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Is the Social Scientific Concept of Structure a Myth? A Critical Response to Harré

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Reading Rom Harré's essay 'Social Reality and the Myth of Social Structure' is an experience that fills me with a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, I am attracted by his concern with rule governed practices, the discursive turn, constructionism and the selectionist theory of social change. On the other, he in my opinion imposes restrictions of such a magnitude on himself that the significance of his work for the social sciences, sociology in particular, is dramatically reduced. In this respect, the essay on which I am commenting here seems to fall behind some of his earlier writings, for instance *Social Being* (1993), although certain limitations are also observable there. It seems as though this narrowing of perspective derives from the choice of causality as the specific angle from which to conduct his polemics. In a sense, then, I do not disagree with the shift Harré has made beyond his early commitment to the realist philosophy of science, but I doubt whether he establishes a sufficiently complex position in his essay to account for the social sciences. What I challenge is his claim that the social scientific notion of structure is a myth and, its corollary, that sociologists – and I include myself among them – are 'well-meaning but metaphysically misguided people' (10). It should be noted that Harré's explicit object of critique is critical realism as represented by Roy Bhaskar and related authors such as Ted Benton and Margaret Archer. That his critique ranges wider, however, is indicated by the fact that it includes references also to social theory and sociology. Since I am neither a representative of British critical realism, nor in a position to come to its defence, I propose to respond to Harré in terms of this broader horizon.

For present purposes, I want to identify two basic problems that in my view prevent Harré from developing his position sufficiently to contribute toward overcoming the current lack of a synthetic theory in the social sciences. The first problem is that he presupposes a psychological and individualist theory of action that does not allow for the kind of relations and dynamics central to the social sciences. The second problem is that he presupposes an ontological position that precludes a social scientific concept of structure. Harré indeed offers a number of useful contact points for the argument I wish to develop, yet I propose to opt for a position quite different from his instead. As I see it, the two problems can be avoided only by means of an interactionist theory that is based on a broader ontological foundation. The interactionism with which I work is a sociological communication and discourse theory and the ontology a weak naturalism giving priority to nature over culture yet allowing the mediation of realism and constructivism. This means that I identify neither with Harré, who is too intellectualist, nor with what he calls the 'critical realist crowd', who is too idealist to be good for the social sciences.

Action or Interaction?

To provide an anchor for a critical evaluation of Harré's thesis of the mythic nature of the social scientific concept of structure, let us begin by considering his basic social theoretic position.

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Focused on the question of causal efficacy, Harré’s abiding emphasis is on ‘particulars’ possessing certain ‘powers’ (1). Generally speaking, a particular of this kind is an ‘agent’ in the sense of a ‘continuously existing being, continuously active which can bring about events without being stimulated in any way’ (2). In the social scientific case, the relevant active agents are ‘people as actors’ (4) who, possessing ‘capacities’ (11) or competences as they do, not only ‘articulate roles’ (40) by ‘following a rule’ (5), but also generate structures by ‘acting in accordance with a rule’ (5). In the final analysis, however, ‘the only efficacious being in the game is the person’ (6), that is, ‘the person is the active agent’ (6). Accordingly, Harré repeatedly calls on psychology to provide the criteria of identity of a genuine agent (7-8, 9).

From a social theoretic point of view, this approach translates into an individualist theory of action. Harré confirms this in various ways, for instance, as when he stresses the significance of the ‘meaning of action’ (7) or offers the picture of an individual having a firm rule in his mind as an example of the minutiae – that is, ‘reductons’ (10) – that maintain the social order and make it basically resistant to change. Decisive, however, are the incontrovertible individualist assumptions underpinning his position that shine through between the lines. They are of a cognitivist and a rationalist kind, both represented in an equally narrow version. Harré’s cognitivist predilection is apparent from his consistent emphasis throughout on the powers, capacities or competences of persons as actors, while his prioritising of the radical freedom of the individual to make choices according to his or her own preferences points up his rationalist tendency. Even when Harré gestures in the direction of an interactionist position beyond his own circumscribed action theory, such as his references to discourse (6) or the social process instigated by the feminist movement (9), he does not broaden these restrictive assumptions.

What needs to be done to prepare the ground for an adequate understanding of the social scientific concept of structure is that we leave the theory of action behind in favour of an alternative non-psychological and non-individualist theory of action together with assumptions appropriate to it. This alternative takes the form of a theory of social interaction or communication. For instance, Habermas speaks of ‘the reversal from the lonely subject to participation in intersubjective discourse’ (1999: 58), while Luhmann (1985: 193) regards communication as the basic process constituting the social world. The exchange of the theory of action for the theory of social interaction means that the unit of analysis is no longer the individual but rather the relations among individuals, social relationships. Individuals are always there, to be sure, yet this does not imply that one is bound exclusively to the competent subject who has something in mind and intentionally pursues certain aims or goals. The emphasis shifts from intentions to relations, from having something in mind to having something in common or sharing something, and from the competent subject to changing forms of communicative experience or intersubjectivity (Miller 1986; Eder 1988; Strydom 1987). An important dimension of such temporally and spatially specific contexts of communicative experience is that they are not constituted exclusively by the participating actors who stand in a relation of double contingency to one another. Simultaneously, such contexts also embrace onlookers, observers, evaluators and commentators, or more generally a public, who lend them an edge of triple contingency (Strydom 1999, 2001). As soon as one adopts a theory of social interaction or, differently, a relational theory of social action, it becomes apparent that

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it is no longer possible to speak in an undifferentiated way about active agents possessing powers, as does Harré. For it becomes immediately apparent that the distribution of such capacities among actors can socially be expected to vary considerably – from a hierarchical relation, on one extreme, to an egalitarian relation, on the other. A relational theory is thus a condition of pinpointing social scientifically relevant structures.

Structure – Metaphysical or Post-metaphysical?

Exactly why does Harré regard the social scientific concept of structure as mythical? Why does he see large-scale or macro-structures as a metaphysical illusion? It is because his theoretical assumptions lead him to settle for a particular generating mechanism that makes social reality and its structure appear in a certain light. Harré makes assumptions, as we have seen, about the fundamental nature of agency, action and people or, rather, persons or individuals. By extension, he then goes on to argue that ‘people…generate the structure’ and, therefore, that ‘(t)hey are a necessary foundation on which the possibility of social structure depends’ (4). In one sense, this social constructionist credo states a trivial truth and is therefore uncontentious. The motives and values of individual actors necessarily go into the makeup of social reality. In at least two respects, however, it falls short of an adequate account of social reality.

In the first instance, Harré exhibits a tendency to operate with a substantialist rather that a relational concept of the person or individual, despite the fact that he regards the discourses jointly created by actors as the medium through which their contributions become part of reality. By contrast, Mead (1962) already recognised that social theoretically the person or individual has to be approached in terms of consciousness or mind as a process taking the form of the social phenomenon of interaction or communication. In the second place, insisting on persons or individuals as generators of structure as he does, Harré conceives of the problem of the micro-foundations of macro-social phenomena in such a way that he reduces the macro to the micro. He opts for an individualist micro-level generating mechanism and thus sees structure in the social scientific sense of the word as a ‘secondary formation or product’ (5) which at best is only a ‘summary expression’ (6) of the joint discursive acts of the participants. On this basis, he regards any notion of macro-structure beyond such a summary of the micro as not merely unintelligible but downright metaphysical.

Here I want to insert two observations. It is interesting, first, that there seems to be a tension in Harré between a psychological action approach and a structural micro-social approach. For instance, he proposes to explain social order in terms of ‘reductons’ (10) yet at the same time defends the ‘discursive turn’ (9) and the centrality of the concept of ‘discourse’ (6). To anyone familiar with the relevant literature it is apparent, second, that his conception of the macro as summary expression contains an oblique reference to Knorr-Cetina. According to her so-called ‘representation hypothesis’, ‘the macro-order is first and foremost an order of representation, that is, of summary references pursued within micro-situations’ (1988: 39-40). However, what Knorr-Cetina never explicated (Eder and Schmidtke 1998: 435) remains equally unclear in Harré. What does this order of representation or expression amount to? Where are these representations or expressions located? Are

they ‘reductons’, intracranial representations, cognitive structures in the mind of the individual? Or are they to be found among the images contained in the collective memory? Or do they form part of the structures of the situation within which the participants relate to one another, for instance, cultural cognitive structures in the form of ‘cultural models’ (Touraine 1981: 63) or social ‘classificatory schemes’ (Bourdieu 1986: 468)? Are they perhaps to be found in all these locations? One indeed should reject the common view of the macro as a particular layer of social reality on top of micro-episodes, as Knorr-Cetina advises, but this by no means implies that the social scientific concept of structure is a metaphysical aberration which needs to be jettisoned, as Harré maintains. Nor does one have to ignore the cogent critiques of classical macro-approaches such as Marxism and functionalism developed during the past fourty years (for instance, Touraine 1977; Giddens 1984) to be able to continue dealing with the macro. Since the macro refers to exactly the same phenomenon as the micro, but at a different level of abstraction, what one needs is a processual and structural approach that continues where psychological and individualist micro-social action theories stop short. Such a post-metaphysical approach seeks to analyse both the micro- and macro-structures of interaction situations that are created and reproduced by the participants as well as their observers, evaluators and commentators.

These general remarks having been made, I now want to single out what I regard as the most problematic strand in Harré’s argument about structure. For this purpose, I will focus on a selection of junctures in his text all of which are in need of further analysis.

Harré summarises the oft repeated centrepiece of his argument as follows: ‘(T)he efficacious agents in the social world are people and they shape their world, creating social structures, by following the rules of social engagement or acting in accordance with them’ (8). In his elaboration of this thesis, he argues that structure in the social scientific sense of the word refers to act sequences and institutions, and that they in turn are secondary formations or products of the activities of people. ‘There are just people and the products of their activities’ (6). ‘Social reality is exhausted by what people do’ (6). Social reality has the ‘ontological status’ of ‘discursive acts’ (6). Over and above this, no more reality can be imputed to it. To do so by means of the concept of structure would be metaphysically misguided. The most striking step Harré takes, however, is to exempt rules from the status of structure (5-6). This is all the more remarkable since he readily admits that they are historically transmitted and guide practices (8). But beyond this he refuses to proceed to treat rules as shared or intersubjective structures. This is a peculiar stance for, as Harré the expert on contemporary cognitive science surely knows, rules do not determine action consistently, as was classically assumed, but rather represent the parameters of micro-social situations within which actors engage with one another despite widely differing values and motives.

Perhaps the most basic difficulty in Harré’s treatment of the question of structure in the social sciences is his failure to develop a sufficiently differentiated concept. Social structure for him embraces institutions and act sequences. These are in turn created or produced by agents possessing certain powers, each of whom engages in action under the motto: ‘That is the sort of person I am’ (8). It is obvious that such a psychological, agency-theoretical understanding of social structure leaves no room at all for what is

social scientifically accepted as central structural features of social reality and organising principles of social positions, namely class, race and gender. In fact, Harré is quite explicit about this. According to him, problems of equal access do not derive from structural variables but are rather attributable to the incompetence of the disadvantaged. For social structural constraints, in his view, are no more and no less that ‘just story lines’ (7).

Besides an impoverished concept of social structure, Harré further fails to recognise a distinction that has been gaining in importance over the past number of decades due to the increasing mediation of the structural organisation of social positions by collectively shared patterns of perception, experience, interpretation and evaluation. This is the distinction between social structure and cultural structure (for instance, Habermas 1984/87, 1996; Touraine 1981; Bourdieu 1986; Alexander and Seidman 1991). It would seem as though certain of Harré’s presuppositions do not allow the distinction. Not untypically, he argues that people generate structure and are therefore the necessary foundation of the possibility of social structures (4). As suggested by the keyword ‘people’, this is a levelling argument that is symptomatic of a failure to carry the theoretically crucial distinction between the social action and interaction dimension and the cultural textual or representational dimension systematically through. This eventuates in Harré’s basic unwillingness to bring rules under the concept of structure. He is adamant that rules should not be ‘reified into a quite unjustifiable systematic sense’ and be given ‘far too concrete a character, as if they existed independently of the practices they guided’ (5). In an even more emphatic vein, he objects to rules being located in a ‘transcendent realm’ (6). This position of his contrasts rather starkly with those of leading social theorists whose writings contain some of the most important, generally recognised advances in the social sciences in the latter half of the twentieth century. Allow me to mention just a few examples: Bourdieu, Touraine and Habermas.

Bourdieu (1986) gives central place to the cognitive structures in the form of classificatory systems or historical schemes of perception and appreciation that are common to the members of society and make possible the construction of a common, meaningful, common-sense world. Instead of regarding them in an intellectualist fashion as universal forms and categories, however, he insists that the social sciences relate these cultural structures to social divisions and inquire into the variations of use made of them according to the social structural position occupied. In social life itself, in his view, these cultural structures are a matter of ‘knowledge without concepts’ (1986: 470), so that their command and use involve practical rather than reflexive mastery. At least this seems to compare with Harré’s insistence that rules are immanent in practices. Touraine (1981; 1988) stresses the importance of cultural models that are common to the members of society and provide them with shared cultural orientations. Groups occupying different social structural positions, or classes, entertain distinct values and thus develop their own particular competing interpretations of those cultural orientations. In turn, each such group-specific interpretation is supported by a complementary set of practices geared towards the realisation of cultural orientations. This leads to a network of competitive and even conflictual interpretations and practices that are related to one another in that they are all oriented toward the same cultural model. According to Touraine, cultural structures of this kind possess a historically variable degree of autonomy. At certain historical junctures, the members of society are more reflexive in relation to cultural

models and therefore more aware of them. To this I would like to add that it would seem as though we are today living in a period in which it is a matter less of knowledge without concepts, as Bourdieu submits, or simply the immanence of rules in practices, as Harré holds, than of cultural cognitive structures being reflected up, autonomous and discursively available for differential use in the construction of social reality.

If Bourdieu and Touraine in opposition to Harré draw a distinction between social and cultural structures and subsume rules under the latter, Habermas (1999) also differs from him in so far as he is willing to treat rules emphatically as transcendental structures. Whether his development of the ideas of Schutz and Wittgenstein in terms of the practical knowledge embedded in the background structures of the intersubjective lifeworld and manifested in the practices and achievements of social actors and the outcomes of discourses amounts to what Harré regards as a reification of rules (6) is highly doubtful. Habermas assumes Peirce (1960) and Apel’s (1980) transformation of the Kantian transcendental realm into the desublimated realm of pragmatically organised, everyday, communicative practice. But he also recognises that the status of the rules in this realm is of a peculiar nature. Their ‘ontological status’ is not exclusively ‘discursive’, as Harré submits (6). Rather, rules or intersubjective structures pertain both to the world and to inner-worldly processes. On the one hand, they disclose the world in so far as they posses a cognitive significance for the members of society. As such, rules have a natural historical origin that gives them a certain universality and necessity, thus presenting them as intuitively and unquestionably given for those sharing them. On the other hand, under conditions of uncertainty a selection of these rules can be rendered problematic, made thematic, transformed and in their new form taken up in the coordination of action and the organisation and self-organisation of society. Here it should be added that this happens continually in contexts that vary in both their degree of openness and their degree of symbolic structuredness, such as innovation in science and the economy, decisions in the political arena, and the problematisation of taken-for-granted assumptions and the search for new solutions in public discourse.

Constructionism or Constructivism?

Harré’s treatment of rules, which contrasts so sharply with the positions taken by some of the leading social theorists, provides us with a criterion for understanding the credo of his social constructionism. It runs as follows: ‘People are effective agents who are creating the social world, creating social structures in accordance with rules and conventions that have come to them historically, and, for the most part, are immanent in practices’ (8). On another occasion it is restated: ‘…the efficacious agents in the social world are people and they shape their world, creating social structures, by following rules of social engagement or acting in accordance with them’ (8).

Informed by an agency-theoretical perspective, the emphasis here is on the social construction of social reality. At the same time, the context of given structural features is underplayed or, rather, the structural parameters are themselves regarded as being subject to construction. All structures and structural parameters have a purely discursive existence. This means that Harré’s credo tells only half the social scientific

story. Actors do not just create their social world, but through their social structurally positioned action and interaction they both draw on and reproduce the shared structures which specify the parameters of the situations within which they find themselves. Further, as soon as the context and its situational structures are taken into account, it becomes apparent that the process of construction takes place in publicly relevant communication. Far from being the achievement of the participants alone, the construction belongs also to those who observe, evaluate and comment on the active agents (Eder 1993; Strydom 1999).

Against this background, it is clear that a line can be drawn between Harré’s ‘social constructionism’ and a quite different form of constructivism. The latter is concerned with the cultural construction of cognitive frames of different orders bearing on norms and preferences within a situation outlined by structural parameters (Eder 1988, 1993; Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Strydom 2000). By contrast with this more restrained cultural constructivism, the former does not shrink back from seeing the structural features themselves as being socially constructed. The extreme nature of Harré’s constructionism explains his polemics against the realism of Bhaskar and his followers. I am not convinced, however, that the global denouncement to which it gives rise can lead to anything else than a sterile contest. A more fruitful route today would seem to be to work toward the establishment of a relation between constructivism and realism (Delanty 1997). It is this same intuition that has led various authors for some time already to search for a way of mediating the two apparently contrary approaches. Among them are, for instance, Bourdieu and Habermas. The former’s structuralist-constructivism is a case in point. Besides the critical-hermeneutical approach he earlier shared with Apel, the latter (Habermas 1999) has recently articulated a weak naturalism that metatheoretically assumes a continuity between nature and culture which nevertheless allows the mediation of a pragmatic realism and a cultural constructivism.

More substantively, Harré’s social constructionism also accounts for a double ambivalence in his theory of social change. On the one hand, he stresses the immanence of rules in practices and counsels against seeing them as concrete as if being independent or autonomous (5, 8). On the other, he pictures rules as the best candidates to act upon if one wants to bring about change (8, 9, 10). The strength of his insistence on the immanence of rules and his neglect to make clear how rules become or could be made available for concrete manipulation already signals a certain ambivalence. But it is then compounded when he undercuts any rule change, or what may be called ‘rule learning’ (Eder 1999: 205), by submitting that ‘reductons’ (10), in the sense of small practices available in the heads of individuals as minute cognitive units, not only underlie rules but are also intransigent to change. Harré for instance includes a brief analysis of the feminist protest as an example of a social process serving as a source of rule change (9). What is striking here, however, is less his neglect to do the analysis in terms of public discourse and its self-organising dynamics and structuration than his virtually immediate qualification of the achievement of this movement by arguing that large-scale changes or revolutions leave ‘everything pretty much the same’ (10).

The final question to which my reading of Harré’s paper gives rise, then, is whether his Wittgensteinianism does not leave us with a paradox. On the one hand, powerful particulars create their own social world, yet on the other reductons see to it that

everything remains as it is. Perhaps there is a difference between 'acting in accordance with a rule' and 'following a rule', as Harré holds, but it is hard to see how it could be a difference that makes any difference as long as there is little or no room for social rule learning in his scheme of things.

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