

Question 2)“There is really no need to continue with the 'structure-agency debate' since pretty much everyone now agrees that we need to consider both whilst privileging neither”. Discuss.

Whilst there has been a growing recognition amongst social, political and international relational analysts regarding the importance of considering both, without privileging neither structure nor agency, there is no consensus relating to the nature of the relationship; and, indeed, often theorists - through techniques such as methodological bracketing - end up privileging either structure or agency despite contra intentions. This, alongside different interpretations of authors' work involved within the 'debate', ontological questions, and the notion of seeking a 'solution' to a supposed 'problem', are all reasons for why there is a need to maintain interest in the 'debate'. To illustrate the importance of the 'debate', the essay will begin with an analysis of the terms involved and the related ontological and scientific questions. The essay will then explore the sociological, political analysis and international relation traditions' contributions, which have some crossover, to the 'debate'; ending with advocating a dialectical account of structure and agency referring back to previous discussions and utilising the recent UK riots as a case study – demonstrating the potential effects the 'debate' can have upon political policy.

As the essay will demonstrate, the terms structure and agency are controversial – and theorists, especially dialectical theorists, have utilised different concepts to express the duality of the terms. For instance, Hay replaces agency with 'strategic action' and structure with 'strategically selective context' (Akram 2010). Typically, structure is defined as referring to the context and ordering of social, economic and political relations; whereas agency refers to practices such as reflexivity, choice and rationality (Hay 2002). Those who privilege structure tend to be structuralists/functionalists, whereas those focusing upon agency are often intentionalists/voluntarists; both simplistic and inadequate accounts (Hay 2002; Hay 1995; Bieler and Morton 2001). However, 'true' forms of structuralism and intentionalism rarely exist (Hay 2002). By dialectical analysis, the essay is advancing the notion of dialectics where concepts (such as structure and agency) are utilised to understand a complex interplay of processes/mechanisms, as the concepts are not real *per se*.

The 'debate' reflects ontological choices. Ontology is a 'political question', inquiring about the 'nature', boundaries, and subject area of political analysis (Hay 2002). However, critiques such as Pleasants' (2009) place ontology into doubt, so this includes the relevance of the 'debate', but for a different reason than arguing the 'debate' has been 'solved' through theorists agreeing about the relative importance of structure and agency. Rather, he argues that members of the political science community are involved in an ontological 'crusade', specifically criticising Hay's (2009a) analysis/argument that ontological assumptions cannot be refuted or tested empirically, as Hay argues that contrasting ontologies interpret empirical evidence differently so there is no 'solution' because such an argument would mean that political analysis would have to be eventually confined to one ontology (also see Hay 2002; Bieler and Morton 2001; Hay 2005). Pleasants, slightly pretentiously, believes that ontology should be left for philosophy given its abstract nature, whereas empirical investigation should be the focus of political analysis (see Hay's (2009b) response).

The 'debate' relates to the 'scientific question', an epistemological concern, relating to what forms and aspects of political knowledge are able to be discovered and understood regarding the political world that has been constructed through ontological assumptions and whether politics can be/should be a science (Hay 2002). Natural scientists' studies are often 'agentless', creating problems for political/social science attempts to construct a science based upon natural science's methodology/principles, as natural scientists do have laws that are independent to the researcher; whereas social and political researchers are always interrelated with the processes they are trying to understand (Hay 2002; Hay 1995; Archer 1998; Wendt 1987).

Sociology has been central to the 'structure-agency debate'. Sociological work, such as Giddens, was essential to influencing the move - from around the 1970s - away from privileging neither structure nor agency, reformulating sociology as the discipline of the 'structure-agency debate' (Hay 2002; Hay 1995). Central to Giddens' (1984) theory is the stratification model of the agent, where the routine form of action is constituted through reflexivity, rationalisation and motivation. Giddens argues that day-to-day action is made up of mainly intentional action, but often with unintended consequences. By intention, Giddens refers to the way actors utilise knowledge to act in a certain way to achieve a particular outcome, but also how action may be different to what the actor desired resulting in unintended acts; with both forms of actions possibly resulting in unintended consequences.

For Giddens (1979;1984) there is a difference between structure and system, and too often they have been conflated by structuralist/functionalist thought, essentially neglecting the importance of time/temporality. Structure refers to rules and resources that influence transformations through agency, but Giddens also notes the changing nature of rules themselves. Structure relates to the formation of social systems that are constituted by social practices that occur across time and space, with agents situated within social systems, utilising rules and resources. There are three structural properties of social systems; significant, domination and legitimation, which interplay with each other. Giddens (1979) therefore argues that the 'stratification model of action' relates to the properties of structure, as social systems are constituted through agents' social interaction over time and space informed by structural resources and rules, which are then constituted/transformed by the former creating a dialectical relationship as interaction reproduces and sometimes transforms the structures that inform social systems.

However, Hay (2002) argues that Giddens forms an ontological distinction between structure and agency through concepts such as methodological bracketing. Methodological bracketing refers to the practice of studying how, through the modalities of structuration, the properties of structure are put into action either through focusing upon strategic conduct (so how actors utilise rules and resources in a given context), or institutional analysis (a more focused analysis upon the roles rules and resources have in reproducing social relations) (Giddens 1979). Essentially, Giddens is only able to appear to overcome the dualism of structure and agency through an unconventional redefinition of structure, with the dualism reappearing through his conception of system, especially through methodological bracketing – but because system is not as prominent in Giddens' theory, Giddens is closer to an intentionalist/agent approach (Hay 1995; Joseph 2008; Bieler and Morton 2001). Hay (2002), contra to Giddens' viewing structure and agency as two sides of the same coin, sees structure and agency as the metal alloy of the coin, representing their interdependent nature. Yet Bates (2006) argues that both analogies are problematic, as neither, he believes, reflects their perspective/ontology. Despite many viewing Giddens as the 'solution' to the 'debate', his theory has several major inadequacies, illustrating the importance of the 'debate' to elaborate/critique theorists such as Giddens.

Bhaskar's, another sociologist, critical realism and position regarding the 'debate' is an example of the varying interpretations of authors' work (and critical realism) within the 'debate' (Hay 2002). Archer, another critical realist, has drawn on Bhaskar's work, but Hay (2002; 2005) highlights the contentious reading Archer, and others', have:

This ontological dualism of structure and agency seems somewhat at odds with Bhaskar's critical realism... 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 their mediation of human conduct (Hay 2002: 125/6).

Archer has criticised Giddens for not viewing structure and agency as ontologically distinct, even arguing Giddens does not create an analytical distinction between the two terms (Hay 2002). Terming this central conflation, Archer (1998) has argued that the differential aspects of structure and agency are not being respected, especially through practices such as methodological bracketing. Archer believes that only critical realism allows for a non-conflationary approach, through its respect of the interplay but distinct properties of structure and agency – however, it is important to note the difference in interpretation between theorists such as Hay and Archer regarding critical realism. The critical realism utilised within the dialectical approach advocated below draws more upon Hay's than Archer's interpretation. This again illuminates the importance of not viewing the 'debate' as resolved. Furthermore, Bates (2006) has criticised both Archer's and Giddens' theoretical conceptions inability to consider the importance of change and their view of structure and agency, as they create temporal dualisms between cyclical and linear temporalities.

Jessop (1996) is a central theorist in the political analysis's contribution to the 'debate', arguing sociology has failed to transcend the dualism of structure and agency through its inability to consider specific agent actions and the strategies constructed in relation to structural factors. Jessop (1996) differentiates between a 'structural' moment where social, political relations at a given strategic context/time cannot be changed by the actor/action and a 'conjunctural' moment where such relations can be changed at that time/context. Some agents may find relations 'structural' whereas other agents may find the same relations 'conjunctural', and this is subject to change over time.

Jessop (1990) criticises Marxist state theory, developing his strategic-relational approach, constructing the state as a strategic agent. Jessop argues that Marxist theories construct a false dichotomy between 'capital logic' (focusing upon structures/'laws') and 'class logic' (focusing upon agency in terms of class interests/mobilisation). Advancing the importance of strategy, Jessop argues such a concept can help construct a dialectical relationship between the capital and class logic. Essentially, Jessop argues that class struggle varies in accordance to different forms of capital relations, as different people have different capital constraints influencing their choices/strategies and eventual class struggle. So there is a need to consider the different types of class struggle, and how that class struggle then influences the capital relations. However, the struggle may not have any effect, depending on how well the strategy accords to the hegemonic material and strategy ideas/resources. The state is a strategic entity, producing and generating strategies making it central to the dialectical interplay of class struggle and capital relations.

Political analysis and international relations cross-over (Hay 2002). Bieler and Morton (2001) refer to how there was a first and second wave in international relations regarding the 'structure-agency debate'. Wendt was central to the first wave. Hay (2002) states that Wendt is wrongly viewed to be a mainstream constructivist, and says that he rather represents 'thin' constructivism as this refers to the inadequate consideration of the production/processing of ideas, as he views ideas as rigid and ever-present. Hay contrasts this to 'thick constructivism', that emphasises the open-ended, flexible and constructed nature of political/economic policies. 'Thick constructivism', sometimes 'thin', is central to constructing a dialectical approach to the 'structure-agency debate'.

In advancing his perspective, Wendt (1987) criticises both neorealism and world system theory for their 'structural' accounts, developing a new approach based upon structuration theory. However, as Bieler and Morton (2001) argue, Wendt's reliance upon both Giddens' and Bhaskar's definition of structure creates problems, especially when assessing his claim that his theory represents a dialectical perspective (also see Joseph 2008). This is illustrated by Wendt's advancement of methodological bracketing, which, as demonstrated earlier, undermines a dialectical conception of structure and agency. For this, Wendt advances structural analysis for understanding 'how' questions (regarding what is possible) and historical analysis for 'why' questions (regarding looking at why something happened rather than something else). Again, this illustrates the diversity of conceptions regarding the relationship between structure and agency within the 'debate'.

The strategic-relational approach views structure and agency as analytically, not ontologically, distinct. Essentially, actors are seen as strategic, reflective and acting with underlying – if not recognised – intention; but not all action is consciously strategic as alongside explicit strategic action there is intuitive/habitual strategic action, or sometimes an interplay of both (Hay 2002). Intention and strategy, informed by 'knowledge' of the structures, together constitute strategic action that results in intended and unintended consequences, including direct effects that help transform the structure and strategic learning where the actors gather more 'knowledge' about the structures and potential of various context specific strategies (Hay 1995). Structures are therefore considered to be limiting and enabling through the contextualisation of agency, as structures are strategically selective and so different actors due to their various positions within the structure will have differential access to knowledge of the structure and consequential different utilisation of strategies therefore showing the importance of power in a strategic-relational perspective (Hay 1995).

The 'debate' can help us understand political events/policy, as will be demonstrated through applying the strategic-relational dialectical perspective to the recent UK riots. The riots occurred over several days in August, mainly in several London boroughs spreading across other cities within the UK where people looted, mugged and rioted, with arrests, injuries and even death resulting from the unrest. Importantly, this is not a complex analysis/explanation of why the riots happened, rather an illustration of the potential a dialectical approach can have for understanding political phenomenon given mainstream attempts to understand the events were undermined through an inability to understand the complex interplay of structural and agential factors. This demonstrates the value of continuing the 'debate', as it has important political/practical implications.

Sociologists have been at the forefront of promoting a complex analysis of the riots (see Brewer and Wollman 2011). *The Guardian* and the London School of Economics are researching and preparing an empirical study (*Reading the Riots*) on the riots (Lewis 2011). Such an approach would benefit from a strategic-relational perspective through demonstrating the relationship between strategies, structural conditions and practice. Initial data is already demonstrating links between poverty and the riots, as most areas where suspected rioters live are deprived, with 66% becoming poorer between 2007-2010, and 41% of riot suspects living in the 10% most deprived areas of England (Rogers 2011a). This illustrates the structural conditions and the effect these conditions may have had upon actors' strategic selection. Reverting back to Jessop's (1990) work on class struggles,

given the predominately high levels of deprivation of the areas the rioters came from, it can be theorised that part of the recent riots resolved around the effects different capital relations have upon the choices/strategies actors engage in and the unintended counterproductive effects of the riots, such as the strong public backlash and strict law and order policies, relating to the strategies (such as looting) dis-juncture with hegemonic material and strategy ideas/resources.

Essentially, utilising a dialectical approach helps undermine Cameron's argument that this was a result of 'pure criminality' (Cameron 2011). Rather, strategies employed during the riots arguably relate to factors/processes such as racism, poverty and restricted strategic options (James 2011). Importantly, the strategies were not given much legitimacy by the public or the government, therefore resulting in unintended consequences of structural reform. For instance, the rioters' strategical choices had a mediating and transformational, unintended, 'conjunctural' (Jessop 1996) effect upon the judicial system. Several legal figures voiced worry that the sentences were disproportionately strict and rushed (Bowcott 2011; Meikle and Rogers 2011). A Court of Appeal judge argued that the punishments had to be a lot stricter than normal sentencing to deter others (Bingham 2011). For instance, those sentenced, whilst the figures do not include everyone involved, for burglary on average got a 60% higher sentence (Rogers 2011b). One of the Court of Appeal judges was involved with the recent review of legal guidelines, by the Sentencing Committee for England and Wales, resulting in stricter guidelines for burglars of homes/businesses (Casciani 2011). There are also proposals to provide police with more power to impose curfews onto areas if there are further riots (Travis 2011).

New forms of media communication such as Facebook, formed a central debate within the riot reporting. Papacharissi and Easton (2011) discuss the concept of new media in relation to change using Bourdieu's habitus concept and its relevance to structure and agency. The habitus is structured and also structures the relating fields (a distinguished social sphere), such as the social media network. They refer to the formation of a social media habitus, which is "a set of dispositions that emerge out of the social architecture of social media, and frame but also constantly invite the remediation of agency" (p.2/3). This relatively new and growing field assisted the dissemination of information regarding the riots for those involved, others interested in keeping track of developments and the authorities, with representatives from Facebook, Twitter and Blackberry criticising proposed plans by some members of the government to place temporary bans upon social

media networks during any future unrest (Stamp 2011). The fact the government considered such proposals illustrates, again, another unintended consequence of the rioters' strategical decisions.

Akram (2010) proclaims that unlike critical realists such as Hay and Archer, Bourdieu has constructed a concept of agency (through habitus) that assists with considering the importance of unconscious activity. Akram argues that if strategic-relational theorists focused upon unconscious action this would create problems with their epistemology/methodology, therefore undermining the approaches' dialectical claims because of its restricted consideration of structural effects upon strategic action. Akram states that Giddens (1979) and Bourdieu can assist with a dialectical account of structure and agency through a competent consideration of unconscious action. However, Zenz (N.D.) asserts that Bourdieu has a deterministic conception of habitus, seeing practices originating from the habitus unconsciously rather than viewing strategy as conscious. This again illustrates the ongoing disagreements within the 'debate'.

The dialectical relationship between structure and agency relates to constructing a dialectical view of the interplay between ideational and material factors, as in order to make strategic decisions relating to the context actors have to rely upon incomplete knowledge of that context and therefore interpret their context with reference often to dominant/hegemonic discourses, as the context influences the ideas/discourses that carry more legitimacy, with ideas then having an influence upon the context - illustrating the mediating role of ideas within the 'debate' (Hay 2002; Hay and Smith 2010). For instance, Bauman's (1989) Holocaust analysis can be applied to the riots in the sense that they were, like the Holocaust, seen as a 'blip' in modern 'civilization', rather than a product of the processes associated with the term 'civilization'. Understanding the constraints caused by consumerism, when considering Bauman's (1989) theory, is also important as Bauman (2011) has also discussed the influence consumerism had upon the rioters. This relates to the production and effects of hegemonic discourse and therefore agents' interpretation of the situation and their production of ideas that mediate their practice in line with the structural conditions. Ideas can be influenced by views regarding 'civilization', as seen by politicians' and the public's response to the riots; alongside the constant promotion of consumerism, arguably having a notable effect upon the rioters' construction of their conditions in society and their strategical choices.

In conclusion, it is important to respect the fractured/contentious nature of the 'structure-agency debate'; despite the increasing consensus that both structure and agency should be considered, without privileging neither, there is no common ground on how to express this ontologically and theoretically. Nor should the debate be premised on finding a 'solution', as that would result in ontological censorship. Rather, to accept the need for an ongoing debate is to respect a range of opinions, and also the growth of sophisticated knowledge regarding such an important ontological issue, as demonstrated through a strategic-relational approach analysis of the recent UK riots and how understanding the events through a complex analysis of strategic action and situated strategic contexts can assist with proactive policy. The 'debate' is made harder by the varying interpretations of key authors' involved in the 'debate' work/analysis, especially critical realists, making attempts to find a 'solution' even more redundant but also undermining policy potential if the 'debate' becomes too focused upon interpretation rather than action. However, the 'debate' should be viewed as relevant for developing political, international relations and sociological analysis with a focus upon trying to penetrate and inform policy makers' decisions so that they take more account of the strategical and dialectical processes influencing practices and social phenomenon such as the UK riots.

Word Count: 3,300

### Bibliography

- Akram, S. (2010). *Re-conceptualising the concept of Agency in the Structure/Agency Dialectic: The Importance of Habitus and the Unconscious* [online]. [Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> October 2011]. Available from World Wide Web: <[http://www.psa.ac.uk/journals/pdf/5/2010/1644\\_1503.pdf](http://www.psa.ac.uk/journals/pdf/5/2010/1644_1503.pdf)>.
- Archer, M. (1998). "Social Theory and the Analysis of Society". In: T. May., and M. Williams, (eds). *Knowing the Social World*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Bates, S. R. (2006). "Making Time for Change: On Temporal Conceptualizations within (Critical Realist) Approaches to the Relationship between Structure and Agency". *Sociology*. **40**(1) 143-161.
- Bauman, Z. (1989). *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2011). *The London Riots – On Consumerism coming Home to Roost* [online]. [Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> October 2011]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.social-europe.eu/2011/08/the-london-riots-on-consumerism-coming-home-to-roost/>>.
- Bieler, A., and Morton, A. D. (2001). "The Gordian Knot of Agency – Structure in International Relations: A Neo-Gramscian Perspective". *European Journal of International Relations*. **7**(1) 5-35.
- Bingham, J. (2011). *UK riots: don't expect sentences to be cut, judge tells rioters* [online]. [Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> October 2011]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8793243/UK-riots-dont-expect-sentences-to-be-cut-judge-tells-rioters.html>>.
- Bowcott, O. (2011). *Appeal court criticises judge's approach to riot sentencing* [online]. [Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> October 2011]. Available from World Wide Web: <[www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/sep/27/riot-judge-sentencing-guidelines-criticised](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/sep/27/riot-judge-sentencing-guidelines-criticised)>.
- Brewer, J., and Wollman, H. (2011). *Sociologists' offer to unravel the riots* [online]. [Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> October 2011]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/11/sociologists-offer-unravel-riots?fb=ative&CMP=FBCNETTXT9038>>.
- Cameron, D. (2011). *PM's speech on the fightback after the riots* [online]. [Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> October 2011]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-on-the-fightback-after-the-riots/>>.
- Casciani, D. (2011). *Riot burglars face longer in jail under new guidelines* [online]. [Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> October 2011]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-15281574>>.
- Giddens, A. (1979). *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hay, C. (1995). "Structure and Agency". In: D. Marsh., and G. Stoker, (eds). *Theory and Methods In Political Science*. First Edition. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hay, C. (2002). *Political Analysis: A Critical Introduction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Hay, C. (2005). "Making Hay...or Clutching at Ontological Straws? Notes on Realism, 'As-If-Realism' and Actualism". *Politics*. **25**(1) 39-45.
- Hay, C. (2009a). "King Canute and the 'Problem' of Structure and Agency: On Times, Tides and Heresthetics". *Political Studies*. **57**(2) 260-279.
- Hay, C. (2009b). "Your Ontology, My Ontic Speculations...On the Importance of Showing One's (Ontological) Working". *Political Studies*. **57**(4) 892-898.
- Hay, C., and Smith, N.J. (2010). "How Policy-Makers (Really) Understand Globalization? The Internal Architecture of Anglophone Globalization Discourse In Europe." *Public Administration*. **88**(4) 903-927.
- James, M. (2011). *Behind the riots: what young people think about the 2011 summer unrest* [online]. [Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> October 2011]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/sep/05/young-people-2011-summer-unrest>>.
- Jessop, B. (1990). *State Theory: Putting Capitalist States in their Place*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Jessop, B. (1996). "Interpretive Sociology and the Dialectic of Structure and Agency". *Theory, Culture & Society*. **13**(1) 119-128.
- Joseph, J. (2008). "Hegemony and the structure-agency problem in International Relations: a scientific realist contribution". *Review of International Studies*. **34**(1) 109-128.
- Lewis, P. (2011). *Reading the Riots study to examine the causes and effects of August unrest* [online]. [Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> October 2011]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/sep/05/reading-riots-study-guardian-lse>>.
- Meikle, J., and Rogers, S. (2011). *UK riots: Judges warned by Law Society not to hand down 'rushed justice'* [online]. [Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> October 2011]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/12/uk-riots-courts-warning>>.
- Papacharissi, Z., and Easton, E. (2011). *In the Habitus of the New Structure, agency and the social media habitus* [online]. [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> October 2011]. Available from World Wide Web: <[http://tigger.uic.edu/~zizi/Site/Research\\_files/HabitusofNewZPEE.pdf](http://tigger.uic.edu/~zizi/Site/Research_files/HabitusofNewZPEE.pdf)>.
- Pleasants, N. (2009). "Structure, Agency and Ontological Confusion: A Response to Hay". *Political Studies*. **57**(4) 885-891.
- Rogers, S. (2011a). *England riots: was poverty a factor* [online]. [Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> August 2011]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/aug/16/riots-poverty-map-suspects>>.
- Rogers, S. (2011b). *Riots broken down: who was in court and what's happened to them* [online]. [Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> October 2011]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/sep/15/riot-defendants-court-sentencing>>.
- Stamp, G. (2011). *English riots: social media were 'force for good'* [online]. [Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> October 2011]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/uk-politics-14931010>>.

Travis, A. (2011). *Riot curfews for public proposed by Home Office* [online]. [Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> October 2011]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/oct/13/home-office-plans-public-riot-curfews>>.

Wendt, A. E. (1987). "The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory." *International Organization*. **41**(3) 335-370.

Zenz, A. (N.D.). *Habitus, Actors and Cognitive Schemas or Why Bourdieu May Have Wanted to Study Cognitive Anthropology* [online]. [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> October 2011]. Available from World Wide Web: <[http://zenz.org/adrian/Essays/Habitus\\_and\\_Cognitive\\_Schemas.pdf](http://zenz.org/adrian/Essays/Habitus_and_Cognitive_Schemas.pdf)>.