THE MICRO-MACRO DILEMMA IN SOCIOLOGY:
PERPLEXITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

Mikro-makro dilema u sociologiji: Nedoumice i perspektive

ABSTRACT The micro-macro or agency-structure question is indisputably one of the most important theoretical issues within the human and social sciences. The main purpose of this paper is to carefully explore, fruitfully overview and comprehensively critique the contemporary sociological literature on micro (agency) and macro (structure), from a reflexive-dialectical standpoint. This particular standpoint strategically emphasizes both the circularity and the relative autonomy of structures vis à vis actors, or of institutions vis à vis individuals. In this analytic context, it is critically discussed the varied notion of a middle position on the ongoing theoretical debate between positivism and constructivism, as well as the epistemologically beneficial role that meta-theoretical reflexivity and the internal conversation can potentially play in this debate. In specific, the internal conversation (Margaret Archer) gives a reflexive-dialectical impetus to the micro-macro relationship, while embracing a needed analytical dualism (not necessarily an ontological one).

KEY WORDS sociology, social theory, epistemology, critical realism, reflexivity

APSTRAKT Pitanje odnosa mikro-makro ili dejstvenosti i struktura bez sumnje je jedno od najvažnijih teorijskih pitanja u humanističkim i društvenim naukama. Ovaj rad ima za prvenstveni cilj da u širokom zahvatu pregleda, brižljivo razmotri i detaljno kritički preispita savremenu sociološku literaturu o mikronivou (odnosno, dejstvenosti) i makronivou (odnosno, strukturi), sa jednog refleksivno-dijalektičkog stanovišta. Ovo stanovište strateški naglašava kako cirkularnost tako i relativnu autonomiju struktura u odnosu na aktere, ili pak institucija u odnosu na pojedine. U ovom analitičkim kontekstu, kritički se razmatra ideja o srednjoj poziciji u tekćoj teorijskoj debati između pozitivizma i konstruktivizma, kao i epistemološki blagotvorna uloga koju metateorijska refleksivnost i unutrašnji razgovor mogu igrati u toj debati. Konkretno, unutrašnji razgovor (Margaret Arčer) pruža refleksivno-dijalektički podstrek odnosu mikro i makro, dok istovremeno zastupa neophodni analitički (ne nužno i ontološki) dualizam.

KLJUČNE REĆI sociologija, društvena teorija, epistemologija, kritički realizam, refleksivnost

1 tsekeris@gmail.com
2 a_lydaki@otenet.gr
Introduction

In the human and behavioral sciences, the analytic connection or co-relation between individual and social processes, between cognitive (mental) and social (group) structures, or between "habitus" and "field", as Pierre Bourdieu repeatedly puts it in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), is often understood and elaborated as the big problem of bridging the "micro" and "macro" levels. No doubt, this is one of the most central, recursive and confusing problems for theoretical sociology; but it is also both constitutive of and constitutive for the sociological discourse and the everyday sociological practices (see Pels, 1998).

On the one hand, methodological individualists and rational choice theorists (mainly inspired from scholars like Max Weber, Karl Popper, and Raymond Boudon) usually solve the problem of structure (macro) and agency (micro) by defining the former as a repetition or an aggregate effect of individual actions, through an overly voluntaristic image of society. On the other hand, culturalists and structuralists (heavily drawing upon scholars like Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, or Louis Althusser) tend to solve the same problem by conceiving of individual actions as mere emanations of social institutions or structures (see Vandenberghe, 2005).

But many accounts on the very dialectic of structures and human actions in contemporary sociology are mostly “realistic in the sense that they assume that there is a social reality that is co-constructed by human beings” (Fuchs, 2008: 98). This paper critically deals with the long-standing micro-macro dilemma in theoretical sociology and openly champions the scholarly reflexive-dialectical attempts to establish *both* the circularity and the relative autonomy of structures vis à vis actors, or of institutions vis à vis individuals. Hence, it is profoundly in direct line with what Nicos Mouzelis (2008) imaginatively calls perspectival or methodological dualism, in order to clearly distinguish it from philosophical or ontological dualism (which falsely implies that the autonomy of structures over against actors has not only a methodological but also an ontological basis).

Epistemological Disputes

Within the wider realm of social epistemological thought, there have been various analytic positions in approaching the difficult micro-macro relationship. In their thoughtful paper “Dialectic of Bottom-up and Top-down Emergence in Social Systems”, Christian Fuchs and Wolfgang Hofkirchner (2005) discern three different philosophical traditions relating the categories of thinking (epistemology) and being...

---

3 Of course, the notion of circularity here is not a vicious one – that is, it does not imply the disappearance of the subject into the object or vice versa. For this argument, see Pels (2000).
(ontology). These are well-known today under the labels constructivism, structuralism and interactive dualism.

First, constructivism, mainly represented by the popular epistemological work of Heinz von Foerster, Ernst von Glasersfeld, Paul Watzlawick, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, delineates a general analytic framework within which cognition is more or less constructed autonomously, rather than being determined by the social and physical reality (see e.g. Maturana and Varela, 1987). But this can of course be seen as a reductionist conception that does not consider the dialectical relationship of the individual/consciousness and society/being. It does not take into account the limitation and structuration of individual action, and the thinking in social relationships. If reality, cognition, and consciousness are solely seen as autonomous constructions, existing social pressures, coercion, domination, and manipulation are not sufficiently taken into account. (Fuchs and Hofkirchner, 2005: 34-35).

Second, structuralism mainly keeps in line with Marxist epistemology and naively theorizes the being-consciousness relationship in a rather reductionistic top-down fashion, by assuming that individual and collective consciousness is inescapably determined by being. For instance, the so called Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (mainly represented by the highly influential work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno⁴) sharply criticized the reification/dehumanization of the modern social world (see Vandenberghe, 2009) and repeatedly argued that capitalist society authoritatively “manipulates individual consciousness in such a way that members of society identify themselves more and more with society. In this respect they particularly stressed ideological mechanisms of manipulation that can be found in aspects of mass culture and cultural industry” (Fuchs and Hofkirchner, 2005: 35).

Third, interactive dualism somehow reproduces the old Cartesian “mind-body philosophy” and uncritically distincts between subjective and objective modes of knowledge. In this line of thought, Karl Popper (1972) famously theorized “subjective knowledge” as existing in each of us and pertaining to the social individual and her/his particular attributes, experiences, cognitive competences and other personal capabilities. On the other hand, objective knowledge

…is still developed from an individual’s background, but then acquires an independent existence and exists separately from the person. It develops

⁴ See, for instance, their acute, cogent and wide ranging critique on the emergent forms of mass culture, as well as on the emergent phenomenon of culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972; see also Tsekeris, 2008).
further and then turns the tables, dictating the nature of the personal knowledge from which it arose. Understanding means nothing more than adopting super-personal knowledge for oneself, or taking down wisdom from a higher level for one’s own use. (Fuchs and Hofkirchner, 2005: 36)

Both epistemological traditions are allegedly and apparently opposed to the “received” or “conventional” myth of detached objectivity. However, the highly persistent and contentious problem of analytically linking or co-relating thinking and being, or epistemology and ontology, “cannot be solved completely by constructivist, structuralist or dualistic approaches” (Fuchs and Hofkirchner, 2005: 36; Fuchs, 2008). That is why this paper strategically seeks to promote a reflexive-dialectical sociological approach, with particular critical emphasis upon both the circularity and the relative autonomy of structures vis à vis actors, or of institutions vis à vis individuals.

A Response from Mouzelis

Of course, the mind-body debate “has a much longer history than its sociology counterpart” (that is, constructivism-positivism, subjectivism-objectivism, intentionalism-functionalism, agency-structure, individual-society, or micro-macro) and vividly demonstrates “many similarities to what has happened in social theory in recent decades” (Le Boutillier, 2001: 159-160).

Within the particular analytic context of social and sociological theory, the long-standing binary opposition between objectivism and subjectivism (macro and micro) indisputably pertains to the core of the discipline and has been the main cause that social scientists have often been split between those who have held that social life is governed by the law-like interaction of objective (that is, non-mental) forces, and those who have assumed that social life is instead determined by people’s ideas, values and perceptions (i.e., their subjective states) that defy any attempt at generalisation. In other words, a common assumption has been that if one wanted to generate valid, scientific knowledge about social life, then it would be fruitless to focus on “subjective” factors, such as perceptions, norms, and ideas. (Verweij, 2007: para 2.3)

In some sense, this opposition seems to be inescapable since “every time we construct, however tentatively, a notion of social, political or economic causality we appeal, whether explicitly or (more likely) implicitly, to ideas about structure and agency” (Hay, 1995: 189). Relevant dilemmas have been significantly intensified during the post-Parsonian period “when Parsons’s grand synthesis was challenged
by a variety of competing paradigms (symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, phenomenological sociology, non-Marxist conflict theory, neo-Marxism, structuralism/poststructuralism, etc.) (Mouzelis, 2000: 741). But the immense pluralization of approaches seriously impeded the epistemologically healthy capacity for meta-theory – that is, for a sincere, uninterrupted and open-ended dialogue between opposing worldviews and paradigms.

Nicos Mouzelis (2000) refers to three different forms of reaction to the so called “war of paradigms”, which overwhelmingly characterized the post-Parsonian sociology. The first reaction came from post-structuralism that aimed to “the radical dissolution of boundaries between not only social-science paradigms, but also social-science disciplines and sub-disciplines (economics, sociology, social pathology, anthropology, etc.), or even between the social sciences and philosophy, literature, linguistics” (Mouzelis, 2000: 741). However, such an extreme theoretical de-differentiation naively reduces the essentially complex social reality to an endless chain of signifiers and texts – that is, a confusing “anything goes” condition of epistemological anarchy.

The second reaction came from more constructive sociological attempts aiming to the theoretical transcendence of the existing paradigmatic boundaries. But such “transcending” conceptual frameworks, operationalized either in Giddens’ structuration theory or in Bourdieu’s theory of action (or theory of practice), ultimately tend to eliminate the necessary hiatus or distance between micro and macro, or between subject and object (Mouzelis, 2000: 742). Instead, Mouzelis champions paradigmatic rapprochement over paradigmatic transcendence, as well as bridge-building over dissolution. This eventually signifies “the creation of concepts that show us the complex ways in which subject and object interrelate – so that in certain cases the subject–object distance disappears, and in others it does not” (Mouzelis, 2000: 742).

Actually, Mouzelis’s central aim to study how structure and agency relate to each other, or how real social structures emerge and what influence they have on social order and our social lives, does not break with the “realist” defense of the relative autonomy of the macro over against the micro, or of the structures over against the actors (Mouzelis, 2008).

In other words, the methodological move from the macro- to the micro-level and vice versa perceptively avoids the actor-structure conflation (a la Giddens), which allegedly seeks to transcend the old subjectivist-objectivist divide.\footnote{Essentially, it also avoids reducing structures (power) to actors (knowledge) and vice versa. It is obvious that by committing the serious errors of conflation (central, upwards, or downwards), dissolution, or transcendence, the interplay between structure and agency, macro and micro, can no longer be objectified and investigated (Vandenberghe, 2005). In fact, Mouzelis’s critical target is...}
Mouzelis, rejecting such a conflation enables us to critically assess opposing theories or approaches not only in terms of power criteria (a la Foucault) or aesthetic criteria, but also in terms of truth criteria (Mouzelis, 2007). To put it differently, it enables us to reflexively theorize about theory, that is, to meta-theorize (see e.g. Ritzer, 1991; 1992).

A Response from Critical Realism

An almost identical defense of the relative autonomy of the macro over against the micro, as well as of the irreducibility of the structures to the actors and vice versa, has been carefully exhibited by the tradition of critical realism. Critical realism seems to have strong epistemological links with the realist philosophy of John Searle (1995), who argued that “realism and a correspondence conception [of truth] are essential presuppositions of any sane philosophy, not to mention of any science” (Searle, 1995: xiii).

In direct contrast to idealism, for Searle (1995: 150), “the world (or alternatively, reality or the universe) exists independently of our representations of it”. Within such an analytic framework, empirical social science should strategically seek to formulate true explanatory theories or, at least, to continue to challenge, question and criticize its theories, always keeping a minimum distinction or hiatus between objective knowledge and subjective knowledge.

In the same line, the Argentine philosopher and writer Mario Bunge (2001) describes an objective reality (arranged in levels and distinctly different from the conceptual world), where qualitatively new phenomena can spontaneously emerge from lower levels (emergence). For Bunge, realism undeniably enriches and refines intellectual discourse: “it provides a ‘pro-science’ position with much more flexibility and philosophical depth than positivism” (Reed and Alexander, 2009: 27). These arguments have systematically been elaborated and developed by critical or relational realism.

In general, critical realism primarily aims to re-explore and re-energize the possibility of naturalism in the social sciences. It can be characterized as a “third way” (a middle ground) between the positivist/naturalist tradition (philosophically grounded on the work of Hume, Comte, Mill, Mach, and the Vienna Circle) and the anti-positivist/anti-naturalist tradition (philosophically grounded on the work of Vico, Kant, Hegel, Dilthey, Husserl, and Wittgenstein). A “realist philosophy of reductionism rather than holism. That is, holistic conceptual frameworks are still to be pursued, but sociological aspirations should be more humble and modest (see Mouzelis, 2008).

6 “Critical realism” is rather a smart denomination that arose by the purposeful elision of the terms “transcendental realism” and “critical naturalism”.

---

72

SOCIOLOGIJA, Vol. LIII (2011), N° 1
“science”, sharply distinguished from both positivism and constructivism, claims the original and substantial analytic ability to understand the social and cultural world of scientists-qua-seekers-of-the-real from an ironic distance – ‘epistemic relativism’ – and simultaneously to theorize how, ultimately, through the pragmatic engagement with a world possessed of ontological structure, the collective project of science is capable of judgmental rationalism. Through transcendental ontology, the sociology of science and the philosophy of science are synthesized, and the possibility of human rationality, in a long-term, collective sense, is reaffirmed (Reed and Alexander, 2009: 27-28).

The main representative of critical realism, the British philosopher Roy Bhaskar, assertively argues that, within the erroneous context of epistemic fallacy,7 ontology is (somehow, simply or sophisticatedly) reduced to “our ways of knowing” and “our knowledge of it” (Bhaskar, 1989: 181). In fact, as William Outhwaite concludes, both empiricism (positivism) and idealism (constructivism) “reduce ontology to epistemology, questions about being to questions about our knowledge of being. And in so doing they also retain an implicit ontology of the “empirical world”” (Outhwaite, 1987: 32).

Moreover, the critical realist view is principally based on the distinction Roy Bhaskar made between the “intransitive” and “transitive” aspects of all scientific inquiry. Where “intransitive” aspects of scientific inquiry refer to those deep causes, sequences, mechanisms in the natural and social worlds which exist “independently of identification by human beings” (Bhaskar, 1989: 17), the “transitive” objects of science refer to human knowledge and understanding of the independently existing macro-world of things (Bhaskar, 1989: 18).8 That is, transitive objects of science refer to the “human descriptions of reality” and intransitive to the independent “reality which the [transitive descriptions] attempt to describe” (Outhwaite, 1987: 35).

Critical realists openly reject all forms of idealism, rationalism, constructivism or solipsistic relativism, insisting instead on a real world of things independent of human beings (that is, a real world which has not been created, constructed, defined or is in another way dependent on humans).

7 Epistemic fallacy is the reduction of being in favor of knowledge: “there are instances where the prominence of knowledge about something rather than on the ‘something’ [sic]. That is to say, there is a tendency to emphasize what we know about and not the object of knowing” (Resca, 2009).
8 Hence, Roy Bhaskar’s analytic orientation is mostly upon the (unobservable) causal mechanisms creating the (observable) emergent properties of interdependent structural systems or ontological layers.
This is no less true in the human and social sciences as in the physical and natural realms. According to mainstream critical realism, there is a real physical and social world of independent macro-phenomena, which cannot be reduced to the intersubjective production of meaning (semiosis), language, discursive practices or the human constructions of knowledge.

But, by scholastically focusing on overcoming “epistemic fallacy”, as well as on the careful study of structure at the expense of culture and agency, critical realists (with the remarkable exception of William Outhwaite) have not paid adequate attention to language, meaning and intersubjectivity (the rich human micro-processes in general). This leaves no space for a genuinely circular-dialectical relationship of the individual/consciousness and society/being.

Nevertheless, language (like agency) is indeed real and has to be systematically theorized as an irreducible “causal power”, which silently structures the social and physical world as meaningful. So, critical realism does not really succeed to efficiently address the radical difference between two competing lines of social thought:

1. On the one hand, the fear of relativism or nihilism. That is, the Marxian tradition and the concomitant fear of committing the so-called “linguistic fallacy”, or the “reification of language”, which naively reduces the world to language (just as Rorty did), social action to “performance”, and the human subject to an unstable patchwork of signifiers (the notorious case of Baudrillard) or to an endless chain discursive identifications, has unavoidably led to a serious underestimation of the causal power of language.

2. On the other hand, the fear of epistemological dogmatism, unwarranted objectivism, scientific elitism, or ungrounded normativism. That is, the highly heterogeneous nexus of post-structuralism, post-modernism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, feminism, gender and queer studies, archeology/genealogy and other de-constructivist approaches, such as Richard Rorty’s neo-pragmatism, which often does not recognize anything “outside of the text” (Derrida) and has more or less tended to impede or delete the critical impetus of hermeneutics.⁹

⁹ Unlike post-structuralism and post-modernism, hermeneutics does not, however, reduce the “sign” to a phantasmagoric play of “signifiers” without any “signified” (a real object or reference). It does not naively absorb or collapse the intransitive (ontological) into the transitive (epistemological) dimension. Language, after all, does not speak about itself, but about something else: being – whether this being is human or non-human (a cloud in the sky, a shower of sparks, the eruption of a volcano, a dog barking, a telephone ringing, or an airplane flying). What comes to language, what is expressed and “presents itself” in language is, in Gadamer’s terms, “the world itself”. Thanks to language, it is ultimately opened a window to the (empirical) world itself beyond language.
The Internal Conversation

In general terms, Roy Bhaskar’s persistent underestimation of language/meaning issues, as well as his monistic analytic emphasis upon the “rationality” of agents and the “reality” of entities, structures, generative mechanisms and causal powers, more or less abstracts his attention from the very richness of the social world and from the internal dialogue people have with themselves.

This involves the inspiring and increasingly influential conception of the “internal conversation” (Archer, 2003; 2007), which theoretically describes the continuous reflexive self-confrontation of the individual (that is, the self-self relationship), as well as its complicated dialogical interaction with the ever-changing social environment (i.e. the macro-level).

It is thus defined as “the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa” (Archer, 2007: 4). Schematically, the internal conversation, as a hidden mediatory process, intervenes in between agency and structure (Giddens), the life-world and the system (Habermas), the habitus and the field (Bourdieu), or “people” and “parts” (Archer). Hence, social reproduction or transformation is – more or less – an active “accomplishment” of the reflexively deliberating human subjects themselves, who are still embedded in (and constrained by) an “alienating” and “stratified” objective reality (contra the conflational logic of constructivism, or of Giddens’s structuration theory).

This inherently relational “process” or “mental ability” is nevertheless being seriously neglected within the very flux of routine or habitual daily action (infra-reflexivity). In direct response to such an unwarranted neglect, Gerald Myers reflexively observes that the crucial importance of self-dialogue and its role in the acquisition of self-knowledge, I believe, can hardly be exaggerated. That it plays such a role is a consequence of a human characteristic that deserves to be judged remarkable. This is the susceptibility of our mind/body complexes to respond to the questions that we put to ourselves, to create special states of consciousness through merely raising a question. It is only slightly less remarkable that these states provoked into

---

10 See also Wiley (1994).
11 In the last instance, Anthony Giddens’s ultra-activistic structuration theory can be seen as being in line with Berger and Luckmann’s subjectivistic accounts of social constructivism, which implicitly reproduce and naively celebrate the old tradition of phenomenological individualism (see Berger and Luckmann, 1967). In a sense, the “internal conversation” effectively correlates subjective projects and objective situations within a workable modus vivendi (Vandenberghe, 2005).
existence by our questions about ourselves quite often supply the materials for accurate answers to those same questions (Myers, 1986: 206).

Arguably, the general (relational) sociological theorization of reflexivity as a “complicated dialogical interaction” heavily draws from the famous school of American Pragmatism (mainly grounded on the original stimulating insights of John Dewey, William James, Charles Sanders Peirce and George Herbert Mead).  

From the innovative social epistemological standpoint of the “internal conversation”, the self (including the philosophical or sociological self) is rather reflexively re-created; it is necessarily intertwined with the real world and dialectically re-constituted by the on-going, synergetic and self-organizing mutual interaction of the ego (a) with the emergent social structures and (b) with the significant others (actual, imagined, or implied).

Most importantly, the very existence (or appearance) of these “significant others” is completely integral to the evolutionary reflexive emergence and development of selfhood. Yet, in the original social interpretivist sense of George Herbert Mead, the “other” is not only the other (significant) person, “but another perspective: another way in which the world is judged or appreciated” (Natanson, 1956: 64).

In Archer’s “internal conversations”, the self appears neither as an impersonal “object” of knowledge, nor as an empirical ego, which somehow lacks autonomy, critical agency, imagination, choice, creativity, improvisation and spontaneity. In other words, the cognizing human subject is not self-assured, atomistically passive and narcissistically private any more (see e.g. Tsivacou, 2005; Cilliers and De Villiers, 2000; Briggs and Peat, 1999). The reflexive self-in-relation-with-others

---

12 According to Margaret Archer, “only if the ‘internal conversation’ can be upheld as an irreducible personal property, which is real and causally influential, can the exercise of its powers be considered as the missing mediatory mechanism that is needed to complete an adequate account of social conditioning” (Archer, 2003: 16).

13 In parallel, what should also be reflexively recognized and acknowledged here is the particular importance of the “I-thou” relationship (Buber, 1970), which was the very essence of the great Socratic dialogues. This complex relationship has been involved with the original introduction of second-person inter-subjective methodologies, such as the Bohmian dialogue, surprisingly leading to innovative forms of “dialogic consciousness” (Bohm, 1985).

14 Of course, it is almost a commonplace nowadays that the self is relational. In addition, it is almost a truism that knowledge cannot be analytically distinguished from its multiple complex cognitive-political practices, as well as from the multiple complex social relations that make it generally acceptable and legitimate. However, many of the so-called “situated” or “contextual” perspectives “still treat the environment as supplemental to the individual consciousness” and the “concept of autonomous individual mind – learning to participate – remains privileged and fundamentally unchallenged” (Fenwick, 2001: 247). This implicitly reflects the continuing determination of social/sociological theory to be strong, on the varied basis of final analytic judgments, robust results, compelling
(methodological relationalism) is now explicitly prevailing upon the old *self-in-social-vacuum* (methodological individualism) (see Ho et al., 2001).

Instead of naively seeing subjectivity as a coldly isolated, independent, self-contained and self-referred locus of individualistic experience (according to the classical mentalist Cartesian ego), the “internal conversations”, perhaps in the open spirit of Ludwig Binswanger (1963), fruitfully co-relate it with language, meaning, otherness and (bounded) reflexive deliberation through an (endless) uncertain circular-dialectical process – without however reducing ontological questions to epistemological ones (just as Kant did), or “facts” to performative descriptions and interpretations, symbolic categories and conceptual frameworks.\(^\text{15}\) For Archer, objective circumstances as shaped by socio-cultural properties are real; we cannot make what we will of them with impunity. If the descriptions under which they are known are wildly divergent from reality, then reality will have revenge, because the strategy for pursuing a project will be defective.(Archer, 2003: 139-140).

Within a reflexive-realist\(^\text{16}\) framework, knowledge cannot and should not be erroneously confounded with the mere “recording and analysis of the ‘pre-notions’ (in Durkheim’s sense) that social agents engage in the construction of social reality; it must also encompass the social conditions of the production of these pre-constructions and of the social agents who produce them” (Bourdieu, 2003: 282; 1977; 1984).\(^\text{17}\)

This “analytical dualism” is absolutely necessary for human agents’ creative capacity to distance themselves *cognitively* from the objective social and cultural circumstances, in order to critically see and elaborate on them (meta-reflexivity). In other words, it is absolutely necessary for the sequential radical transformation of the passive “individual agent” (in a Bourdieusian sense) into a self-critical social actor and role-taker.

arguments and inescapably powerful conclusions (Pels, 2003). It is remarkable that hardly anyone in everyday performative practice actually sees knowledge as inherently circular! See e.g. Pels, 2002; Woolgar, 1988.

\(^\text{15}\) Archer (2003) explicitly holds to the realist notion of analytical dualism.

\(^\text{16}\) For the interesting and challenging notion of reflexive or circular realism, see Pels (2000).

\(^\text{17}\) Of course, this should carefully refrain from any sort of “last-instance” objectivism and decisively move towards a rather never-ending reflexive dialectic between micro and macro, action and structure, transformation and reproduction, individuality and sociality (or individual and collective action), randomness and simplicity, contingency and directionality, emergence and social causation (Sawyer, 2007), as well as towards a generalized critique of naïve/uncritical/unreflexive realism, reification and essentialism, at the level of both everyday world-making and professional scientific (sociological) analysis.
Through the internal conversations, we can possibly cultivate and boost our *meta-theoretical reflexivity*, defined as a “stepping back from full engagement in cultural activity”, or as a “form of ironic detachment: a disengagement from tribal custom and a heightened awareness of taken-for-granted assumptions” (Lynch, 2000: 30). But this advanced kind of reflexivity, as Hans Herbert Koegler (1997a) rightly explains, should concurrently be *both* inward-looking (introverted) and outward-looking (extroverted), that is, a *structural self-reflexivity* (sharply distinguished from the instrumental and practical reflexivity of situated agents), resulting as the demiurgic combination of “individual self-reflexivity and socio-structural reflexivity, in so far as the constitution of oneself as an interpreting and evaluating agent is related to objective social contexts” (Koegler, 1997a: 247, n. 3).

In general, increased reflexivity may indeed be *empowering*, by allowing the social subject to critically oscillate “between the stability of habitual and positional structures, and the contingencies that surface within rapidly changing contemporary social realities. By synthesizing each of these causal powers within one theory of social action, it becomes possible to appreciate the complex interplay between structure and agency” (Kemp, 2010: 11).

**Concluding Remarks**

The social theoretical standpoint adopted here strategically emphasized upon both the circularity and the relative autonomy of structures vis à vis actors, or of institutions vis à vis individuals. Actors and structures are *both* relatively autonomous (over against each other) and mutually interdependent. In this analytic context, the radical constructivists (a la Steve Woolgar) should nevertheless abandon their extreme theoretical dedifferentiation/dissolution, or their extreme ontological nihilism, and make only *methodological* use of such notions as relativism, constructivism, performativity, and reflexivity (without however ending up to any kind of methodological foundationalism). This will eventually show us how ‘reality’ – that is, the descriptions, re-descriptions, and constructions of reality, but not reality itself, of course, which exists independently of those descriptions in the same way as the dog barks whether we have a concept of it or not – is ‘performatively’ constructed as a matter of course by their spokespersons. Such a move from ontological to methodological nominalism

---

18 For a superb analysis of the intriguing notion of “alienation as epistemological source”, see the relevant sociological work of Hans Herbert Koegler (1997b).

19 Obviously, this is heavily inspired by the Bourdieusian methodological notion of intellectual socioanalysis, or “self-socioanalysis” (see Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).
implies a consequent switch from a ‘deconstructivist’ to a genuinely ‘constructivist’ posture, from construction to something more akin to phenomenological constitution (Vandenberghe, 1999: 35, n. 7).

Of course, the reflexive-dialectical relationship of micro-macro does possess important methodological “values” and implications. That means, social research should not only focus upon structures and systems, coldly seeking causes, but also upon social action itself, vividly expressed in polymorphous human behaviour, as well as upon the “results of communication and interaction between individuals and their knowledge of the world seeking the comprehension and interpretation of behaviour, while at the same time sensing the weight of history in the formation of the present” (Lydaki, 2010).

In other words, the obsolete rigid dichotomies between interpretation of meaning and scientific explanation cannot be accepted anymore. On the one hand, human beings, as both externally determined and internally motivated, do create (unpredictable) meaning and are inherently capable of reformulating it.20 On the other hand, it can indeed be justified to make logical statements about “regularities that help in explaining and even predicting (or retrodicting) the human construction of meaning. Subjectivity need not rule out regularity as long as different sorts of people feel subjective in similar ways regarding similar objects” (Thompson et al., 1990: xiii).

What is therefore needed is to reflexively envision and fashion the synthetic possibility of a cultural social science, which is “historically circumscribed, but it is also theoretically informed, empirically responsible, and epistemologically aware, and it searches for explanatory validity” (Reed and Alexander, 2009: 36). Besides, sociology is a subject that strongly resists to any “formation as a discipline based around a fixed frame of reference or ‘core’. In that sense, it is a discipline that has to be ‘achieved’, or continually re-invented in new circumstances” (Holmwood, 2009: para 1.16).

References


20 This should necessarily be included in all sociological accounts, as an essential criterion of their very adequacy.


