentially distribute the capacity to influence outcomes, and thereby establish the relationship between the agency and the structures they inhabit. Archer goes beyond merely pointing to the existence and relationship of agency with structures, by maintaining that the former have independent “emergent” powers. Agency is not only conditioned, but it also conditions and mediates the structures. A strong conception of agency, which contributes to the transformation and stability of social life, derives from this “stratified” and “emergent” concept of agency. Archer makes an analytical distinction

\(^{158}\) Ibid., p. 200.
\(^{159}\) M. Archer, “Human Agency and Social Structure: A Critique of Giddens”, in Clark, Modgil and Modgil ed., Anthony Giddens, p.88; Archer, Realist Social Theory, pp.196-211.
\(^{160}\) Archer, Realist Social Theory, p. 184.
between the various aspects of agency: persons, primary agents, corporate agents and actors. This enables her to delineate the relationship that ensues between these various types of agency, independent of the structures, and the implications for each of them. In her "stratified" model of "people", Archer insists that human beings are a "natural kind" with distinct pre-social biological features. She argues that humanity is required as an "a prioristic anchorage for the understandability of both Agents and Actors over time". Her concept of "person" is based on the "sense of self", which is the basic indispensable human element that makes social life possible, since it is the human person "who do the becoming". This "sense of self" is based on the idea of "the body plus the continuity of consciousness" as the determinate human material with pre-social proclivities. The former is pre-social, enduring, autonomous and causally efficacious, and "the human person father(s) the Agent, who, in turn, fathers the Actor". Archer, thus, argues for a concept of person on which the social and highly changeable agent is anchored and which must not be reduced or absorbed into the latter.

Agents are collectivities sharing the same life chances. Every individual, by their very physical and numerical existence in socio-cultural systems have agential effects. Archer makes a distinction between two types of agents: "primary" and "corporate". The former are those collectivities, which neither express their interests nor are organized for a strategic purpose. They lack any vested interest in the social happenings. Nonetheless, they do influence change or stability, if only through the aggregate effects of their simultaneous co-action in similar ways under similar circumstances. On the contrary, the "corporate agents" have vested interests in matters affecting them and are articulate, organized, and shape the context for all agents. As "corporate agents" agents they try to promote their interests and seek to achieve certain "ends". Nonetheless, these social agents are not without any constraints, as they have a specific set of predispositions particular to their position with which they assess opportunity costs and strategic logics. Also importantly, the autonomous properties of persons who can opt to act for, or against, their collectivity's vested interests, also influence such assessments. Agential interests are subject to social necessity, but nevertheless there is no irresistible compulsion to

---

161 Ibid., pp.287-89.
162 Ibid., p.281.
163 Ibid., p.287.
164 Ibid., p.255.
165 Ibid., pp.259-265.
adopt them. In Archer's conception the interests and desires that motivate agential action are not solely subject to "external reasons" supplied by the vested interests of collectivities in the social structure, and is also positively related to the "internal reasons" supplied by the self-reflection of each person. Archer here argues both for the autonomy of persons and social structures, and only warns of the difficulties that ensue when one seeks to act against the tendencies of their social position, which has a conditioning effect.

Distinct from the persons and social agents are the actors, who occupy various social roles. Role-occupants, unlike the social agents, in such capacity do have the opportunity to "make a difference". When social agents inherit structures with differential positions, the actors for their part can freely choose among roles, but this also means that they have to encounter differential opportunity costs attached to them. The actor is anchored in the person and social agents. Accordingly, actors as autonomous persons can take on high costs and risks to fulfil their ambitions, and as social agents they attach differential importance to their various roles and choose among them. This stratified conception of agency, where actors are influenced by social agents, corporate agents mould the context for other primary agents, and all of them in turn anchored in the person, grants relative autonomy to the constituents and enables an explanation of agential properties in terms of the relations ensuing between them and solely in terms of the structures.

This conception of "people" with pre-social properties means that explanations can accommodate the agential activities against the structures. At the same time the conditioning effects of differential opportunity costs and situational logics provide a basis for explaining the patterning of action and preferences. Having conceived of the structures and agents as possessing independent "emergent" properties, Archer also establishes the interdependent and inseparable nature by her notion of temporality. Analytical dualism is rendered possible by temporality, because it is this concept which allows for an analytical separation of the two inseparable constituents of social reality. The powers of actors and systems are both strongly asserted and equally strongly limited by being related in a temporal sequence, broken analytically into three stages: Emergence-Interplay-Outcome. Thus, although structure and agency are continuously at work in society, the analytical element

166 Ibid., pp.129-31.
167 Archer, "Human Agency and Social Structure", p.88.
168 Archer, Realist Social Theory, pp.275-79.
consists in breaking up these flows into intervals and the projection of the three phases forwards and backwards would connect up with anterior and posterior analytical cycles. First, there is conditioning by all pre-existing conditions (T1), the given state of affairs, of the social action being investigated. Then there is a present of social interaction (T2-T3) in which agents try to achieve their goals using their powers. In this phase the logical relations prevailing within and between structures and cultural systems conditions and is acted upon by the causal relations that exist between the agents. The "emergent" character of agency means that the pre-groupings are in a relationship of exchange and power conditioned by the structures which through social interaction results in the elaboration of structures and agency. Agency exerts two independent influences: temporal and directional, by speeding-up, delaying or preventing the elimination of prior structures, and by influencing what course will be adopted in the future. Finally, there are the outcomes of this episode of interaction (T4), which either result in change (morphogenesis), i.e. structural elaboration of the conditions of action, including the agents themselves, or stability (morphostatis). These changed structures and agents then become the conditions for future action – and so on endlessly (see figure 1.12).

Archer contends that morphogenesis is not always single; instead it is double and triple. It is double as the primary agents over a period of time come to acquire vested interests and become corporate agents by forming promotive interest groups and social movements, and defensive associations. With time, there is shrinkage of the primary agents as they acquire vested interests and begin acting as corporate agents. Furthermore, there is also a triple, whereby agency conditions the social actor who occupies different social roles. The social identities of individual social actors are forged from agential collectivities in relation to the array of organizational roles which are available in society at that specific point of time. Social agency invents new rules and new "games" which contain more roles for the actors and expands the possibilities for the latter not confining them to a fixed array of roles,

For in such structural and cultural struggles, consciousness is raised as collectivities are transformed from primary agents into promotive interest groups; social selves are re-constituted as actors personify roles in particular ways to further their self-defined ends; and corporate agency is re-defined as institutional interests promote re-organization and re-articulation of goals in the course of strategic action for their promotion or defence. 

169 Ibid., p.179.
170 Ibid., p.191.
Archer, thus, proposes a social theory which is emergentist, relational, and analytically dualist. It is “emergentist” as it considers structures and agency to have autonomous internal relations, and exercise an independent influence on the process of morphogenesis/statis. They are simultaneously “relational”, as these autonomous elements are interdependent in social interaction, and hence are inseparable. Analytical dualism engages in an analytical separation of the two for the purposes of understanding what happens when, how and why, by invoking the “emergent” and temporal character of the process. Given time, each is conditioned and conditions the other. Archer’s social theory involves promoting structure and re-centering agency. Subjects are re-centered and structures reinstated; but it is precisely because very strong claims are made for each that the sole responsibility for outcomes cannot be attributed to either. The relation of agency and structure is intrinsically temporal and historical: it is this condition which allows Archer to say that the powers of each must always be considered, but that their precise force has to be established case by case. Central to the morphogenetic approach is the temporal distinction of constraint and freedom i.e. when and how agency can act. Neither are the “emergent” structural constraints made totally activity-dependent, nor is the agency ever-trammelled by the structures. Each of them is given full play in their interaction, which does not foreclose consideration of the varied possible avenues of relatedness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.1 Basis of agential action for various social theories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Holism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situationalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational Choice Institutionalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociological Institutionalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Institutionalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony Giddens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pierre Bourdieu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob Jessop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicos Mouzelis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jurgen Habermas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret Archer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

171 This is in relation to Giddens’s structuration theory, which virtualizes structure and de-centres agency.
Figure 1.12 A structure-agency framework to study NGOs and the empowerment of poor women.

(T4) T1 Structural-Cultural Conditions

Existing structural conditions

Structural
Distributions of material resources and power
Roles: Proprietary-Propertyless; Powerful-Powerless; Employer-Employed; Developer-Developed, Donor-Receiver
Institutions - Family, Village, Caste, Money-lending, Patriarchy, Market, State, Aid, Development, Marriage Systems - Ecology, Economy, Polity, Society
Cultural
Ideas, Beliefs, Norms, Rules, Symbols

Structural

(A) Situational logics

Complementary & Contingent
Necessary
Contradictory
Protection Compromise
Opportunism Elimination

Strategic Guidance

Opportunity Costs
Continuity Change

(Vested Interests (according to their positions)

Involuntary Placement
(of all agents)

(B) Change
(C) Empowerment
(D) Disempowerment

(D) Relations of exchange, power and discourse

Agential Pre-grouping

Individuals

Primary agents - Poor, Women, Dalits

Corporate agents - Landlords, Dominant Castes, Money-lenders, NGOs, Donors, Political Parties, State Officials, Village Assembly

Actors - Occupants of various roles

Character of Agency

Change
Empowerment
Disempowerment

Change
Empowerment
Disempowerment

Individual Collective

Poor

Vested Interest Groups

Corporate Agents

Empowerment
1.5 The Theoretical Framework

The above figure presents the theoretical framework which we would adopt to study the NGOs' efforts to empower the poor women. It is substantially derived from the morphogenetic approach of Archer, which we have shown offers the best possible way to study the issue at hand. In order to highlight the relationship among the various aspects of the framework, the arrows in the framework are elaborated below.

At T1, the structural conditions that are the emergent outcome of the previous social interaction are present. Following Archer, the structural conditions have been disaggregated into their structural and cultural properties. In this framework, the structural properties are represented by the distribution of material resources and power in the society. Poor women occupy a disadvantageous position with respect to both these aspects, their poverty and powerlessness reinforcing each other. Their poverty also means that they are highly vulnerable to small shifts in patterns and lack the ability to take risks. They also occupy several roles in the society, both in the community and in their workplace. Some of these roles typify the poor as the powerless, propertyless in general terms, in relation to the other members of the society. On the other hand, we also have the specific roles the poor occupy as tenants, wage earners, labourers, employed, recipient etc. These roles ensure that they are dependent on others and lack any power to assert themselves. Poor women also live in a world replete with institutions of different proportions and varying influence, for example, family, village assembly, caste, patriarchy, market, aid, development, state etc. In all these institutions they are at a disadvantageous position and unable to advance their interests, as in most instances they lack either access to or control over them. At a higher level we also have the systemic elements of ecological, economical, social and political nature. Other than these structural properties we also have the “propositional registers” inscribed with and emergent from beliefs, ideas, rules, values etc. These structural and cultural elements, as denoted by the arrow (A), are in a relationship of necessity or contingency, and complementarity or contradiction, within and between them resulting in four different situational logics – protection, compromise, opportunism and elimination, shown by arrow (B). Arrow (C) implies that the situational logics condition the social interaction among agents by offering strategic guidance of the available possibilities and the opportunity costs involved in adopting different course of action to various agents differentially.
The agential pre-grouping consists of various types of agents: individuals, primary agents like the poor, women, dalits etc., corporate agents with vested interests in the social change or stability like the landlords, dominant castes, money-lenders, NGOs, political parties, state officials etc. They all have different stakes in the various issues concerning the lives of poor women, who remain as primary agents, incapable of articulation and getting organized to protect their interests. Other than these there are specific actors occupying various roles in the society. These agents are in a relationship of exchange and power, their bargaining power being conditioned by their differential position in the distributional hierarchy. In addition to these two relations we identify a third – relations of discourse – of substantial importance for the empowerment process, which requires positive and alternative articulations. Having been involuntarily placed in the social situation – arrow (D), these agents bring their power to bear upon the latter.

Various agents have different vested interests [arrow (E)] in deciding the issue in their favour, keeping in mind their interests, and tend to either look for change or stability in the existing situation. If we conceive NGOs and the poor as agents looking for changing the situation, there are other agents who have a stake in maintaining the status quo in the existing power relations which are adverse to poor women. Here, they are not only lead by their collective interests, but also by their moral judgement, predisposition, and personal interests – arrow (F). Nevertheless, the outcome as to who will be the winner or the loser in the interaction is not a priori determined. They have to generate and utilize their negotiating strength to influence the outcomes, which are hence realizational.

The outcomes are also relational, since the social interaction is conditioned by structural conditions between T2 and T3. In other words, social outcomes are not merely decided on the basis of the agential interaction, but are conditioned by the situational logics and the strategic guidance and opportunity costs ensuing from them [arrow (G)]. Hence, the agents have to necessarily take into account the opportunity costs involved in adopting different course of actions. This does not mean that they cannot ignore these costs and proceed with their projects, but nevertheless they have to encounter the structural conditions and overcome them in order to do so. This in effect means that poor women and NGOs have to overcome the structural constraints which place them in a disadvantageous position, to bring about empowerment. Any effort by them towards empowerment will be conditioned but the situational logics and relations of exchange, power and discourse with other
agents. As pointed out by arrow \((H)\), their freedom to interpret the situation and act upon it are conditioned, and results in either change or stability of the structural conditions and the agential relations [arrow \((J)\)].

The arrow \((J)\) points to the fact that, social interaction might either result in change or stability. In our case, we are more concerned about the possibilities for social change, in the form of empowerment. Despite this, it would be improper to view any change as a positive outcome and equate it with empowerment. The possibility that the outcome of the social interaction might result in change, albeit a negative one, in the form of disempowerment of the poor has to be accommodated in the framework. Hence, similar to the equi-possibility of change and stability, we also have empowerment and disempowerment as equally possible aspects of change [arrow \((K)\)]. The efforts to empower poor women might also result in unintended consequences from the social interaction, and contain elements of disempowerment. The role of NGOs in assessing the situational logics along with poor women and adopting a strategic approach to empowerment, which essentially results as positive outcome for the poor, is critical.

As an outcome of the social interaction the agential pre-groupings may either change or remain stable – arrow \((L)\). If change ensues, it might be empowering or disempowering [arrow \((M)\)] and in case of former on individual or collective basis [arrow \((N)\)]. The individual and collective forms of empowerment in turn influence each other [arrow \((O)\)] and as a collective, poor women gain vested interests [arrow \((P)\)] and transform from being primary agents into corporate agents [arrow \((Q)\)]. This process of converting themselves into corporate agents is important for their empowerment, as they will be able to express their interests in the various matters of their interests. On a different level, this change is also crucial for them to become independent of the NGOs and for any possibility of the NGOs to withdraw from their activities. The study will employ this framework to analyze the process of empowerment of poor and the role NGOs play in that. Any possibility and understanding of the empowerment process vis-à-vis the role of NGOs necessitates a clear idea of what these organizations are, how different are they from other organizations which populate the organizational universe, what is their function in the society, and in general about the nature and efficacy of these organizations. Following this, the next chapter will focus on the problem of NGO definition and classification and the various functional character of this set of organizations.