Beyond Structure versus Agency, Context versus Conduct

In Chapter 2 we dealt with what might be regarded as the two most fundamental questions of political analysis – how we define the 'political' and how we might adjudicate between contending accounts of what occurs within that domain. In this chapter we descend one rung on the ladder of conceptual abstraction to deal with a scarcely less significant issue – that of structure and agency (or context and conduct). Essentially, what we are concerned with here is the relationship between the political actors we identify (having decided upon our specification of the sphere of the political) and the environment in which they find themselves; in short, with the extent to which political conduct shapes and is shaped by political context. Clearly on such a fundamental issue as this we are likely to find a considerable variety of opinions. Some authors (notably pluralists and elite theorists) place their emphasis upon the capacity of decision-makers to shape the course of events. By contrast, other more structuralist authors (notably many institutionalists and neo-Marxists) emphasise instead the limited autonomy of the state's personnel and the extent to which they are constrained by the form, function and structure of the state itself.

Historically, such abstract issues as the relationship between actors and their environment have been thought the exclusive preserve of sociologists and philosophers. Yet, although for a long time silent on such questions, in recent years political scientists and, in particular, international relations theorists have felt the need to return to, to render explicit and to interrogate their own assumptions about structure and agency. In so doing they have increasingly sought to acknowledge, problematise and revise the implicit sociologies and social theories underpinning conventional approaches to their respective spheres of inquiry. This move is nowhere more clearly stated than in the title of Alexander Wendt's seminal Social Theory of International Politics (1999). Even five years before its publication the idea that international relations needed, far less was necessarily premised upon, a social theory would have been unthinkable.

90 Political Analysis

What is – and what is not – at stake in the structure–agency debate?

Given the sheer volume of literature devoted in recent years to the question of structure and agency in political science and international relations, it might be tempting to assume that the need for a series of reflections on this question is relatively undisputed. The reality, however, is somewhat different. For even in sociology, perhaps the natural home of the structure–agency question, there are dissenting voices. If we are, then, to make the case for the centrality of the relationship between structure and agency to political analysis it is perhaps appropriate that we first deal with the potential objections. Among the most vociferous of critics of the 'structure–agency craze', as he terms it, has been Steve Fuller. His central argument is simply stated:

Given the supposedly abortive attempts at solving the structure–agency problem, one is tempted to conclude that sociologists are not smart enough to solve the problem or that the problem itself is spurious. (Fuller 1998: 104)

The case is certainly well made. If sociologists have spent 200 years on the issue and have got no further than Marx's truism that men make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing, then either the question wasn't a very good one in the first place or sociologists have revealed themselves singularly incompetent in their attempts to answer it. Either way the reflections stimulated by pondering this great imponderable have hardly proved very constructive. Consequently, there would seem to be little to be gained by international relations theorists and political analysts in following their sociological forebears into this cul-de-sac of obfuscation and meaningless abstraction.

However tempting it may be to concur and to terminate the discussion at this point, Fuller's remarks are not quite as devastating as they might at first appear. For, in certain crucial respects, they reveal a systematic, if widespread, misinterpretation of the nature of the structure–agency debate itself. In this regard they prove quite useful in helping us establish what is – and what is not – at stake in the structure–agency debate (cf. Dessel 1989). Put most simply, the question of structure and agency is not a 'problem' to which there is, or can be, a definitive solution. Accordingly, the issue cannot be reduced to one of whether sociologists, political scientists or international relations theorists are smart enough to solve it.

Yet at this point it must be noted that if the very language of 'problem' and 'solution' is itself problematic, then it is precisely the language in which the debate is couched (see, for instance, Doty 1997;
centred accounts, tend to resolve themselves into differences about where to look for and, indeed, what counts as, important causal mechanisms in the first place. This implies that ontology precedes epistemology. Such a view is entirely consistent with the argument of Chapter 2 – we must decide what exists out there to know about (ontology) before we can consider how we might go about acquiring knowledge of it (epistemology). Yet having noted this, Wendt and Shapiro almost immediately abandon the logic it implies, suggesting that we might choose between contending ontologies on the basis of what we observe empirically. Surely this now implies that epistemology proceeds ontology. If our ontology informs where we look for causal mechanisms and what we see in the first place (as they contend), then how can we rely upon what we observe to adjudicate between contending ontologies?

Wendt and Shapiro’s confusion is further compounded in the passage which immediately follows, in which a Popperian logic of falsifiability is invoked:

The advocates of individualism, structuralism and structuration theory have all done a poor job of specifying the conditions under which their claims about the relationship of agency and social structure would be falsified. (Wendt and Shapiro 1997: 181)

Putting to one side the problems of Popperian falsificationism dealt with in Chapter 2, here again we see direct appeal to the possibility of an epistemological refutation of ontological propositions. A similar confusion underpins Wendt’s prescriptive suggestion that ‘ontology talk is necessary, but we should also be looking for ways to translate it into propositions that might be adjudicated empirically’ (1999: 37). If only this were possible. When, as Wendt himself notes, ontological sensitivities inform what is ‘secur’ in the first place and, for realists, provide the key to peering through the mists of the epistemeral and the superficial to the structured reality beneath, the idea that ontological claims as to what exists can be adjudicated empirically is rendered deeply suspect. Quite simply, perspectives on the question of structure and agency cannot be falsified – for they make no necessary empirical claim. It is for precisely this reason that logical positivists (like many Popperians) reject as meaningless ontological claims such as those upon which realism and structuration theory are premised.

The danger of assuming an ultimate empirical court within which ontological claims might be adjudicated is revealed if we consider the structure-agency theory of predestination. There is perhaps no more extreme position on the structure-agency spectrum than the theory of predestination – the view that all events, however mundane and
Beyond Structure versus Agency. Context versus Conduct

ephemeral, represent the unfolding of a preordained, inexorable and innumerable historical path. The point is that there is no empirical evidence capable of refuting such a theory. True, a proponent of predestination might falsely predict a particular political outcome, yet this would constitute not so much a refutation of predestination per se as of the theorist’s access to its particular path. Similar points might be made of social ontologies usually considered more plausible, including Wield’s own ‘thin’ constructivism.

It is important, then, that we avoid claiming empirical licence for ontological claims and assumptions. Yet arguably more important still is that we resist the temptation to present positions on the structure-agency question as universal solutions for all social scientific dilemmas – whether ontological, epistemological or methodological. In particular, social ontologies cannot be brought in to resolve substantive empirical disputes. Giddens’ structuration theory can no more tell me who will win the next US Presidential Election than the theory of predestination can tell me whether my train will be on time tomorrow. The latter might be able to tell me that the movements of trains is etched into the archaeology of historical time itself, just as the structuration theorist might tell me that the next US Presidential Election will be won and lost in the interaction between political actors and the context in which they find themselves. Neither is likely to be of much practical use to me, nor is it likely to provide much consolation if my train is late and my preferred candidate loses. It is important, then, that we do not expect too much from ‘solutions’ to the ‘problem’ of structure and agency.

**Conceptualising structure and agency**

Having established that while much is at stake in the agent-structure debate, not everything is at stake, we are now in a position to review more dispassionately the terms ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ themselves.

It is no exaggeration to suggest that the question of structure and agency has troubled, concerned and occupied the attentions of very many social scientists over the years. Yet, as noted above, it is only relatively recently that it has been taken up by political scientists and international relations scholars, as both disciplines have gone through more or less intensive processes of soul searching and have begun again to ask the big questions. Structure and agency is one of the biggest.

Put most simply, the question of structure and agency is about the explanation of social and political phenomena. It is about what is deemed to constitute a valid or adequate explanation of a political effect or outcome; about what adequate political explanation entails.

If we look at how political phenomena have traditionally been explained, we can differentiate relatively easily between two types of explanation: (i) those which appeal predominantly to what might be called structural factors on the one hand; and (ii) those which appeal principally to agency (or agentual) factors on the other. If we are to do so, however, we must first define our terms.

Structure basically means context and refers to the setting within which social, political and economic events occur and acquire meaning. Yet by appealing to a notion of structure to describe context or setting, political scientists are implying something more. In particular, they are referring to the ordered nature of social and political relations – to the fact that political institutions, practices, routines and conventions appear to exhibit some regularity or structure over time. To appeal to the notion of structure to refer to political context may, then, not be to assume very much; but it is to assume that political behaviour tends to be ordered.

At this point it is important to note that to refer to political behaviour as ordered is not necessarily to imply that such behaviour is, consequently, predictable. Nonetheless, as we shall see, the greater the influence of structure, the more predictable political behaviour is assumed to be.

Here the analogy with the natural sciences is again informative. As suggested in Chapter 2, the most fundamental premise of the latter is that the physical world is ordered in such a way as to render outcomes predictable given a few initial conditions and knowledge of the structuring principles of the universe. The purpose of the natural sciences is to elucidate such universal and trans-historical governing axioms. Given knowledge of these and a set of initial conditions (for instance, the theory of gravity and the position and mass of an object to be dropped), the outcome is (assumed to be) predictable. This is seldom the case – and seldom assumed to be the case (theories of predestination notwithstanding) – in the social sciences. For although the social and political context is structured, it is not structured in this ultimately determinate sense. The reason for this, quite simply, is agency – a term which has no obvious analogue in the natural sciences.

*Agency refers to action, in our case to political conduct. It can be defined, simply, as the ability or capacity of an actor to act consciously and, in so doing, to attempt to realise his or her intentions. In the same way that the notion of structure is not an entirely neutral synonym for context, however, the notion of agency implies more than mere political action or conduct. In particular, it connotes a sense of free will, choice or autonomy – that the actor could have behaved differently and that*
this choice between potential courses of action was, or at least could have been, subject to the actor’s conscious deliberation. In this sense, the term agency tends to be associated with a range of other concepts, notably reflexivity (the ability of the actor to monitor consciously and to reflect upon the consequences of previous action), rationality (the capacity of the actor to select modes of conduct best likely to realise a given set of preferences) and motivation (the desire and passion with which an actor approaches the attempt to realise a particular intention or preference).

Set up in this way, the concepts of structure and agency tend to be thought of as oppositional – the extent to which we appeal to agential factors in a particular explanation is the extent to which we regard structural factors as incidental and vice versa. As we shall see, however, this need not necessarily be the case. For now, however, it is important that we distinguish clearly between structural and agential explanations. An example might here prove instructive.

Consider the long-running controversy over the most effective means to reduce (or, more realistically, to stabilise) the rate of crime in contemporary societies. The controversy invariably crystallises itself into a dispute between, on the one hand, those advocating deterrent or retributive forms of punishment and those, on the other, advocating broadly redistributive or re-educative programmes and policies designed to alleviate social deprivation and/or to resocialise the criminal into society. In recent years, in countries as different in their political cultures as Britain and South Africa, the debate has tended to focus around the popular, if perhaps rather unhelpful, slogan ‘tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime.’ Equally significant, however, was the comment, associated in Britain with John Major, that when it comes to crime, we should understand a little less and condemn a little more. Implicit within both of these aphorisms is the notion that those who choose to ‘understand’ crime by offering causes for it tend to attribute it to socio-economic factors which, in some sense, the individual bears subconsciously. This, it is suggested, implies a ‘softness’ on crime itself. By contrast, those who choose to ‘understand rather less’, preferring a more immediate and intuitive notion of causation, focus instead upon the direct responsibility and culpability of the criminal, thereby resisting the (‘sociological’) temptation to ‘explain away’ or dissolve notions of moral deviancy and individual guilt. For present purposes, suffice it to note that the former places the emphasis upon structural factors, the latter upon agential factors.

In sum, in most contexts a series of structural and agential factors can be identified. Structural factors emphasise the context within which political events, outcomes and effects occur – factors beyond the imme-

96 Political Analysis

diate control of the actors directly involved; whereas agential factors emphasise the conduct of the actors directly involved – implying that it is their behaviour, their conduct, their agency that is responsible for the effects and outcomes we observe and are interested in explaining. The specific blend of factors we choose to appeal to will reflect the analytical questions we pose of the contexts which interest us. But those questions should not be considered theoretically neutral. Those predisposed to structural explanations will tend to pose questions which lend themselves to the appeal to structural factors, just as those predisposed to more agential explanations will tend to frame their inquiries in such a way as to select for more agency-centred accounts.

Operationalising structure and agency: the rise of fascism in Germany in the 1930s

Having examined the terms ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ in some detail, it is instructive to turn, for a more detailed exposition, to a specific illustration. Consider the rise of fascism in Germany in the 1930s. In this peculiar case, the contrast between structural and agential factors and associated explanations is stark. Consider first the structural or contextual factors appealed to in accounts of the rise of fascism in Germany in the 1930s (summarised in Table 3.1).

These fall, fairly clearly, into three categories, though they are by no means mutually exclusive. First, a number of accounts place considerable emphasis upon the immediate social and economic context, arguing that it was only under conditions such as those that Germany experienced in the 1930s that fascism could arise, and that this explains to a significant extent the appeal of Nazism at the time. Such explanations tend to appeal to the internal economic, social and political tensions and contradictions of the Weimar regime. Over time these condensed to precipitate a widespread sense of a state, economic and governmental crisis. This, in turn, predisposed the German population to a decisive rejection of the seemingly crisis-prone ruling ideas of the time and, in particular, to a dramatic and populist move to the right which sought to punish the failings of a now delegitimised liberal-left establishment. None, however, that although such a form of explanation might account for a significant change in the political sensitivities of everyday Germans, facilitating fascist mobilisation, it cannot, in itself, explain the form that fascism would take, nor indeed the capacity of the fascists to appropriate strategically this ‘political opportunity structure’ (Jenson 1995). This is, then, in essence a structural explanation in that
Beyond Structure versus Agency, Context versus Conduct

**Table 3.1** Context and conduct, structure and agency in the rise of fascism in Germany

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanations emphasising context/structure</th>
<th>Explanations emphasising conduct/agency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Social and economic context: the internal contradictions of the Weimar regime and the widespread sense of a governing crisis made the German population highly susceptible to a decisive move to the right which sought to punish the failings of the liberal-left establishment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Hitler himself: the charismatic leadership of Hitler mobilised and duped the population into an anti-Semitic and xenophobic fascist mobilisation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Cultural context: a pervasive, deep-seated and distinctly German tradition of anti-Semitism pathologically predisposed the German population to fascist mobilisation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Groundswell resistance to Weimar in the political vacuum following the demise of Weimar and the failure of the Communists to seize the moment, fascist tendencies and groupings organised themselves with considerable strategic skill, thereby crystallising and mobilising a popular and populist groundswell of resistance capable, eventually, of seizing the state apparatus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Historical context: the lingering legacy of defeat in 1918 predisposed the German people to the promise of military and economic ascendency offered by the Nazis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the context is seen to condition, if not entirely determine, the outcome. Given the context, the outcome was likely if not perhaps inevitable. Modes of analysis like this seek to establish the conditions under which particular outcomes become possible, even probable. To derive any greater predictive capacity from them would be to assume that actors are little more than simple extensions of their environment. This is but a small step from the ultra-determinist philosophy of predestination.

A second set of authors emphasise not so much the historical specificity of post-Weimar Germany, so much as the distinctiveness, indeed uniqueness, of German culture over a rather more extended period of time. Thus a currently extremely fashionable account emphasises the context provided by German culture and, in particular, German anti-Semitism. This reading is associated in particular with Daniel Goldhagen's highly emotive and deeply controversial book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996) – a book which began life as a Harvard PhD thesis and which has subsequently won its author a succession of accolades, from the Ameri-
Beyond Structure versus Agency, Context versus Conduct

Given the controversy which has come to surround Goldhagen's book – a controversy which at one point threatened to spill over into the courts – it is perhaps important to pay just a little more attention to the argument itself. For in certain key respects the widely identified weaknesses in the text derive from confusions over the question of structure and agency. Goldhagen's ostensible purpose is entirely laudable. It is to restore the conscious human subject to the perpetration of the Holocaust – in short, to restore a notion of human agency to a set of atrocities for too long accounted for in (comfortingly) structural terms. The deep irony, then, is that the logic of his thesis in fact largely serves to absorb German subjects of culpability for an act of barbarism he regards as at least latent in an 'exceptional' and 'eliminationist' anti-Semitism that pre-dates the rise of Fascism. If Hitler's willing executioners were indeed products of their (German cultural) environment, we must assume they could not have acted differently. Accordingly, they cannot be held culpable or even accountable for their actions. If, on the other hand, they were conscious, reflexive strategic actors who could have behaved differently but chose instead to indulge themselves in an orgy of violence, then their German identity is of no conceivable relevance. Goldhagen seems to dissolve the notion of human agency and subjectivity upon which notions of moral responsibility and culpability must surely be premised. The problem, to be clear, is not so much Goldhagen's tacit structuralism, but his inconsistency on the question of structure and agency – his vacillation between, on the one hand, an essentially contextual explanation of the Holocaust and, on the other, one which would attribute responsibility directly to the actors immediately implicated (for a more detailed exposition, see Hay 2000b).

As Norman Finkelstein notes:

If Goldhagen's thesis is correct... Germans bear no individual or, for that matter, collective guilt. After all, German culture was 'radically different' from ours. It shared none of our basic values. Killing Jews could accordingly be done in 'good conscience'. Germans perceived Jews the way we perceive cockroaches. They did not know better. They could not know better... Touted as a scaring indictment of Germans, Goldhagen's thesis is, in fact, their perfect alibi. Who can condemn a 'crazy' people? (1997: 44)

If Goldhagen does indeed provide an unwitting alibi for Hitler's willing accomplices, then it is nonetheless crucial to note that he resolutely resists the logic of Finkelstein's move. That move – to re-conceptualise the perpetrators not as exceptional characters (though everyday Germans) but as entirely unexceptional modern subjects, people like ourselves – Goldhagen categorically rejects. This is unsurprising. For it

is an extremely disturbing move to make and one not easily accomplished in a work dedicated as an act of remembrance. Yet, if we are to come to terms with the Holocaust, and to assess its consequences for contemporary societies, we must surely pose the disturbing question of the latent potential for atrocities like the Holocaust in modernity itself. As Finkelstein again notes, 'lurid as Goldhagen's account is, the lesson [it] finally teaches us is... remarkably complacent normal people – and most people, after all, are normal – would not do such things' (1997: 86). This contrasts sharply with the view of Primo Levi (himself an Auschwitz survivor): 'we must remember [that] the diligent executors of inhuman orders were not born torturers, were not (with few exceptions) monsters: they were ordinary men [and women]' (1965: 214).

A third, and altogether less controversial, set of structural explanations for the rise of fascism appeals neither to the immediate context of Weimar, nor to what are regarded as the historical specificities of Germanic culture, but to the legacy of defeat in 1918. Here the humiliating terms of the peace settlement loom large. A pervasive sense of economic crisis and decline together with the continuing ignominy of defeat in 1918, it is argued, made the German public prone to the promise of military and economic recovery and global ascendency offered by the Nazis.

Turning to the more familiar agential explanations (again, see Table 3.1), we find two prominent, if rather different accounts.

The first emphasises Hitler himself. For many authors, the rise of fascism in Germany in the 1930s is unimaginable and hence inexplicable without appeal to the character of Hitler. The contextual factors are incidental. The argument is elegant in its simplicity. Exceptional outcomes require exceptional explanations. Consequently, what Goldhagen attributes to the exceptional nature of German anti-Semitism, other authors trace instead to the exceptional personal attributes of Hitler. The latter's charismatic leadership, it is argued, is the decisive factor of the mobilisation of the German population behind a nationalist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic ideology. This is, as clear as you get, an agential explanation.

Other agency-centred explanations draw their analytical brushstrokes more broadly, also arguing that history is made by conscious actors, but now drawing attention to a more extensive cast. Here the emphasis is placed on popular resistance. In the political vacuum following the demise of Weimar and the subsequent failure of the Communists to seize the moment, fascist tendencies and groupings came to mobilise a popular and populist groundswell of resistance, eventually seizing the state apparatus.

While the focus of this latter explanation is still, essentially, agential, it is quite clear that significant appeal is here made to the context in
which specific agential factors came to acquire significance. Timing and the precise sequencing of events, is here crucial. The window of opportunity for fascist mobilisation may well have been small (an assumption which could only be defended through more sustained contextual analyses). Nonetheless, what is distinctive about this form of analysis is that it places the emphasis not upon the ‘political opportunity structure’ itself so much as the capacity of strategic actors to seize the opportunity with which they were presented.

Interestingly, this suggests that rather different standards of explanation are invoked by different authors and, more significantly, that these might depend upon prior ontological sensitivities. Thus, those more predisposed to structural explanations may define their analytical and explanatory task as one of seeking to establish the conditions under which a particular set of events might arise, while those predisposed to a more agential account might regard their task as that of elucidating the strategies required to realise a set of preferences within a given set of conditions. What this also suggests is that structural and agential factors need not be seen as oppositional. Indeed, it suggests the potential utility of seeking to combine the analysis of structure and agency and of recognising the complex interplay between the two in any given situation. It is to attempt to do precisely this that we turn presently. For now, however, it is important that we establish in rather greater detail the limitations of overly structural and overly agential analyses.

**Positions in the structure-agency debate**

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, there has been something of a re-discovery and (re)turn to the question of structure and agency in political analysis in recent years. This has been accompanied by a quite conscious and concerted attempt to move beyond the widely identified limitations of the structural and agential extremes to which social and political theories seemed inexorably drawn in the 1970s. In this sense, and this sense alone, the renewed concern with the relationship between structure and agency has been impressively consensual. Scholars in political science and international relations have rounded on both structuralist and intentionalist tendencies with one voice (see, for instance, Adler 1997; Carlsnaes 1992; Cerny 1990; Dessler 1989; Kenney and Smith 1997; M. J. Smith 1998, 1999; Suganami 1999; Wendt 1997 and, for a review, Hay 1995b). In so doing they have drawn extensively and quite explicitly upon a prior strand of sociological and social theoretical work (see, for instance, Alexander 1988, 1989, 1995; Archer 1988, 1995; Bhaskar 1979, 1989, 1994; Bourdieu 1977, 1984, 1991; Giddens 1979, 1984). If we are, then, to understand the contemporary debate, it is first crucial that we identify what has been seen so troublesome about structuralist and intentionalist perspectives.

It is perhaps appropriate that we begin with the private language in which such discussions have tended to be couched. Those positions and bodies of theory that consistently privilege structural or contextual factors are referred to as structuralist; those that consistently privilege agential factors as intentionalist or voluntarist. Consider each in turn.

**Structuralism**

Structuralism is the explanation of political effects, outcomes and events exclusively in terms of structural or contextual factors. By such a definition, few if any pure forms of structuralism persist. Nonetheless, the term is widely deployed to point to the marginalisation of actors and agency in social and political analysis. As I have elsewhere noted, used in such a way structuralism is little more than a term of abuse (Hay 1995b: 193). To adapt Terry Eagleton’s characteristically memorable phrase, nobody would claim that their own thinking was structuralist, ‘just as noone would habitually refer to themselves as Faro’. Structuralism ‘like halitosis is what the other person has’ (1991: 2).

Yet despite the bad odour that the term now seems to convey, structuralist tendencies have by no means been totally excised from political science and international relations. Thus, although rarely explicitly identified and defended as structuralist, structuralism lives on in various forms of systems theory. Such approaches seek to account for regularities in observed patterns of political behaviour (for instance, the behaviour of states within an international system) by appeal to the operation of systemic logics (logics operating at the level of the system as a whole). In so far as these logics are seen to operate in some sense independently of – and over the heads of – the actors themselves, recourse is being made to a structuralist mode of argument. Within international relations theory, neo- or structural realism and world systems theory might both be regarded as systemic in this sense (on the former see Buzan, Jones and Little 1993; Waltz 1979: 38–59; Wendt 1999: 11–12 and, on the latter, Hopkins and Wallerstein 1980, 1983; Wallerstein 1974, 1980, 1989; for a useful critique, Hobden 1999).

Moreover, in a related if nonetheless distinct sense, the now familiar appeal to notions like globalisation itself frequently implies a form of structuralism. For, insofar as globalisation is seen to imply a developmental logic unfolding over time in a largely irreversible fashion, and in so far as such a logic is seen as circumscribing the parameters of what
is possible politically and economically, the analysis is structuralist (for instance, Barnett and Cavanagh 1994; O’Brien 1997; Ohmine 1998, 1995; Teeple 1995). The same might be said more generally of all appeals to seemingly inexorable ‘processes without subjects’ (Hay 1999b; Hay and Marsh 2000; Winch 2000) or, as Peter J. Taylor has it, ‘-isations’ (2000).

Yet this by no means exhausts the prevalence of structuralist tendencies within contemporary political analysis. Structuralism lurks in the most unlikely places. For, as hinted at in Chapter 4, even the most ostensibly agency-centred accounts, such as rational choice theory, often rely upon an implicit and underlying structuralism. Thus, although the form of rational choice is clearly agent-centred in the emphasis it places upon individual choice, its form is nonetheless inherently structuralist.

The paradoxical structuralism of rational choice

This potentially paradoxical remark perhaps requires some explanation. The point is, in essence, a simple one. The most basic assumption upon which rational choice theory is premised is that individuals are egoistic and self-regarding utility-maximisers who behave rationally in pursuit of their preferences. Moreover, in most cases these actors are assumed to have perfect (or near-perfect) knowledge of the environment in which they find themselves. Additionally, in any particular situation there is only one rational course of action consistent with a specific preference set. Consequently, if the actor is indeed ‘the very model of a modern individual’ (Hollos 1998: 16), then she or he will behave in any given situation in a manner determined (and thereby rendered predictable) by the context itself.

The implications of this are clear. We need know nothing about the actor to predict the outcome of political behaviour. For it is independent of the actor in question. Indeed, it is precisely this which gives rationalist modes of explanation their (much cherished) predictive capacity.

While it may seem somewhat perverse to detect in rational choice theory a basic structuralism, this is by no means as contentious as it might at first seem. For one of its principal protagonists, George Tsebelis, notes precisely this paradox:

That the rational-choice approach is unconcerned with individuals seems paradoxical. The reason for this paradox is simple: individual action is assumed to be an optimal response to an institutional environment, and the interaction between individuals is assumed to be an optimal response to one another. Therefore, the prevailing institutions (rules of the game) determine the behaviour of the actors,

which in turn produces political or social outcomes. (1990: 4, emphasis mine)

Yet this is not just any form of structuralism. In one key respect it is a highly unusual form of structuralism. For whereas, conventionally, structuralism is associated with the claim that the actor is a prisoner of her environment, in rational choice theory (as the name would perhaps imply), the actor is deemed autonomous and free to choose — if only to choose the sole `rational’ option in any given context. It is this, in the end, that is the genuine paradox. Yet, it should be noted, it is in the conflation of choice and structural determination which this paradox implies that rational choice theory’s particular appeal resides. For it allows rationalists to deal (ostensibly) with questions of choice and agency, which would normally entail some recognition of the indeterminacy of political outcomes, without ever having to concede the open-ended nature of political processes. In short, it allows a quasi-natural scientific notion of prediction to be retained despite the theoretical incorporation of human agency, for which there is no natural scientific analogue. In the end, however, this is a façade. For what sense does it make to speak of a rational actor’s choice in a context which is assumed to provide only one rational option? This is rather reminiscent of Henry Ford’s (no doubt apocryphal) comment about the Model T, ‘you can have any colour you like, so long as it’s black’.

This final observation raises a crucial issue, one we have thus far tiptoed cautiously around. Since there is no analogue of human agency in the natural sciences, structuralism might be seen to have strong affinities with naturalism; While structuralists have certainly not held a monopoly on claims to a naturalist mandate for their ‘scientific’ conclusions, there is surely some substance to this connection. For in systems theory, as in rationalist approaches, the social sciences most closely resemble their natural scientific role-models. If the utility of an aspirant science is to be judged in terms of its ability to formulate testable hypotheses (predictions), then structuralism may hold the key to such a scientific status. This is, of course, neither to suggest that the utility of social and political theories should be assessed in such terms, nor that there are not considerable difficulties in squeezing social scientific problems into analytical categories derived from the natural sciences. It is, however, to suggest that naturalism may only be credible to those prepared to dispense with the notion of agency — whether explicitly (as in systems theory) or (as in rational choice theory) by appeal to the fallacy of fully determined free choice. If warranted, this makes the clear recognition of contemporary social and political theorists to label themselves structuralist (Tsebelis’ candour notwithstanding) somewhat surprising.
The structuralist tendencies of the new institutionalism

If rational choice theory is perhaps a rather unexpected, and largely unacknowledged, devotee of structuralism, then the same cannot be said of the new institutionalism. In a sense the new institutionalism's often remarked structuralism can be traced to its very origins as a response to and rejection of the society-centred or input-weighted theories which had come to dominate political science (especially in the USA) since the 'behavioural revolution'. Where these emphasised the decision-making capacity of actors to determine outcomes, the new institutionalism emphasised the mediating and constraining role of the institutional settings within which such outcomes were to be realised. The former's tendencies to intentionalism were almost directly mirrored in the corrective structuralism of the latter. Indeed, the term 'institutionalism' itself implies such a certain structuralism. For if institutions are structures then institutionalism is a form of structuralism.

In this way, the new institutionalism emphasises the ordering (or structuring) of social and political relations in and through the operation of institutions and institutional constraints. Such constraints operate in a variety of ways and might be summarised as follows:

1. The 'density' of the existing institutional fabric in any given social or political context renders established practices, processes and tendencies difficult to reform and steer (P. Pierson 2000)
2. Institutions are normalising in the sense that they tend to embody shared codes, rules and conventions, thereby imposing upon political subjects value-systems which may serve to constrain behaviour (Brininst and Nee 1998: Part I)
3. Institutions are also normalising in the sense that they may come to define logics of appropriate behaviour in a given institutional setting to which actors conform in anticipation of the sanctions or opprobrium to which non-compliance is likely to give rise (March and Olsen 1984, 1989)
4. Institutions serve to embody sets of ideas about which is possible, feasible and desirable and the means, tools and techniques appropriate to realise a given set of policy goals (Hall 1989, 1993)
5. Institutional creation may be constrained by a reliance upon existing institutional templates (DiMaggio and Powell 1991).

In the emphasis it places on each of these mechanisms of institutional constraint, the new institutionalism might be regarded as structuralist. This structuralism, however, is somewhat softer and more flexible than that of rational choice theory and has been tempered somewhat since the initial attempts to 'bring the state back into' political analysis in the 1980s (for instance, Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1985). Indeed, the question of the relationship between structure and agency has emerged as a key focus of analytical attention in recent years among historical institutionalists in particular (Hall and Taylor 1998; Thelen 1999; Thelen and Steinmo 1992: 7-9; see also Hay and Winckott 1998; Hay 2001b).

The notion of structure to which it appeals is also distinctive and worthy of comment. In all of the positions we have thus far considered structures are principally appealed to as material factors constraining behaviour. Yet institutionalism, like constructivism, draws attention to the intersubjective nature of structure and hence to the role of agents in the constitution of the very contexts within which their political conduct occurs and acquires significance. Even if the explanatory weight tends to be placed upon the structures thereby created, this already implies a rather more complex view of the relationship between structure and agency than we have thus far seen. This is nowhere more clear than in the appeal to institutions in political explanation. For institutions tend to be defined in terms of rules, norms and conventions (Hall 1986: 6; March and Olsen 1984, 1989). In so far as such rules and conventions are upheld without the resort to force, sanctions or other forms of direct imposition and constraint, such institutions are intersubjective. They emerge and evolve out of human behaviour. The new institutionalism, particularly in its more historical and sociological variants, thus tends to replace rational choice theory's 'logic of calculus' with a 'logic of appropriateness'. Conduct is context-dependent not because it is rational, in pursuit of a given set of preferences, for actors to behave in a particular manner in a given context, but because it becomes habitual so to do. In this way, the parameters of the possible become confined through the emergence of (intersubjective) habits and norms and their reinforcement over time such that rituals become normalised (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). We behave the way we do because we have become habituated to behaving in particular ways in particular contexts and because it is difficult and potentially risky, as a consequence, to imagine ourselves behaving in any other way. Context-dependent norms of behaviour thus emerge to which, by and large, we conform out of habit and of our own volition. In essence, we become self-constraining, as we put on a jacket on a hot summer's day to go to a meeting or troop en masse to the canteen on the stroke of 1 p.m. when it might be rather more 'rational' to dress in keeping with the weather and to stagger our lunch breaks.

For institutionalists, then, it is unremarkable that policy-makers in a Keynesian treasury department or finance ministry will tend to confine themselves to thoughts and policy proposals consistent with that
Keynesian orthodoxy, even when a more utility-maximising course might be open to them (Hall 1989, 1993). While it might well be rational to consider and, arguably, to pursue different policy solutions, utility-maximisation has little or nothing to do with it. Until such time as an economic paradigm such as Keynesianism reveals itself incapable of throwing up 'solutions' to the policy dilemmas its implementation periodically generates – until, in short, its crisis is announced – it is likely to circumscribe the parameters of policy choice (Hay 2001).

It is in this emphasis upon institutions as constraining the parameters of political possibility that the new institutionalism’s strengths and weaknesses lie. On the positive side, it is highly sensitive to the difficulties in bringing about significant institutional and programmatic change and to the irreversibility of paths once taken. Yet, on the negative side of the balance sheet, its ability to account for the degree of institutional change that is observed is rather limited. Precisely by virtue of the emphasis it places on processes of institutionalisation and normalisation, then, it is far better at accounting for institutional stability than it is institutional change.

Critiques of structuralism

That structuralism, like halitosis, is something the other theorist exhibits is testament to the barrage of critiques to which it has been exposed over the years. Nonetheless, as we shall see, while there may be good reasons for exercising a preference for views of the structure-agency relationship other than structuralism, the conventional critiques are less than totally devastating. Moreover, they tend to be critiques of a rather more totalising and debilitating form of structuralism than that which characterises either rational choice theory or the new institutionalism. Four common challenges are worthy of particular attention.

The first is little more than an expression of exasperation. Structuralism here stands accused of a systematic failure to acknowledge the influence of actors (individual or collective) upon the course of political events. In the last instance, the detractors and critics argue, it is actors that make history. Without them nothing changes; without them there is nothing to explain. An account which argues that political subjects simply make no difference is, then, nonsensical.

We might well empathise with the sentiments expressed here. Yet that such a critique is somewhat less than devastating is not difficult to see. For, quite simply, this is a charge to which any genuine structuralist could quite happily plead guilty. Structuralism fails to acknowledge the influence of actors upon events because, for structuralists, almost by definition, actors have no (independent causal) influence upon events. Agency

is merely a medium through which structural logics unfold over time. To this there is simply no response, save to reiterate the alternate view. This is less a critique of structuralism than a tracing of its logical implications.

A second, related, criticism takes us a little further. Here it is suggested that structuralism presents the depressing image of a world populated by mere automatons whose behaviour is entirely predictable given the context in which they find themselves. Human subjects, in such a schema, are little more than functional relays for processes which are beyond their control, influence or comprehension. Exasperating though this may be for the critic (who fails to recognise this as a description of her experience), the critique does not stop here. Rather it seeks to trace the implications of such an assertion. In particular, it is noted, such an essentially hollow conception of human subjectivity is incapable of recognising any difference between, say, a fascist dictatorship whose other might be penetrated to a considerable extent by processes of ideological indoctrination and social control and a liberal democracy in which the subject might be regarded as enjoying a rather greater degree of autonomy.

Two points might here be noted. First, this may indeed be a logical implication of the ultra-structuralist position. On such a reading there is nothing (or precious little) to choose between a fascist dictatorship and a liberal democracy in terms of the autonomy they accord the subject. Note, however, that this is only a problem for those who suggest that there is – those who hold out the prospect of actors reclaiming their freedom from the structural prison house they currently inhabit. For a genuine structuralist, neither condition is likely to be satisfied. Consequently, while this line of critique may again draw out the implications of an ultra-structuralism and might, as such, motivate a normative rejection of structuralism it, too, is less than totally devastating.

Relatedly, structuralism stands accused of (often unwittingly) promoting fatalism and passivity. For if the course of human history is ultimately pre-determined and pre-determined, then it makes no difference what we (as mere agents) do. Consequently, we might as well sit back and wait for the inevitable unfolding of history’s inner logic. The irony, of course, is that by so doing the anticipated future might be put on permanent hold. If the transition from capitalism is inevitable, then there is no need to devote ourselves to the promotion of a revolution whose form, function and (perhaps) date is etched into the archaeology of historical time. A confidence in historical teleology simply leaves no room for political intervention. Here again, the only problem is one of consistency. In so far as authors who espouse a teleological view of history subscribe also to a notion of transformative political agency, they are
committing a logical fallacy. This is not likely to be a problem for pure structuralists, however, dull their political lives, as a consequence, might be.

Finally, and perhaps of rather greater significance, many authors suggest that there is a fundamental contradiction at the heart of the structuralist position. It is simply stated. If the structuralist view were indeed valid, could structuralism ever be expressed? Put differently, if we are indeed all simply expressions of the structures we bear, how could we hope to know? How, in particular, is it that structuralist scholars, by climbing to a high perch in the ivory tower, can seemingly gain a vantage point from which to observe the structures which constrain the rest of us? In the end structuralism seems to rely on a patronising distinction between the 'enlightened' theorist and the rest of us which is logically inconsistent. This is a point to which we return in discussing Steven Lukes' 'three-dimensional' conception of power in Chapter 5.

This final line of critique does rather more damage to the structuralist position than the others combined. Once again, it points to a problem of inconsistency. If, as for purist structuralists, human subjects are products of their environment to the extent to which the ideas they hold are not their own but those they imbibe from the context in which they find themselves (as, for instance, in Althusser 1971), then what capacity does this give the structuralist to analyse the process? In short, unless the structuralist ideology critic is accorded rather greater autonomy, agency and insight than the rest of us (a proposition inconsistent with a structuralist ontology), then we should surely dismiss her theories as the product of a consciousness no less distorted than our own. What this suggests, in the end, is the difficulties of a pure and logically consistent structuralism. Note, however, that this is not the basis for a refutation of structuralism per se—merely particular forms of structuralism (those which imply a privileged position for the critic). The structuralist ontology may well be 'correct'. But, we can only hope that it is not. For if it is, there is precious little than we can hope to say about the environment in which we find ourselves.

**Intentionalism**

While the exasperation which the above critiques express has tended to put pay to the open declaration and defence of structuralism, its antithesis—intentionalism (or voluntarism)—has survived the years rather better.

The term 'intentionalism' itself implies that actors are able to realise their intentions. Accordingly, we can explain political outcomes simply by referring to the intentions of the actors directly implicated. Intentionalists tend to view the social and political world from the perspective of the participants in social and political processes, climbing down from their high perch in the ivory tower to adopt a position somewhat closer to the action. Like structuralism, intentionalism presents a simple view of the relationship between structure and agency. For, in the same way that pure structuralism effectively dispenses with agency, so pure intentionalism disavows notions of structure.

The concepts of structure, constraint and context are, then, largely absent from such accounts. Instead, intentionalists tend to take issues of social and political interaction at face value, constructing explanations out of the direct intentions, motivations and self-understandings of the actors involved and using explanatory concepts which the actors themselves might use to account for their actions' (Hay 1993b: 195). The world, it is argued, presents itself to us as really it is and should, consequently, be conceptualised in such terms. There is no need to import complex theoretical abstractions such as those associated with more structuralist analytical strategies.

The result is a form of analysis which tends to be highly descriptive. It is rich in detail, low on explanation. An intentionalist account of the reform of European social democratic parties in recent years, for instance, might adopt a 'fly on the wall' approach to the internal workings of such parties in developing a detailed account of this 'modernisation' process. It is less likely to account for the (perceived) need for modernisation in the first place or to situate it in terms of any broader context allowing wider lessons to be drawn.

Like structuralism, however, virtually no pure forms of intentionalism persist to the present day. Intentionalism is perhaps best seen as a tendency present in certain modes of analysis rather than as a distinct and clearly defended position in its own right. It is not difficult to see why. For, without some conception of context, it is almost impossible to deal with the differential capacity of actors to influence political processes and outcomes or, more prosaically still, to account for the inability of actors to realise their intentions in contexts in which they simply lack the resources to do so. It might be rather harsh, for instance, to attribute the failure of any Green Party to win a national election in a liberal democracy to purely agential factors.

It is perhaps not then surprising that most ostensibly intentionalist forms of analysis tend to contain submerged assumptions about the impact of context which remain unacknowledged, undefended and un-interrogated. Thus, for instance, an agency-centred account of the 'modernisation' of European social democratic parties in recent years is
likely to accord far greater significance to the actions of those holding (structural) positions of power and authority within the party than to random passengers on the Clapham Omnibus or the Paris Métro. Moreover, even where causal significance is attached (as well it might be) to the ideas held by those on the Clapham Omnibus or Paris Métro, such an appeal is likely to refer to the structuring of societal preferences. As this example successfully demonstrates, it is an extremely difficult exercise to formulate an explanation of a given social and political outcome with a lexicon restricted exclusively to agental terms. That this is so is due in no small part to the fact that actors themselves routinely appeal to the structured nature of their behaviour, their experience and the contexts in which they find themselves.

A purist intentionalist might well at this point interject by noting that the 'structure' routinely appealed to by actors is, in fact, the behaviour of others (or, at least, a consequence of the behaviour of others). Nonetheless, even this represents a considerable concession. For, from the perspective of the actor being considered (the preferred vantage point of the intentionalist, it should be recalled), the behaviour of others is a relevant contextual factor. It is, after all, the anticipated response of others, a factor beyond the control, that leads me to put on a jacket for the meeting or leave the office at 1 p.m. for the canteen. In this way, and numerous others, the behaviour of others causes actors to reconside what they would otherwise do. Yet, even were we to regard the appeal to the structured behaviour of others as an agental factor, this does not exhaust the analytical poverty of a narrowly intentionalist position. For it does not deal with the fact that Lionel Jospin, for instance, by virtue of his structural position as leader of the Parti Socialiste, could exert a more direct influence over the course of the party's policy trajectory than any of his (not so similarly elevated) constituents.

Pure intentionalism tends to imply a condition of near anarchy in which all outcomes are entirely contingent upon the immediate conduct of the direct participants and in which, consequently, all outcomes are entirely indeterminate. Moreover, it would seem to imply, additionally, that no particular actor is likely to be able to exert any greater influence than any other – or, more accurately, that insofar as certain actors' conduct comes to acquire greater significance this, in itself, is a contingent outcome. Again, however, it should be noted that even the seemingly most intentionalist accounts tend to shy away from this logic of pure indeterminacy, just as structuralist accounts tend to shy away from a logic of pure determination.

If intentionalism is best seen, then, as a tendency, it is important to consider with what other tendencies it might be associated. Two, in particular, might usefully be identified. The first of these is what might be called 'chronocentrism' or, more prosaically, 'presentism'. It is the tendency to concentrate upon the present moment and, in so doing, to remove that moment from its historical context and, in particular, from its relation to both past and future. It is not difficult to see why intentionalism might tend to be associated with presentism. For if there is no conception of context or structure and hence no notion of strategic resources, strategic opportunities or strategic constraints, then there is effectively no relationship between the past and the present. Without a notion of the opportunities and constraints the past might bequeath actors in the present, there is simply no need to historicise action – nor, for that matter, any capacity to contextualise it historically. Similarly, if the determinants of all political outcomes are contained in the instant in which political action occurs, then there is no legacy passed on into the future (save, perhaps, for the memories of the actors themselves). Consequently, a purely intentionalist account can say nothing about the process of social and political change over time, save that it is indeterminate and explicable in purely intentional terms (a statement which amounts to no more than the reassertion of an ontological assumption).

The second tendency arises directly from the first. It is what might be termed 'contextual parochialism' or what Richard Rose terms 'false particularisation' (1991: 450) – the tendency to restrict one's analysis to a tightly specified situation, to analyse that situation in its own terms and resolutely to resist the attempt to draw general or even transferable conclusions. In some respects chronocentrism is merely a particular form of contextual parochialism in which the context to be analysed is specified temporally. Again, it is not difficult to see why intentionalism should result in a reluctance to draw conclusions from one situation and to apply them to another. For, like some postmodernist strands, its logic is that each and every event or occurrence must be understood in its own terms, since the way in which actors behave in any given situation is both unique and unpredictable. Consequently, we can make no appeal to general concepts and there are no lessons to be drawn from one context to another.

Like structuralism, it would seem, pure intentionalism is extremely limiting. Observations like those above have led many authors to suggest that if structuralist accounts tilt the stick too far towards the pole of structure in the structure-agency relationship, then intentionalism is guilty of the converse, failing to consider both the structural constraints on the behaviour of actors and the structural consequences of their actions. Again, it is not so much wrong as profoundly limited and limiting, confining and consigning political analysis to a largely descriptive as opposed to an explanatory role.
The widely identified problems – of perhaps more accurately, limitations – of both structuralism and intentionality have suggested for many the need to move beyond these extremes to some middle ground (for perhaps the most explicit statement of this, see Adler 1997). What is required, it is argued, is a mode of analysis (and corresponding social ontology) capable of reconciling structural and agential factors within a single explanation; an account which is neither structuralist nor intentionalist yet an account which does not simply vacillate between these two poles. In recent years there has been a proliferation of contending accounts. These we will review presently. Before doing so, however, it is first important to establish some general principles from the discussion thus far.

As the example of the rise of fascism in Germany in the 1930s demonstrates well, concepts of structure and agency are implicit in every explanation we offer. Consequently, we can benefit from rendering them explicit and exposing them to critical scrutiny. In so doing it is, above all, consistency to which we must aspire. Yet we need to be clear about what precisely is entailed – and what is not entailed – by consistency in this context. As Martin Hollis and Steve Smith note, "the agent–structure problem is not settled by deciding what proportions to put in the blender" (1990a: 395). By consistency, then, I do not have in mind a particular proportion of structural and agential factors (say, two parts agency for every one part structure) that must be appealed to in any set of explanations which might be seen as sharing a common ontology.

'Consistency' here means something rather different. What it entails is being able to demonstrate how a common social ontology is applied in each case considered and how this reveals the relative primacy of structural or agential factors in a given situation. A social ontology, as this makes clear, is not a guide to the correct proportion of structural and agential ingredients in any adequate explanation. It is, instead, a general statement of the manner in which agents are believed to appropriate their context and the consequences of that appropriation for their development as agents and for that of the context itself.

In seeking consistency in our appeal to the relationship between structure and agency we can benefit from interrogating the explanations we formulate by asking ourselves a series of questions (Box 3.1).
driven a process of corporate tax cutting, thereby undermining the revenue basis of the welfare state.

This is, once again, an improvement. We have now identified a rather different set of potential actors rather closer to decisions relating to welfare expenditure and we have introduced their perceptions into the equation. It is but a short step from perceptions to actions. Yet we have still not directly attributed welfare reform to identifiable subjects in a genuinely causal fashion. One final step fully restores agency to the (now considerably weakened) relationship between globalisation and welfare retrenchment:

Government X, acting on its belief that investors will leave high-taxation environments for low-taxation environments, has reduced the rate of corporate tax, with consequent effects for the revenue basis of the welfare state.

This is by no means a neutral example. Indeed, there are many ways of restoring a notion of agency to our initial statement in such a way as to identify different groups of significant actors and, no doubt, in such a way as to retain a more direct relationship between globalisation and welfare retrenchment. Now is not the place to review the argument that this relationship is, at best, a contingent one (though see Hay 2001c). Suffice it to note that attempts, such as this, to restore notions of agency to processes, like globalisation, without subjects, do serve to problematise the inevitability such processes are frequently seen to imply.

Beyond structure versus agency

In recent years, as noted above, considerable attention has been devoted to the question or ‘problem’ of structure and agency. Invariably that attention has sought to diagnose the need for an approach to the question of structure and agency – in some accounts a ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ – that transcends the unhelpful and polarising opposition of structure and agency. This opposition or dualism, it is argued, has tended to resolve itself into fruitless exchanges between structuralists and intentionalists. Here the ill-tempered debates, internal to Marxian theory, between the humanist and historicist Marxism of E. P. Thompson on the one hand and the structural Marxism of Louis Althusser is often seen as emblematic (see, for instance, McAnulla 1999). The debate was initiated by Thompson, whose blistering ad hominem critique, The Poverty of Theory (1978) was provoked by the (alleged) ‘structural super-
the development of that context over time through the consequences of their actions. Yet, at any given time, the ability of actors to realise their intentions is set by the context itself.

Despite this common ontological core, however, the precise view of the relationship between structure and agency and the implications one might draw from it for political analysis vary considerably from author to author. In the pages which follow, we concentrate on the two approaches most frequently identified as 'solutions' to the problem of structure and agency, namely Giddens' structuration theory and the critical realism of Bhaskar and Archer. Through a critical engagement with these highly influential positions, we establish a point of departure for the preferred strategic-relational approach which is outlined and defended in the rest of this volume.

Before doing so, however, it is perhaps first worth noting that Giddens, Archer and Bhaskar were by no means the first to suggest the utility of a dynamic and dialectical understanding of the relationship between structure and agency.

Ironically perhaps, given the structuralism more usually attributed to him (a structuralism which certainly characterises many of his most important works), it is Marx who, in the opening passage of The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte famously declares, 'men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen' (1852[1960]:115). This brief passage, though frequently cited, is often dismissed as unrepresentative of Marx's writings along the lines that if you write enough you will invariably stumble across insights more profound than the schema within which you are working. This is to do Marx a considerable disservice. For while it would perhaps be wrong to follow John-Paul Sartre in viewing this statement as the central thesis of historical materialism itself (1968), it is far from unrepresentative of Marx's historical writings. Indeed, similar sentiments are expressed in the third of Marx's Theses on Feuerbach of 1845, perhaps his clearest denunciation of structuralism:

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by man and that it is essential to educate the educator himself... The coincidence of the changing of circumstance and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice (1845[1975]:422, emphasis in the original).

The Theses, it should be noted, culminate in another of Marx's oft-cited aphorisms which put paid to his image as a structuralist, 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it' (ibid.:423, emphasis in the original).

In each of these passages, Marx seems to be suggesting that while agents do indeed fashion the world they inhabit (agency causes structure), the context or circumstances in which this occurs affects their ability to do so (structure constrains or conditions agency). It is precisely this sense of the dynamic interplay of structure and agency over time that authors like Giddens struggle - and, as we shall see, in certain respects fail - to emulate. Arguably, the profusion of recent literature notwithstanding, there is little to the question of structure and agency which is not already well (even better) captured by Marx in the opening paragraphs of The Eighteenth Brumaire.

Giddens' theory of structuration

Whatever the merits of Marx's more humanist and historical writings, it is without doubt Giddens who has done more than any contemporary theorist to restore the question of structure and agency to centre stage. His ambitious theory of structuration, developed over many years, has rightly led him to become the most influential social theorist of the times, perhaps of the entire post-war period. Giddens' formulation is, as perhaps all social ontologies should be, appealing in its disarming simplicity. He sets out to transcend the dualism of structure and agency in existing social theory and, in so doing, stumbles upon a logic to which he can now attribute his considerable reputation. His approach to such questions is essentially dialectical: he notes the opposition between the entrenched positions which constitute the terms of a dualism, seeks to demonstrate the poverty of each, and transcends the dualism by offering a qualitatively novel 'third way'. Where there were dualisms, Giddens sows the seeds of duality. Thus, where, in his most recent work, Giddens sets out to transcend the dualism of old and new right, social democracy and Thatcherism, in forging a 'third way' (1998) which claims to be 'beyond left and right' (1994), so in the theory of structuration he proposes what might be seen as a 'third ontology' beyond both structuralism and intentionalism (1976, 1979, 1981:25-48, 1984).

As I have elsewhere noted, Giddens' aim 'has been to develop a hybrid theory capable of reconciling, on the one hand, a focus on the structures which are the very condition of social and political interaction, with, on the other hand, a sensitivity to the intentionality, reflexivity, autonomy and agency of actors' (Hay 1995b:197). Structure and agency are, then, for Giddens, internally related or ontologically intertwined. They comprise a duality. The analogy he deploys is that of a coin: structure and agency are opposite faces. The analogy is telling and has implications to which we shall return presently. Note, however, that it implies an internal rather than an external relationship between structure and agency -
they are mutually dependent, indeed mutually constitutive. This clearly sets the theory of structuration apart from its structuralist and intentionalist precursors in which, at best, structure and agency are coins of greatly unequal weights which periodically collide.

The keys to Giddens' theoretical toolbox are the twin concepts of *structuration* and the *duality of structure*. These are defined, in the useful *glossary* to *The Constitution of Society*, in the following terms:

**Duality of structure**
Structure as the medium and outcome of the conduct it recursively organises; the structural properties of social systems do not exist outside of action but are chronically implicated in its production and reproduction. (1984: 374)

**Structuration**
The structuring of social relations across time and space, in virtue of the duality of structure. (1984: 376)

With the notion of structuration, Giddens extends the symbolic interactionists' emphasis upon the skilled accomplishment of everyday interaction (Goffman 1959, 1963, 1972) to the macro-level, coming to concieve of the dynamic reproduction of social structures over time as a skilled accomplishment on the part of social actors. His focus is thus upon the process of change, in which structure and agent are mutually and directly implicated, rather than upon the context in which that change occurs or upon the actors inhabiting that context. There is a clear emphasis upon process, as we shall see, crucial to any attempt genuinely to transcend the dualism of structure and agency in its analysis of social and political change (see Chapter 4). It is particularly central to the 'praxiological' approach of Piotr Szantostra which focuses particular attention upon the interplay of agency, practice (or praxis) and what is termed 'social becoming' (1991, 1993). As Giddens himself suggests, social processes are 'brought about by the active constitutive skills of... historically located actors' and, he adds, 'not under conditions of their own choosing' (1976: 157). This scarcely veiled reference to Marx is highly significant, suggesting as it does that even in its earliest formulations, Giddens' theory of structuration owed much to Marx's timeless insight.

Surprisingly, given his emphasis upon the need to transcend the dualism of structure and agency, Giddens chooses to highlight not the duality of structure and agency (and hence the analytical nature of the distinction between the two), but what he terms the *duality of structures*. By this Giddens refers to the (ontological) claim that 'social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very medium of its constitution' (1976: 121). Again he is close to echoing Marx — agents make structures, but, their autonomy is limited by the (always) already structured context in which they find themselves. That Giddens seeks to transcend the dualism of structure and agency by pointing to the duality of structure alone has troubled many commentators. Yet, strange though it might at first seem, it provides a clue to the distinctiveness — and possibly to the problematic nature — of his chosen 'solution' to the structure-agency conundrum.

Recall Giddens' coin analogy. Structure and agency are flip sides of the same coin. Consequently, we can view only one at a time. It is surely for this reason that he is reluctant to investigate the duality of structure and agency that his initial ontological interventions perhaps imply. What Giddens seems to suggest is that while structure and agency may indeed be ontologically intertwined, we as analysts are incapable of capturing that 'real' duality of structure and agency, confined as we are to view the world from one side of the coin or the other at any given moment. We may alter our viewpoint to capture the other side, but we cannot view both simultaneously. Accordingly, the best we can perhaps hope for is to recognise in the duality of structure and, presumably, the duality of agency (a term Giddens does not invoke), traces of the dialectical relationship between structure and agency. The irony, then, is that while Giddens appeals to an ontological duality (interlinking) of structure and agency, he delivers an analytical dualism (separation). Although this is capable of capturing the Janus-face of structure and perhaps that of agency or praxis, it is incapable of interrogating the internal relationship between structure and agency which Giddens insists.

This analytical dualism is reflected in the 'methodological bracketing' of structure and agency that he proposes (1984: 281–372, esp. 288–93). This is simply grasped. In practice, he suggests, it is seldom if ever possible to capture simultaneously both the strategic (agential) and institutional (structural/systemic) aspects of a given situation. Consequently, when engaged in an analysis of 'strategic conduct' we must temporarily suspend or 'bracket off' our concern with the institutional context, for we cannot hope to view both sides of the coin simultaneously. Similarly, when engaged in an 'institutional analysis' we must 'bracket off' our concern with strategic conduct. The clear danger is a simple alternation between structuralist and intentionalist accounts which can only belie the sophistication of the structurationist ontology. Sadly, this tendency is closely replicated in Giddens' more substantive contributions in which he seems to vacillate between, on the one hand, structuralist accounts in which processes seem to operate without subjects (as, for instance, in his depiction of the 'juggernaut' of globalising 'late modernity' (1990, 1998, 1999) and, on the other, intentionalist accounts in which the reflexivity and creativity of subjects is emphasised with little consideration to the context in which they find themselves (as, for instance, in
his reflections on self-identity and the ‘pure relationship’ (1991, 1992, 1994). As Derek Layder notes, ‘methodological bracketting . . . has the paradoxical effect of enforcing an artificial separation between lifeworld and system elements and this is, of course, an outcome which is directly counter to the explicit objectives of structuration theory’ (1998: 100).

This is by no means the only problem with Giddens’ formulation. It is, nonetheless, intimately connected to the others. If the (undoubted) appeal of structuration theory lies in its promise (finally) to transcend the dualism of structure and agency, as I think it does, then it should be noted that this promise remains largely unrealised. That this is so is due, in no small part, to Giddens’ reformulation and redefinition of the terms of that dualism.

Throughout this chapter we have tended to assume a common (and generally unproblematic) understanding of structure as the context in which action occurs. Yet this is not what Giddens means by the term. In fact, this latter sense of structure is far closer to Giddens’ notion of system—which he defines as ‘the patterning of social relations across time-space, understood as reproduced practices’ (1984: 377). Structure is redefined, rather idiosyncratically, as ‘the rules and resources recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems’. He continues, ‘structure exists only as memory traces, the organic basis of human knowability, and as instantiated in action’ (1984: 377). There are three things to note here. First, as Layder observes, in this formulation ‘structure does not mean anything like the same thing as it does in conventional approaches’ (1994: 138). Consequently, at best Giddens has transcended a rather different dualism to that which now attracts attention to the theory of structuration. The theory of structuration may well be regarded as a solution to a particular problem (though note again the dangers of the ‘problem–solution’ terminology), but it is not a solution to the conventional ‘problem of structure and agency’. Second, on closer inspection there was no dualism between the terms Giddens deploys (Hay 1995b: 198). If agency is understood as the actor’s ‘capability of doing things’ (Giddens 1984: 9) and structure as ‘memory traces . . . instantiated in action’ (1984: 377), then there would seem little distance to bridge theoretically between them; these terms naturally imply a duality. Accordingly, it would seem, the dualism of structure and agency is resolved less by theoretical innovation than by definitional sleight of hand. Finally, and rather ironically, the genuine dualism between context and conduct (or, in Giddens’ terms, system and agency) lives on. Indeed, as we have seen, it is replicated in the methodological bracketting the theory of structuration recommends. Far from providing a solution to the ‘problem’, Giddens may well compound it.

Critical realism and the morphogenetic approach

This brings us to the other much-touted ‘solution’ to the problem of structure and agency, namely the critical realism of Roy Bhaskar. Given the sheer volume of references to his work in this area, Bhaskar has written remarkably little which pertains directly to the question of structure and agency (though see especially Bhaskar 1979: 34–56, 106–37, 1989: 89–115, 1994: 100–7). Moreover, what he has written is both sufficiently general and, at times, sufficiently impenetrable to sustain a diverse range of often mutually incompatible readings (compare, say, Archer 1989, 1995; Collier 1994; Outhwaite 1987; Sayer 1992, 2000 and the various contributions to Archer et al. 1998). Consequently, rather than present yet another variation in the pages which follow I focus instead on Margaret Archer’s rather more systematic and exhaustive attempt to trace the implications of Bhaskar’s critical realism for the question of structure and agency. This she advances in her distinctive, and now increasingly influential, ‘morphogenetic approach’ (1989, 1995, 1998). Although this, too, is based upon a particular reading of Bhaskar (and a not uncontroversial reading at that), it is a reading that he would seem to endorse (Bhaskar 1998: see also Archer 1995: xii). Moreover, it is a reading which addresses the issues which concern us here in a more direct and systematic fashion than does the work of Bhaskar himself.

On the face of it the critical realist position is very similar to that advanced by Giddens. As philosophical realists, however, Bhaskar and Archer approach the analysis of social and political processes from a somewhat different starting point. The world, they claim is structured in such a way that it exhibits a separation of appearance and reality. As Archer herself notes, ‘there is no direct access to the “hard facts” of social life, at least for the vast majority of us who cannot subscribe to the discredited doctrine of immaculate perception’ (1995: 17). Clearly such an ontological claim is untestable. Yet it serves as the very condition of a (critical) realist approach to social enquiry. The world does not present itself to us as it really is. Accordingly, if we are to reveal the structured reality of the world we inhabit, we must cast our gaze beyond the superficial realm of appearances, deploying theory as a sensitising device to reveal the structured reality beneath the surface. It is this ‘depth ontology’ which underpins critical realism. As this already makes clear, Bhaskar and Archer rely upon a rather more familiar conception of structure to that developed by Giddens. Despite this, what is said about the relationship between structure and agency is remarkably similar to the theory of structuration. Indeed, as already noted, Bhaskar goes so far as to use Giddens’ notion of the duality of structure, arguing, in an
uncharacteristically accessible moment, that ‘society is both the ever-present condition and the continually reproduced outcome of human agency’ (1979: 43, 1989: 92, emphasis in the original).

On the basis of the above observations it might be tempting to suggest that critical realism offers fresh promise of transcending the dualism of structure and agency and, in effect, of delivering what Giddens set out to achieve in the theory of structuration. Yet, as Margaret Archer’s critique of Giddens makes clear, this is far from being the case.50 Her critique is, in certain key respects, the very antithesis of that presented in the previous section. Archer takes Giddens’ claim to have transcended the dualism of structure and agency at face value, and takes issue with it. For Archer it is not so much Giddens’ ability to deliver what he promises that is at issue, so much as what he sets out to deliver in the first place. Quite simply, structuration theory is premised upon a dangerous and false assumption – that structure and agency comprise a duality and not a dualism. As she argues, ‘the two have to be related rather than conflated’ (1995: 6). For Archer, then, structure and agency are ontologically independent, capable of exercising ‘autonomous influences’ (ibid.).

This critique of Giddens provides the basis for Archer’s more general distinction between what she terms elisionist and emergentist theoretical orientations (60–1). In pointing to the need to transcend the dualism of structure and agency, Giddens is an elisionist, dangerously (as Archer sees it) conflating structure and agency by denying their separability. Archer and, presumably by implication Bhaskar, are emergentists, for whom structure and agency ‘are both regarded as emergent strata of social reality’ (60).51 Whereas elisionists concern themselves with the mutual constitution of structure and agency, emergentists concentrate instead upon the interplay of structure and agency over time.

It is the issue of the separability of structure and agency which is the crux of the matter. Archer’s position, at least as expressed in Realist Social Theory (1995), is that structure and agency are not only analytically separable but ontologically separate. In this sense, an analytical dualism hardens into an ontological dualism. For Giddens, by contrast, while structure and agency may be separable analytically, they are not separate ontologically.

At this point it is important to note that Archer disputes this reading of structuration theory, arguing that Giddens endorses an ‘inseparability thesis’ in which structure and agency become entirely indistinct and irresolvable analytically. This seems a particularly harsh judgement. For while Giddens clearly defines structure (as rules and resources) and agency (as the capability to act) such that they are inextricably inter-linked, the very fact that they are defined differently would seem to

indicate that they are seen as separable analytically. To talk of rules and resources is not to talk of the capability to act. The suggestion that Giddens, and other (unnamed) critics of analytical dualism, cannot tell the difference between chickens and eggs (75), is something of a cheap shot. Moreover, as already noted, when it comes to operationalise the theory of structuration, Giddens invokes a ‘methodological bracketing’ which effectively serves to reimpose a rigid analytical and methodological separation of structure and agency. The irony, then, is that despite Archer’s sustained critique, the morphogenetic approach and the theory of structuration, albeit for very different reasons, tend to replicate the dualism of structure and agency which Archer proposes. Archer, nonetheless, does have the benefit of consistency.

It is with respect to temporality, however, that the distinctiveness of the morphogenetic approach is established. Archer’s central thesis is stated simply in the following terms: ‘structure and agency can only be linked by explaining the interplay between them over time . . . without the proper incorporation of time the problem of structure and agency can never be satisfactorily resolved’ (63). Here again the ontological separation of structure and agency is key. For Archer insists that structure and agency reside in different temporal domains, such that the pre-existence of structure is a condition of individual action: ‘structures (as emergent entities) are not only irreducible to people, they pre-exist them, and people are not puppets of structures because they have their own emergent properties which mean they either reproduce or transform social structure, rather then creating it’ (71). Interestingly, however, as Anthony King notes, Archer’s own position on this question seems to have shifted over time (1999: 199–201). For, in her first book, Culture and Agency (1989), she refers to this temporal divide as purely ‘analysical’, whereas in Realist Social Theory (1995) it acquires the characteristics of a profound ontological dualism. Archer’s view, at least in her more recent works, then, is that structures pre-exist agents (or subjects).

This ontological premise provides the basis upon which Archer builds her distinctive conception of ‘the morphogenetic sequence’ (for practical elaboration see also McAnulla 1999; Wilmott 1999).

Structure, here understood as ontologically separate from agency, necessarily pre-dates the actions which either serve to transform or to reproduce it – to produce its morphogenesis or its morphostasis (Archer 1995: 295–7). That action or interaction occurs over a particular (and finite) period of time. Its consequences, both intended and unintended, necessarily post-date such action and are captured in Archer’s term structural elaboration. This, then, establishes a simple temporal sequence through
to capture well the practical consciousness of engaging with a densely structured social and political environment. When orienting ourselves to the realisation of a particular goal we do indeed seem to encounter and engage with an external and pre-existing structural context. Our attempts to realise our intentions tend to be limited temporally, though the consequences of our actions may take some time to realise themselves. Moreover, that process of structural elaboration is one over which we effectively lose control once we have acted.

Yet what this serves to indicate, despite the ostensible concern with the complex interplay of structure and agency, is that such a temporal sequence presents a rather agent-centred and individualistic view of morphogenesis. From the vantage-point of a particular actor, the world does indeed appear to be pre-structured, such that structure and agent inhabit different temporal domains. The problem here is a perspectival one. From the vantage-point of a singular actor, social structures do indeed appear external and temporally independent. Yet, a subtle change in vantage-point alters this. As King explains,

the key error which Archer makes in her derivation of social structure is to draw the sociological conclusion of the existence of a social structure from the perspective of a single individual... if she had decentred her perspective to see that the constraint which I face is other individuals and no less serious for that--just as I form some of the social conditions which mutually constrain these others, she would not have fallen into ontological dualism. (1999: 217)

This is an important point and will serve as a crucial point of departure for what is to follow. Yet it is crucial that we first clear up a potential misinterpretation. While the structured nature of social and political reality is indeed the product of human agency, it is not simply reducible to it (as King here seems to imply). The relationship between actors and their environment is an organic one. As such, the product of human action is, in key respects, greater than the sum of its component parts. It is this that gives structure what Archer terms 'emergent properties'. The key point, however, is that such emergent properties are not exclusively properties of the structure itself. To speak, as Archer does, of structural elaboration is to speak of a process by which forms of conduct and hence human agency are transformed over time, just as to invoke a notion of social structure in the first place is to appeal to the structuring of such conduct. Thus conceptualised, structure and agency do not exist in different temporal domains. Indeed, the very distinction between structure and agency is revealed as purely analytical. To speak of the different temporal domains of structure and agency is, then, to reify and ontologise an analytical distinction.

What it more, this ontological dualism of structure and agency seems somewhat at odds with Bhaskar's critical realism. In the end, Archer's position is too important to be adjudicated on the basis of whether it presents a credible reading and elaboration of Bhaskar. Nonetheless, it is surely instructive to note the tension between Archer's insistence that structure and agency exhibit an ontological (and temporal) dualism and Bhaskar's comment that structures can be said to exist only by virtue of the mediation of human conduct - structures constitute both the medium and condition of human agency (Bhaskar 1979: 43, 1989: 92; cf. Giddens 1984). This would certainly seem to imply that structure and agency are (temporally) coextensive.

As this perhaps suggests, the central limitation of Archer's approach is the rather episodic, disjointed and discontinuous view of agency it seems to imply. Despite her comment that 'action itself is undeniably continuous' (1995: 73), there is precious little room to acknowledge this within the morphogenetic sequence Archer identifies. The impression she seems to give is of structure as distant, external and long-enduring, while agency is conceptualised, in contrast, as an ephemeral or fleeting moment. This seems to imply a residual structuralism punctuated only periodically yet infrequently by a largely unexplicated conception of agency. This appears from the shadows and returns swiftly from whence it came, a perturbation or disruption in the otherwise pristine logic of structural reproduction.

The methodological implications of Archer's morphogenetic approach, as I have already hinted, may well be to reproduce precisely the bracketing of structure and agency which Giddens proposes.

Towards a strategic-relational approach

The above discussion suggests that any genuine attempt to transcend the dualism of structure and agency is only likely to be frustrated by adopting either the theory of structuration or the morphogenetic approach. Giddens' theory of structuration sets out in pursuit of this illusive goal but comes up short, ultimately capitulating in a methodological bracketing which seems to legitimate an alternation between structuralism and intentionalism. Arguably precisely this tendency is exhibited in his more substantive writings (Hay, O'Brien and Penna 1994: 51-61; Stones 1993; Thrift 1985). Archer's morphogenetic approach gets us no further since it is premised upon precisely the ontological dualism we are seeking to transcend. Archer, then, seeks to make a virtue out of the dualism of structure and agency which Giddens seeks but fails to overturn.

Altogether more promising is the strategic-relational approach developed by Bob Jessop (1990a, 1996; Hay 1999b; Hay and Jessop 1993). Like Giddens' theory of structuration, the strategic-relational
approach sets out to transcend the artificial dualism of structure and agency, like Archer it draws upon the critical realism of Bhaskar. Yet in other respects it differs significantly from each of these positions. It is important, then, that we begin by establishing its principal ontological premises.

The first of these, which places the strategic-relational approach in opposition to much of the existing literature is that the distinction between structure and agency is taken to be a purely analytical one. This assumption renders redundant Archer’s insistence, for instance, that structure and agency reside in different temporal domains, such that the pre-existence of structure is a condition of individual action. For if the distinction is analytical, structure and agency must be present simultaneously in any given situation. Whether we can speak of structure and agency as exhibiting different temporal characteristics is an interesting and contentious point to which we return. Stated most simply, then, neither agents nor structures are real, since neither has an existence in isolation from the other – their existence is relational (structure and agency are mutually constitutive) and dialectical (their interaction is not reducible to the sum of structural and agental factors treated separately). While it may be useful analytically to differentiate between structural and agental factors, then, it is important that this analytical distinction is not reified and hardened into a rigid ontological dualism.

As I have argued elsewhere, structure and agency are best seen, not so much (à la Giddens) as flip-sides of the same coin, as metals in the alloy from which the coin is forged. From our vantage-point they do not exist as themselves but through their relational interaction. Structure and agency, though analytically separable, ‘are in practice completely interwoven’ (we cannot see either metal in the alloy only the product of their fusion) (Held 1995b: 208).

As this perhaps suggests, a strategic-relational approach offers the potential to transcend the dualism between structure and agency. It does so by suggesting that rather than consign ourselves to references to structure and agency which are, after all, merely theoretical abstractions, we concentrate instead upon the dialectical interplay of structure and agency in real contexts of social and political interaction. Thus ultimately more useful than the abstract and arbitrary analytical distinction between structure and agency is that between strategic action on the one hand, and the strategically selective context within which it is formulated and upon which it impacts on the other.

Consequently, for exponents of the strategic-relational approach, part of the problem of the structure-agency debate is the language in which it has been conducted. Put simply, the very terms structure and agency themselves seem to imply an analytical and ontological separability.

at odds with the ontological assumptions of the strategic-relational approach. What is required is an attempt to devise a new conceptual language which might better reflect the relational and dialectical qualities of the ongoing interaction of structure and agency. This Jessop has sought to provide by drawing our attention to a range of second- and third-order concepts in which structure and agency are already mutually implicated. His strategy is straightforward. Starting with structure and agency, a pairing which seems automatically to invoke a conceptual dualism, Jessop seeks to bring agency into structure – producing a structured context (an action setting) – and to bring structure into agency – producing a contextualised actor (a situated agent). In moving to this new pairing of concepts, the conceptual dualism has been partially overcome. Yet Jessop does not stop here. A repeat move – bringing the situated actor back into the structured context and the structural context to the situated actor – yields a new conceptual pairing in which the dualism of structure and agency has been dissolved. Jessop now identifies a strategic actor within a strategically selective context. No dualism exists between these concepts which, as a consequence, far better reflect both the manner in which actors appropriate the environment in which they are situated and the manner in which that context circumscribes the parameters of possible actions for them. The path from abstract to concrete, conceptual dualism to conceptual duality is traced in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1 From dualism to duality: the strategic-relational approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abstract</th>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Conceptual dualism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concrete</td>
<td>Strategically selective context</td>
<td>Strategic actor</td>
<td>Conceptual duality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.1
systematically structured outcomes. Parties capable of engineering an
electorally expedient or ‘political’ business cycle may be more likely to
extend their tenure in office (see, for instance, Alesina 1987, 1989).
Consequentley, while the outcome of any particular strategic intervention
is unpredictable, the distribution of outcomes over a longer time frame
will exhibit a characteristic regularity (given some degree of structural sta-
bulity over the time frame considered). A couple of examples may help
to reveal the significance of this insight.

Consider first the prospects for labour market reform in Britain today,
particulariy the likelihood of reforms – such as the provision of com-
prehensive state-funded child-care facilities – designed to increase the
labour market participation of women. An applied strategic-relational
approach to such issues would perhaps suggest that given the existing
institutions, traditions, culture, selection mechanisms and personnel of
the British state, it is more likely than not that the state will continue to
fail to pass legislation which might project a Scandinavian future (of
greater labour market participation on more equitable term) for British
women (Eeving-Andersen 1999: 57-60; Jenson, Hagen and Reddy 1988;
Klausen 1999). Though by no means entirely determined, the outcome is
strategically selected for.

A second, and rather different example comes from the political
economy of globalisation, discussed above (see pp. 114-13). Given near-
universal perceptions amongst policy-making elites of the increased
mobility of capital, it is unlikely (though, again, by no means impos-
able) that liberal-democratic states will increase the tax burden on cor-
porations. The outcome is, again, strategically selected for. Heightened
capital mobility, it is widely believed, makes credible previously implau-
sible capital exit strategies. Consequently, states which wish to retain
their revenue base will find themselves having to internalise the prefer-
ce of capital for lower rates of taxation and more deregulated (‘flex-
ible’) labour markets (Przeworski and Wallerstein 1987; Wiekham-Jones
1995). Interestingly, the empirical evidence lends a further complexity
to this strategic-relational logic. For, given what we know about the dif-
ficulty of systemic welfare retrenchment (see, for instance, E Pierson
1994, 1996a, 2001), we might expect to find states cutting headline rates
of corporate taxation while, at the same time, clawing back various sub-
sidies and incentives offered as tax concessions to business. This, again,
is strategically selected for. As the empirical evidence reveals, while cor-
porate taxation has fallen across OECD nations, aggregate tax burdens
on capital have remained relatively stable (Swank 1996, 2001).
In both of these cases the outcome is ‘strategically selected for’, though
by no means inevitable.

The concepts of strategy and strategic selectivity thus provide the
to realise their intentions as, indeed, they may also come to modify, revise or reject their original intentions and the conception of interest upon which they were predicated.

Actors, as discussed above, are presumed to be strategic – to be capable of devising and revising means to realise their intentions. This immediately implies a relationship, and a dynamic relationship at that, between the actor (individual or collective) and the context in which she finds herself. For, to act strategically, is to project the likely consequences of different courses of action and, in turn, to judge the contours of the terrain. It is, in short, to orient potential courses of action to perceptions of the relevant strategic context and to use such an exercise as a means to select the particular course of action to be pursued. On such an understanding, the ability to formulate strategy (whether explicitly recognised as such or not) is the very condition of action.

At this point it is important to deal with a potential objection. For, it might be suggested, there is a certain danger here of so closely eliding strategy and agency as to imply that all action is the product of overt and explicit strategic calculation (just as rational choice theorists attribute an instrumental utility-maximising means–end rationality to all actors). The argument being made here is, in fact, somewhat different. What I am suggesting is that all action contains at least a residual strategic moment though this need not be rendered conscious. This makes it important to differentiate clearly between intuitively and explicitly strategic action:

1. *Intuitive, routine or habitual strategies and practices* are based upon perceptions (accurate or otherwise) of the strategic context and the likely consequences of specific actions. As such they can be regarded as strategic insofar as such practices are oriented towards the context in which they occur. However intuitive, the act of crossing the road so as to avoid oncoming cars and other pedestrians contains an inherently strategic moment. Although such an understanding and lay knowledge can be rendered explicit, invariably it remains unarticulated and unchallenged. Note, however, how effectively a close shave on a zebra crossing brings to the surface previously un questioned strategic calculations. Insofar as the assumptions which implicitly inform such routines, habits, rituals and other forms of unreflective action can be rendered explicit, these practices contain a significant strategic component. Such strategy is manifest in ‘practical consciousness’ (cf. Giddens 1984: 21–2).

2. *Explicitly strategic action* also relies upon perceptions of the strategic context and the configuration of constraints and opportunities that it provides. Yet here such calculations and attempts to map the
electoral gain might come to re-evaluate the opportunity cost of such a strategy in future. In this way, the interaction of strategy and context serves to shape both the development of that context and the very conduct and identity of strategic actors after the event.

What the strategic relational approach offers us, then, is a dynamic understanding of the relationship of structure and agency which resolutely refuses to privilege either moment (structure or agency) in this dialectical and relational interaction. As we shall see in later chapters, this provides a range of crucial insights into the analysis of political power and political change, whilst exhibiting a particular sensitivity to the role of ideas (ideational factors) in the understanding of political dynamics.