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Current Sociology 1992 40: 77

DOI: 10.1177/001139292040001007

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THE ROMANTICISM OF AGENCY/STRUCTURE VERSUS THE ANALYSIS OF MICRO/MACRO

Randall Collins

It has been argued that the problem of agency and structure is more fundamental than the analysis of micro and macro. This argument rests upon an ideological judgement. Micro and macro sociology have been distinctive areas of sociological research, each of which has its accompanying bodies of theory. The question of micro/macro integration is whether one type of explanation takes priority over the other, or whether the two types can be integrated into a combined theory. The question of agency and structure is not an explanatory question but an ideological one. It is an argument to show that human beings control their own destinies; it is a defence of free will.

To shift our theoretical focus from micro/macro to agency/structure is a deliberate choice to give up the search for sociological explanations, in favour of defending an image of the social world which we find pleasant to believe. This longing for agency is part of the romanticism of left intellectuals at the end of the 20th century, at a time when they are notably lacking in any effective power in the social world. It is a retreat from the effort to understand social reality, into a subjective world constructed so as to offer the fantasy of potential power. At the extreme, to deny that there is any substantial social reality has become the inner defence of those whose ideological programmes have been unable to control or even to anticipate the course of modern events.

I argue three main points. First: the argument for agency rests upon the appropriation of sociological micro theories, especially ethnomethodology and Goffmanian interaction ritual; but these are misinterpreted and their structural elements removed. Agency is then projected back into the macro arena, where it has even less basis in empirical explanation. Second, I take up the example of political revolutions, such as the anti-communist revolutions of 1989, which are touted as exemplars of agency. But these revolutions, far from being miracles of indeterminism and free will, are explicable by macro-social conditions which are already well understood. These macro-theoretical

principles rest in turn upon micro processes. We see here too that the constraints of micro-situational action are just what produces the pattern of political stability punctuated by sudden and conflictual changes. Third: I sketch my own conception of the micro/macro connection by way of a comparison with Giddens' comprehensive effort to combine agency and structure with micro and macro. Giddens' theory is limited by the ideological romanticism of agency. Ironically, it presents an overly cognitive, rule-oriented version of social order, and diminishes the importance of emotional and material dynamics which are at the centre of social conflict and change. I will argue that the theoretically fruitful position is to stop worrying about agency and to fully develop the micro contribution to a general explanatory sociology.

THE IDEOLOGICAL SEARCH FOR AGENCY

The micro/macro distinction is a real one at the level of sociological research. The difference became increasingly obvious in the 1960s and 1970s as successful research programmes were developed at each end of the spectrum. Ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, and Goffmanian studies of everyday life showed in empirical detail that an order exists at the extremely micro level. At the same time, historical/comparative analysis with the sweep of Lenski, Tilly, Barrington Moore, Skocpol, Perry Anderson, or Wallerstein showed patterns on the extreme macro end of the continuum. Both ends of analysis were becoming better theorized as well as better documented.

It is from this intellectual progress that arises the significance of the micro/macro question. It is easy to evade the question by admitting that both levels are equally real, differing only in our focus of attention; it is no doubt pragmatically acceptable to declare that every specialized researcher can go ahead with his/her work, ignoring what others are doing elsewhere. The more challenging question, however, is to ask what if anything does micro theory have to say for macro theory, and vice versa? The question became more acute because some of the micro sociologists, notably the ethnomethodologists, were aggressively denying the existence of macro structures, at least in any form resembling the folk glosses in which they are conventionally asserted. On the other side, macro sociologists tend to take the stance that what micro sociologists do is trivial, of no significance for issues such as the struggle for state power or the long-term tendencies of the capitalist world system.

I have oversimplified these intellectual debates by concentrating on

the lines of micro and macro analysis that established their position not only by theorizing but through empirical research, extremely detailed situational observations on the one hand, massive historical comparisons on the other. I leave aside the complications of purely theoretical developments, such as those of Habermas and Luhmann, or in another direction the theory of rational choice. I also omit consideration here of the position of Bourdieu, grounded in studies of the stratification process, which has its own approach to the synthesis of micro and macro. Let us take the issue at its sharpest point, the challenge posed by the ultra-empirical micro sociologies. Virtually all the proponents of radical micro theories took as their enemy Parsonian functionalism, which they depicted as a macro theory without human actors. This was a polemical exaggeration, since Parsons' system by no means lacked a conception of the human actor; in fact it incorporates a Freudian model in which micro/macro integration is carried out through the process of socialization; if successful, the individual carries social norms in his/her superego, and his/her need-dispositions are satisfied as long as the social system is functioning well. Parsons' model allows for strains and change both through failure of socialization (micro-generated), and through uneven differentiation and integration at the level of the social system (macro-generated). The underlying issue was not so much that Parsons lacked a micro-macro connection, but that the micro-macro connection he posited was regarded as both empirically fallacious and politically conservative.

The 1960s and early 1970s in anglophone sociology were a period in which several events came together: Goffman, the ethnomethodologists and other micro researchers established their radically empirical research on everyday situations; functionalism was attacked and abandoned by sociologists from almost every quarter; conflict-oriented macro-sociological research took off; while the politics of the academic world, especially of sociologists, swung towards the radical left. Parsonian and Mertonian functionalism were depicted as more conservative than they really were and dismissed not only for analytical failings but as an ideological enemy. The micro sociologists, who in reality were quite technical empirical researchers with an apolitical programme, were interpreted as if they were some kind of anarchist radicals. If there was no united front of the sociological left, it was because the macro sociologists analysing historical conflicts had no need of a micro sociology; their work not only eclipsed the vacuous functionalist model but made spectacular progress on its own research programmes.

The upheavals of the 1960s, based above all on the black civil rights

movement in the US, and spreading into the anti-Vietnam war protest and into world-wide student movements and a youth counter-culture, for a time gave tremendous emotional mobilization in just those circles in which sociologists were active. The psychedelic youth movement, with its marijuana and LSD trips, was able for a time to make it plausible that reality is “all in your mind”, and there were enough small victories of mass student demonstrations to give the sense that subjective moods also have political consequences. In the course of a decade, however, it was apparent that these movements had produced only rather minor social effects. The civil rights movement was the most successful, achieving the limited goals of legal equality for US blacks and some economic integration for the black middle class, while leaving the black underclass in an even more permanently depressed condition. The anti-war movement mounted huge mobilization for almost no results; the Vietnam war eventually wound down due to sheer geopolitical strains; the nuclear disarmament movement which followed was again without political successes, and the limited disarmament which finally came about in the late 1980s after a serious arms race was again carried out by conservative politicians, acting under geopolitical/economic strains. The “Age of Aquarius” of the hippies quickly turned into the age of business-oriented conservatism and the scramble for financial manipulation; economic inequality in the US, instead of lessening, increased during these decades. Even the feminist movement, the most significant mobilization in terms of its impact on the structure of society, was countered by an anti-feminist mobilization by the turn of the 1980s, and after initial gains has left a stagnant situation of gender stratification.

Yet it is precisely in this period of the failure of the 1960s/1970s left movements that sociological theory has moved towards extolling agency over structure. Sociological theorists write as if the hippie anti-warrior is a universal hero, appearing in all guises and in all historical situations. In order to claim this seriously it was necessary to convert Goffman and Garfinkel into hippie rebels; and this could only be done at some violence to their own texts. Nevertheless, if we take both the word and the spirit of the micro-sociological theorists, it is apparent that: Goffman, Garfinkel, and conversation analysis are concerned above all with the micro production of social order; and they find that this micro order is obdurate and extremely hard to overthrow.

Goffman (1967, 1974, 1981) focuses upon the construction of self as a ritual process of exchange, constraining the individual from the outside in; on interaction rituals which pull the individual into locally

compelling membership ties; on stages and situational frames which are not negotiated, but the very constraints within which individuals are compelled to manoeuvre. The main findings of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Leiter, 1980) are that humans rely on a taken for granted sense of order, and strongly resist efforts to make them see that it is in any sense constructed; the main procedures of common-sense reasoning are to be unquestioning, to trust in normal appearances, and to repair breaches as soon as possible. Garfinkel's actor is virtually the opposite of the wilful rebel and creator; s/he certainly has no taste for living in conscious awareness of reflexivity. Conversation analysis (Sacks et al., 1974; Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Schegloff, 1987; Boden, 1990) is the most explicitly structural of all; it spells out the principles which generate the observed orderliness of turn-taking, conversational embeddings, closings, laughter, and other micro-empirical phenomena. The empirical micro sociologists are very far from being theorists of agency; they are theorists of micro structure.¹

Perhaps for this reason theorists of social agency have tended to move their claim away from any close examination of the micro level. It is recognized that structure can exist on both micro and macro ranges. A structure is minimally some set of parts with patterned relationships among them, such that each part is constrained by its relationships with others. In this sense, very clear examples of structures are given by the patterning of speakers in a conversation, or the non-verbal contagion of gestures in a focused interaction. The image of free, up-by-one's-own-bootstraps spontaneity has to be located somewhere else. If micro can no longer be equated with agency and macro with structure, why not point to macro as the location of agency, and historically significant agency at that?

DOES REVOLUTION PROVE THE EXISTENCE OF MACRO-AGENCY?

Political movements thus are taken as collective agents. This way of talking depicts movements as free, spontaneous, consciously reflective, capable of changing structures and choosing their own futures. For example, the downfall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe during the fall of 1989, and the disintegration of the USSR, have been enthusiastically received as fitting this description. Nevertheless, the existence of revolutions and social movements is not itself clinching evidence of spontaneous, reflexive, self-determining agency. To show

this, one need only ask: do we have any theories which have explained prior historical events, and which give the conditions under which such revolutions and movements occur? Is the content of these revolutionary movements at all predictable from social conditions? Is the outcome of these revolutions freely chosen or is it constrained by anything sociological?

The outbreak of revolution. A theory of revolution well grounded in historical evidence includes the following points: successful revolt is initiated by the paralysis of the state, the struggle among rival factions of the elite, and the breakdown of the disciplined organization of the armed forces. These conditions in turn are most commonly produced by state budgetary crisis and above all by the strains of military expenditure, which come to a crisis when there is geopolitical overextension. Mass dissatisfaction and deprivation alone, in the absence of these conditions, does not lead to successful revolt (Collins, 1978; Skocpol, 1979; Tilly, 1978).

The East European revolutions fit this pattern quite closely. The affected states were all satellites of the Soviet Union, kept in power by the military force of the USSR. When this force was removed, state power collapsed. The retraction of Soviet military power is itself explicable on principles of geopolitical overextension; indeed the geopolitical collapse of the Soviet empire was explicitly predicted in advance (Collins, 1986), on the basis that trends in all five major conditions determining geopolitical strength had turned negative for the USSR by the 1980s. The chain of causes then led to the Skocpolian revolutionary pattern of state breakdown; this was exacerbated by financial weakness of the East European communist states due to their participation in world capitalist markets.

The pattern and content of revolutionary movements. Once state breakdown occurred in some portions of the Soviet empire, it spread to neighbouring states by the contagious crisis of confidence and divisions of policy among the ruling elites, and by the spread of mass mobilizations in opposition. There is nothing in this which is surprising from the point of view of the sociology of mass movements. It is well known that movements arise in situations of crisis, and especially in situations in which the cost of participation is drastically lowered by the weakness of state sanctions (Tilly, 1978; Rule, 1988). The rapidity with which anti-communist movements spread throughout the Eastern bloc was elating for participants and spectators alike, but it is not theoretically surprising; what would have been surprising would be if movements

had occurred very slowly and deliberately, reacting to the collapse of state power by cautious programmes of reform. Marx's own *Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852/1963) noted the tendency of the moderates to be driven out by the extremists in a period of power vacuum; a reaction towards order is to be expected only after a period of several years, during which the organizational resources for mobilizing mass movements are exhausted.

A successful revolutionary movement, by its very nature, creates in its participants a feeling of agency, a feeling that they are taking control of their own destiny. But this feeling is an ideology. The movement comes into being only when the conditions are favourable; the very fact that many individuals come to participate in such a movement is a phenomenon of social influence: individuals whose networks are closest to other participants are pulled into just those situations where they are filled with group solidarity and emotional energy. The structure of the movement itself, physical bodies massed together in the streets confronting an enemy, is a Durkheimian ritual interaction at high intensity; it would be contrary to theoretical prediction if it did *not* result in strong feelings of the moral righteousness of one's cause and the necessity of joining with others in it.

The outcome of the anti-communist revolutions. Is there spontaneous agency in the direction and results of the revolutions of 1989? The image of freely choosing one's own society is undermined when one considers that the ideas which the revolutionary groups put forward are those already available in the societies around them. Authoritarian communist regimes were overthrown, in the context of a military arms race between communist and capitalist blocs; in addition, the greater wealth of the capitalist economy was apparent to all participants. Is it a surprise that the revolutions should have turned out to be anti-communist and pro-capitalist? In addition, ethnic nationalism was mobilized in just those places where ethnic divisions coincided with organizational mobilization against the disintegrating central authority. These ideologies were not spontaneously created, but adapted to the circumstances. Leaving the ideological plane, we should note that the structural outcome of the anti-communist revolutions is an extension of the market forces of world capitalism. These structures will doubtless exercise severe constraints on the fate of post-revolutionary regimes. In macro perspective, the East European revolutions (not yet finished) will appear as the geopolitical crisis of the long-term overextension of Russian power, the result as the further expansion of world capitalism.

In understanding cases like this, the concept of agency adds nothing except to underscore the subjective feelings of some of the participants, while directing our attention away from the conditions under which such events occur. Can we claim that a self-conscious conception of agency is reflexively necessary for rebellions to occur? On the contrary, there have been numerous movements throughout history, ranging from religious movements in ancient societies up to the 20th-century communist revolutions themselves, which have been carried out under the most varied ideologies, most of them highly deterministic in their claims.

The argument in favour of the sociological pre-eminence of agency is a moral claim, not an analytical one. Reflexiveness is put forward as a crucial and necessary virtue; if we fail to preach agency, will we not be preventing future movements from arising? On the contrary; if revolutionary movements occur under structural conditions including geopolitical overextension, government fiscal crisis and power vacuum, they will happen when such conditions arise, no matter what ideology we now hold. Certainly an explanatory sociology of conflicting forces will not make anyone surprised, whether participant or observer, when such movements arise.

Let us recall: the agency/structure issue arose out of an ideological distortion of the micro/macro question. In rejecting the significance of the agency/structure combination, I maintain that we still must ask: what does micro sociology add to macro analysis? Would our analysis of revolutionary movements be any more successful if we included micro theory with the kind of macro principles stated above?

My answer is yes; it is already implied in what has been said above. Movements are composed of human beings in situations; their emotional enthusiasm and feelings of solidarity are the very stuff of the situations in which revolutionary shifts in power occur. The Durkheimian theory I have used to explain ritual solidarity within a political crowd, for example, is a micro theory, set within a particular macro context. One could of course skip through this part of the explanation. Macro theories often make summary statements about aggregated effects; for instance a macro principle in this case would simply state that social movements create moral and ideological solidarity. This is correct, and it will help us to anticipate that when a movement springs up in a political power vacuum, the movement itself will generate an ideological fervour proportional to its size and success. But in the absence of a micro theory of the process by which focused interaction produces emotions and ideas, we lack an explanation of how this happens to be so.

Micro and macro conditions always interpenetrate at the level of

empirical description, and in this sense each flows into the other; but if we examine micro and macro *causal explanations*, macro theories are constrained to take certain forms because of micro theories, and not vice versa. I will not develop this at length here. But notice that the ethnomethodological theory of situational cognition, and the macro theory of revolutions, are connected; that indeed the conservative cognitive practices uncovered by the micro researchers implies that macro political change will occur only in sudden episodes, and not gradually and by rational deliberation.

Ethnomethodology shows actors have a preference for normalcy, and resist having to rearrange their practical actions in a way that disturbs the working consensus of everyday life. This conservatism of “common sense practical reasoning” is further reinforced when it is backed up by a stable coalition of coercive force. Politicians in power rely on people’s unwillingness to call the accepted order into question. This is often mistakenly interpreted as the legitimacy of a given order. Ethnomethodology suggests, however, that it is merely the “natural attitude” in the face of the generated constructedness of the social world. *Any* social order becomes accepted as long as it has been in existence long enough to seem routine or normal. Moral legitimation, appealing explicitly to emotions and ideas, is only something that might be added onto this cognitive acceptance of the status quo. In many cases, this idealized legitimation may be largely or entirely lacking. Ethnomethodology implies that any society will be pragmatically accepted, no matter how coercive, cruel, or stratified it is, provided that it appears to be stable.

How then can change come about? It is initiated by breaks in the normal order, something like Garfinkelian breaching experiences on the large scale. These breaks cannot be merely local, since those are patched up by the local use of ethnomethods. They must be macro breaks, that is they must simultaneously affect many micro situations, and disrupt the links among them. That is why a crisis of the state, typically starting from military/geopolitical problems, is an essential precursor to revolution. Ethnomethodology implies that changes will be dramatic and episodic. Instead of gradual movements of “progress”, routines are clung to as long as possible. When macro-structural coordination breaks down to such a degree that everyone becomes aware a breach has occurred, people are thrown into frenzied action to attempt to repair social order; they do this not by carefully and calmly thinking through all possible alternatives, but by focusing emotionally on the simplest available assumption about the new form of order that can be established. Excited

crowds are engaged in “finding the normal form” which is most widely shared. This model of the micro-cognitive actor also implies that if this period of social chaos goes on very long – because different micro-situational groups spread across the landscape come up with different preferences for normal forms – people become increasingly willing to settle for any arbitrary procedure that restores order. There is a micro-sociological basis for the pattern of Thermidorian reaction. Historical change is parallel to Garfinkel’s picture of micro interaction alternating between long periods of routine and episodes of troubles, followed by a new period of routinely accepted order.

This is empirically the pattern that we find in the history of revolutions, including the most recent. It also illustrates my abstract theoretical point: theories about macro-structural conditions cannot take just any form, but follow from the implications of our best-grounded theories of the micro processes out of which they are composed.

GIDDENS’ STRUCTURATIONISM AND THE ROMANTICISM OF AGENCY

Giddens’ work (especially 1984) stands out as a creative effort to unite the strands of micro/macro analysis with the scheme of agency/structure into a comprehensive theory. He draws heavily on Goffman and on Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology, to which he adds a motivational principle of primordial anxiety drawn from Heidegger’s existentialism. These micro ingredients are depicted as standing in a mutually constitutive relationship with the macro structure.

Giddens’ work is a constructive move forward for sociology; but it is limited by some of the polemical and ideological aspects of the theoretical debates from which it emerged. I comment on four points.

1. Reflexivity and the double hermeneutic. Giddens appears to believe not only that micro and macro, agency and structure, constitute each other, but that this relationship is an infinitely flexible one. He proposes that human actors, as they become aware of general patterns in social processes, can reflexively use this knowledge to change the structure. All social knowledge is thus self-undermining. Here we have the romanticism of agency. If structural principles set forth the relationships among parts, then changing the empirical level of some of these parts is not going to undermine the more abstract laws which underlie those relationships. Efforts to change a structure must always follow possible

patterns within the structure, otherwise they fail. This holds at all levels from the most macro to the most micro. Becoming aware of geopolitical principles might make a politician wary of sending military forces beyond the limits of logistical overextension; if the knowledge somehow gave him or her the hubris to disregard these principles, the price would surely be paid in fiscal strains and military/political retreat. At the meso level, sociologists know that large organizations with centralized resources tend to become bureaucratized and autonomous from the control of their members; activists in a political movement might try to avoid these consequences by keeping their organization from becoming highly centralized, but they can hardly go against the grain of the structure without suffering the consequences. At the micro level, knowing that non-verbal attunement within a face-to-face group brings about higher emotional intensities might be used by a sophisticated leader to make a meeting more effective; but I know of no instances in which someone has been able to deliberately and consciously evoke this principle in order to keep attunement from having an emotional effect.

Giddens' underlying claim, as a good left-oriented sociologist, seems to be that if we can understand the mechanisms of stratification, we can overturn them. The lessons of sociology, since the days of Weber and Michels, have been rather bitter on this point. Certainly the liberal programme of promoting equality through expansion of educational opportunity, has merely led to an inflationary market for educational credentials, which rearranges the positions of some individuals but leaves the underlying structure of inequality the same (documented in many sources including Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970/1977; Boudon, 1973; Collins, 1979). The more radical claim of sophisticated, highly reflexive intellectuals to rise above the system of cultural stratification simply adds another layer of stratifying claims to the structure (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). This is not to say that the empirical distribution of inequalities might not be changed – we do know something about the structures which produce the highest and lowest inequality (Lenski, 1966; Turner, 1984) – but this is only going to be possible in a realistic fashion, and by paying the structural price for what we get. A romanticist use of the concept of reflexivity does not solve the problem; it only obscures it.

2. The knowledgeable agent vs the cultural dope. Giddens polemicizes against the notion that individuals are “cultural dopes”, pushed around by an independently existing body of norms and rules. His argument

rests upon Garfinkel's ethnomethodological researches, which show that people have a great deal of fine-tuned understanding of how to actively produce the sense of social order. Nevertheless, one might well reject cultural determinism, without going to the other extreme of assuming that individuals are very knowledgeable. Here again the long-standing struggle against Parsonian functionalism has elided the issues. The theory that society is underpinned by an autonomously given cultural system – laid down for example by religious values – can be rejected on the grounds that it fails to explain why culture takes its particular forms and when it changes; we are more successful along the lines of showing that there are multiple and conflicting sources of cultural production in the material and social organization of society (a recent impressive example is Wuthnow, 1989). Free-floating cultural determinism is only a way of giving up our interest in explanation.

But does it follow that the human actor is knowledgeable, a kind of cognitive god who knows everything through and through and who can bring a new society into existence out of the resources of his or her own brain? It is a flattering conception, but it flies in the face of the major findings of micro-sociological research. The ethnomethodologists show that the human being operates under severe cognitive limitations. The reason that the everyday actor relies so heavily on ethnomethods of assuming normalcy, reciprocity of perspectives, and so forth is because the ubiquitous problems of indexicality and reflexivity are a morass into which he or she does not want to enter. Giddens sees this to the extent that he recognizes knowledge must be tacit; it cannot be articulated, but depends upon a sense of the local context. Nevertheless, for ideological reasons he clings to the image of the actor as knowledgeable.

But the implications not only of Garfinkel's school, but of the entire thrust of modern micro sociology as well as of organizational meso sociology, go in precisely the opposite direction. The human actor is not very knowledgeable. He or she does not carry around the baggage of an overriding culture, which in itself would constitute a cognitive overload. He or she operates with defensive strategies which grossly simplify and limit the amount of information that comes in even from the surrounding situation. Garfinkel's procedures for ignoring indexicalities and repairing breaches are just one segment of the evidence. The turn-taking model shows above all that in order to get through a conversation, people need not pay very much attention to the content of the talk at all – they can be cognitively ignorant or oblivious – as long as they attune themselves to the rhythms of regular succession of talking. Goffman's interaction ritual model shows individuals oriented

above all to the formal structure of their encounters, including especially its ecological and nonverbal dimensions, far above their concern for informativeness, truth, or sincerity. And to add confirmation from a very different angle of analysis, work on organizational actors (Simon, 1969) and on rational decision making (Kahneman et al., 1982) show that individuals drastically simplify the information available to them, consider very few alternatives, and rely on simple and usually habit-oriented heuristic procedures for reducing complexity. The "bounded rationality" of organizational and psychological research reinforces the results of the naturalistic micro sociologists: the human being operates with rather limited cognitions. Far from being knowledgeable about the way the social structure is put together, one copes with each situation as it comes, ignoring most of the information available, avoiding reflection upon one's tacit procedures, and typically satisfying oneself with reproducing the normal patterns of the past.

3. Macro structure: rules or micro aggregation? If Giddens takes the implications of micro sociology in precisely the wrong direction, is this because a cognitive conception of social organization enables him to sustain his ideology of agency? For him, the nexus between micro and macro consists above all of rules. Individuals tacitly know the rules, which constitute the macro order; the rules thus impinge upon the micro situation, but since individuals can change the rules, they can reflexively act back upon the macro structure. Giddens also views the macro structure as consisting of material and organizational resources which impinge on situational actors and which are reproduced through their actions. But access to these resources appears to be mediated by rules; at least, I do not have the impression that Giddens has thought through just how far-flung inter-situational patterns such as organizations or the distribution of material property are constructed out of situational interactions. We merely have an assertion that such macro patterns exist, and that actors are able to structure them; and the only structuring mechanism given is rules.

The result looks curiously like the Parsonian scheme that Giddens criticizes. There is a classification of institutions (normative, allocative, authoritative, interpretive), but no causal determinants of why structures take particular forms or why they change. This vagueness is a consequence of the emphasis on rules. The problem with rules is the same as the old theory of norms. It confuses three things: (a) the existence of empirical regularities; (b) cognitively expressed statements on how people should behave; (c) knowledge that real social actors have of

either (a) or (b). It is easy to skip from (a) to (c), without investigating whether such rules actually exist (b), are known and acted upon (c), or whether they generate the regularities of social structure (a). Like the theory of norms, the theory of rules is a description masquerading as an explanation. It takes structures in terms of their ideologies, and misses the ways in which actual social organization is informal, messy, episodic, and conflictual.

I have argued that Giddens misreads the micro-sociological evidence. Real-life individuals do not know very much of the social structure which surrounds them. Members of organizations know very little of the division of labour and the chain of command around them (Leiter, 1980). Surveys show very few people have an accurate picture of the more remote reaches of social structure; most people do not even know what the principal agencies of government do, or the structure of the business economy. Nor is it pragmatically necessary that they should know this. They need only know how to deal with the immediate linkages, the micro situations of their everyday lives. This fits much better with the micro-sociological evidence of the situational actor, not as a rule-scanner, but as an information-reducer, taking as much as possible for granted in order to get on with the minimal actions at hand.

It might be objected that my picture depends heavily upon the middle and lower classes, with their localistic orientation. What about the cosmopolitanism of the professions and higher managers? Here one might suppose there is at least a stratified knowledge of rules, and that these elites control the wider reaches of social organization because of their knowledge. Nevertheless, any equation of knowledge and power founders on the failure to distinguish two different aspects of cognition: abstract, generalized knowledge such as formal rules; and particularistic knowledge of a network of people and their dealings with each other. The higher reaches of power have never been well investigated from a micro-sociological point of view, but the available evidence points in the direction that the wielders of power are not oriented to abstract rules, but are those who are most attuned to the recent, local and particularized manoeuvring that goes on in financial and political networks. The crucial feature of getting this kind of power-information, moreover, is to be in the right location at the right time; it is one's location in the macro distribution of micro situations that makes all the difference.

Instead of viewing macro structure as the playing out of a set of rules, it is more useful to take a minimalist view of macro structure as the mere *aggregation of micro encounters* across time and space.²

The macro structure is not user-friendly; it is not held together by social meanings, rules, or intermeshings. Viewed steadfastly from the point of view of the micro situations that make it up, any social organization is intermittent; it flickers in and out of existence when people enact it. Contrary to what may get written on paper in an organizational chart or a government constitution, or what is bandied about in ordinary language in such nouns as “our nation”, “the corporation”, or even “my job”, the micro/macro reality is nothing more than those connections that happen to be enacted in a series of local situations. We should not assume more structure than really exists. What happens in one local micro/situation may sometimes (but not always) carry over into another micro/situation, and the aggregate of these chains may add up to a recognizable pattern that we can glibly refer to as a “state”, an “organization”, or an “economy”. But we cannot explain that aggregate pattern by referring to whatever “rules” individuals might seem to be following in micro situations; it follows a harsher, less human pattern based on the sheer quantitative relationships that exist among micro situations.

If one doubts this, consider the “allocative rule” of respecting property. Property would seem to be a crucial element in economic transactions, and in ordinary social behaviour with respect to physical places and objects. Thus all these macro institutions would seem to depend upon people acting according to a rule of property. But is this a fundamental explanatory principle, or merely a surface description? Garfinkel’s breaching studies indicate that people invoke normative conceptions when something happens to break the taken-for-granted flow of everyday life; *then* one thinks of a reason to go along with expressing one’s emotional disapproval of the breach. But something comprises a breach only as long as there is a normally enforced social order. The theory of rules does not tell us what enforces this order; and it turns out empirically that when that enforcement breaks down or changes, the rules disappear, or adapt to circumstances. Those people who have the most property are the financial manipulators who do not act as if property were a fixed relationship which they must respect, but treat it as subject for renegotiation to the maximal extent they can get away with.

For most of us, less centrally located in market networks, property appears much more stable. What we see, looking through the eyes of ideology, as the “rule” of property, is the most heavily monitored and enforced of our procedures in everyday life; that is why it is so easy to reify it as a cognitive entity. Micro sociology shows us actors with

limited cognition, operating tacitly, situation by situation. They do not process much information about the connections that make up the social structure; they have little idea, for instance, what will actually happen when one tries to get an employee reprimanded, or when one calls the police and becomes involved in the system of justice administration. If people often assume that such rules automatically or easily enforce themselves, this is the result of an emotional tone, not a matter of knowledge. Social order in the form of respect for property depends heavily on the extent to which such emotional tones are widely shared, the rules do not get tested, and the messy consequences of invoking long micro/macro enforcement chains are avoided.

What does this view of macro structures imply for our explanatory theories? Precisely because individuals are *cognitively* limited and know very little of the larger structural connections among micro situations, they rely heavily upon habitual patterns of action in the *physical world*. An organization can be glibly categorized and officially defined by cognitive conceptions and legal rules, but in everyday life its members enact it by recalling the buildings where they work, the offices in which they sit, the trucks they drive, the kinds of places and tools they see and touch. It is for this reason that the physical environment, materials, and technology have such a strong effect on the shape of organizational structures. The sheer number of people spread out in physical space in various ways, attempting various physical tasks (which might include collecting pieces of paper or making telephone calls), heavily influences whether there will be many or few layers of organizational hierarchy, highly bureaucratized or informal procedures of communication, the kinds and frequencies of conflicts that occur, and the tendency for organizational breakdown into “normal accidents” (e.g. Perrow, 1986; Collins, 1988: 475–480).

This does not happen because the organization is reified, operating in a structural realm of its own, apart from micro-situational actors. On the contrary! Situational actors have easy or difficult flows of communication from one part of a network to another, and the level of uncertainty in these connections has such a powerful effect because it impinges upon the actor’s limited cognitive capacities. The macro-organizational level is just whatever connectedness people can situationally maintain. They could not maintain an organization at all, nor would they be motivated to, if they did not spread out a macro-physical structure of buildings, equipment and materials which keeps their situations minimally connected physically, even if that cannot be connected cognitively. Ironically, the cognitive characteristics of the situational

actor are what makes the social world revolve so heavily around material conditions.

4. Cognition vs. emotion. Let us return to the nature of the micro actor. What consequences should we draw from micro-sociological evidence that actors have limited cognitive capabilities, and that they rely upon tacit, ritualized procedures? It seems to me the correct conclusion is this: we will not get the sources of social order out of cognition, but from something else. The missing factor is emotion. This is apparent if we go back to Garfinkel's (1967) breaching experiments. The reaction of the subjects was strongly emotional: irritation, shock, and often moral outrage. Goffman suggests embarrassment as the negative emotional consequence of failed rituals. Turn-taking violations (Sacks et al., 1974) too result in emotions of embarrassment or even anger; when prolonged overlaps occur – speakers fighting over the floor – voices are raised.

The micro sociologies have typically turned up negative emotions which occur when normal order is broken; what is going on when the normal flow of interaction is working well? I have proposed that this too is emotional (Collins, 1983). Such situations consist in a smooth flow of expressive actions, a sense of confidence and a feeling of energy. Sociologists who have examined social interaction in micro detail with the use of video recordings have shown that successful interaction involves an attunement of micro gestures and rhythms which are felt by the participants as emotions. Scheff (1990) describes the secure social bond as a feeling of external solidarity and internal pride; the insecure bond consists in non-focused and uncoordinated gestures and inner feelings of shame and withdrawal. Emotions are social in their essence; they are physical signals which resound in our own bodies and are amplified by the emotions of other persons who are nearby. From a theoretical point of view, shared emotions empirically specify Durkheim's conception of moral force which arises from social interactions, and which makes possible "precontractual solidarity" and underlies the collective symbolism of group life.³

There are of course many different emotions recognized in social life. The most significant type of emotion for social organization is a long-term flow resulting from the level of social attunement. I call this fundamental modality of social force "emotional energy" (EE); it ranges from a high of enthusiasm and spontaneity, down through a low of depression and withdrawal. Much of the time emotional energy is at a medium point on the continuum. Since it is unproblematic here, it is merely taken for granted. But this unconscious level of successful

coordinated emotional flow is what makes possible the ordinary flow of social interactions. The more dramatic emotions (anger, joy, fear, etc.) are more complex patterns which arise from disruptions of the basic flow of EE, in ways that have been described elsewhere (Collins, 1990).

The most important aspect of a micro interaction is the non-verbal, ritualized behaviour which produces a higher or lower level of emotional energy. Successful interaction rituals (IRs) are those in which a mutual focus of attention is built up, outside involvements are cut off, and participants get into a rhythmic flow of non-verbal gestures. Voice tones and rhythms (as apart from the content of what is said) are part of this nonverbal contagion which makes for a successful IR (Sudnow, 1979; Gregory, 1983; further data summarized in Collins, 1988: 201–203). A smoothly flowing turn-taking pattern is another aspect of this attunement, occurring at longer time frequencies than some of these ultra-micro attunements, which may occur at levels well below a second. From this point of view, the cognitions that pass through a person's mind, or the words through their mouth and ears, are important not for their content but simply for whether they are similar enough to the other person's cognitions for a conversational attunement to be kept up. It is not important whether what one says is accurate or even believed, much less that it should express rules of social structure, but only whether it is sufficient to set off resonances so that one's partner can respond and keep the interaction flowing. Micro situations can be full of ideologies and nonsense, as long as actors share enough of the same nonsense to keep up a ritual.

The aggregation of micro encounters in such chains of interactions over time circulate cultural capital as well as emotional energy; these flow differentially to various individuals. The most powerful people are those whose chain of IR experiences puts them at a dominating level of emotional flow vis-à-vis everyone they encounter; this is what enables them to enforce military command or to manipulate political alliances or financial dealings. Stratification is even more a process of the distribution of emotional advantages and disadvantages through the network of encounters than it is a matter of differences in cognitive knowledge.

There are several directions in which this model can be developed. We may take it outwards, into a theory of macro dynamics. Political and military struggles go one way or another depending on EE flows which favour one individual or organization over another, or which put them into harmonious or conflictual stalemates. On the micro side, we may take this model into a theory of thinking; the interior of the

mind is a social realm of inner conversations, carried out with ideas charged up by the emotional energy of the situational encounters they represent (Collins, 1989). Thinking is no longer a privileged realm, a leverage point that stands apart from the social structure; it is an inward continuation of the social structure itself. Cognition is not the Archimedean point from which the social system can be moved; it rests upon emotional flows which themselves can be charted from the aggregation of micro-situational encounters.

Return now to Giddens. His model is not without emotion, but this appears to play a minor role in comparison with cognition. Giddens proposes that the basic social emotion is existential *angst*, a deep feeling of the ontological unfoundedness of things. This conception fits well with Garfinkel's view of social actors; he depicts them as fearful of the depths, anxious to stay away from the pit of reflexivity and recognition of indexicalities. In existentialist terms, Garfinkel's actors inhabit the world of bad faith. The consequences for Giddens' system are peculiar. His actors should be conservative; they should not want to change the social structure, to make rules explicit, much less to change them. This existential actor is a coward; how then are we going to get from it the heroic free will of agency?

To put the argument another way, Giddens posits a dominant emotion which is essentially negative. Actors are motivated to avoid anxiety, to follow procedures which keep up the maximal sense of ontological security. It is parallel to the behaviouristic theory of drive reduction. We would have a quiescent organism if the world did not intervene to disturb one's sleep. In contrast, my model of emotional energy proposes that actors are energy-seekers. They move towards those situations in which they get the highest levels of EE, and away from situations which reduce their EE. Situations in which one enacts power increase one's EE; so do situations in which one has high solidarity through ties of focused group membership. But there is only a limited amount of space in the centres of networks which exercise the coalitions of power; if many people search for maximal emotional energy via this route, the result is an energy struggle in which some are winners and others losers. Similarly on the status dimension: not everyone can be equally at the focus of attention in membership groups, and the dynamics of interaction rituals create boundaries which exclude some while they include others. Here too there is a macro-distributional struggle of emotional energies.

I want to stress that emotional energy is a variable. We can see it rise and fall from one situation to the next, and from one place in the macro/situational distribution to another. We have not done much

empirical work on charting these emotional flows, but this should be a crucial frontier of our research. The micro/macro connection does not involve merely a philosophical debate over ontological priorities; it should not be sidetracked into an ideological dispute over agency, which is to say, the doctrine of free will. There is an opportunity to extend our sociological vision so that we can see the macro structure for what it is, apart from our ideologies and our folk categories. Structure takes its historical forms because of the ways in which aggregate chains of situational encounters must conform to the limitations and biases of interaction rituals at the micro level. At the same time, the stark and unfriendly spatial, temporal and numerical dimensions along which situations are aggregated make the macro patterns constantly escape our micro-situational wishes and beliefs.

Micro/macro analysis does not give us a happy or comforting view of the world. We are not flattered to find ourselves emotionally rather than cognitively dominated creatures; we are even less flattered to find our selves floating on emotional currents which come from outside. And we dislike having stripped away the familiar conceptions of macro institutions, as if they correspond to the names by which we usually call them. Do we want such knowledge? For many people, ideology is the easy way out. For others, it is Weber's challenge, "to find out how much we can take".

NOTES

1. The main exception here might seem to be the ethnomethodology-influenced researchers in the sociology of science (e.g. Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Knorr, 1981; Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984). They argue for an extreme relativism and social construction of scientific knowledge, based on their observations that the cognitive interpretations put forward by scientists are not forced on them by their data or their laboratory practices, but are negotiated in scientists' social networks. These sociologists do not show much concern for their own observations that the practical activities of scientists are patterned behaviour, and that there seems to be considerable regularity in scientists repeatedly closing one cognitive issue and going on to open another (Latour, 1987). This does not look so much like free-floating agency on the social level as a description of the gap between cognitive ideologies and social and physical practices. One lesson is that even scientists are not reflexively sophisticated about how they produce their beliefs about the order of the world; in good ethnomethodological fashion, they actively resist any such recognition (Mulkay, 1985).

2. Giddens emphasizes time and space features as well, taking a path which I have already stated (Collins, 1975; 1983). The difference between our positions is that in my theory, time, space and numbers of micro situations are the only non-illusory features of macro reality. A micro/macro explanatory theory does not merely describe time

and space but shows how *variations in their expanse* are the conditions determining the different kinds of interconnections among micro situations which we call “macro structures”. Explanations of the diversity of macro structures using these variables are given, for example, in my theory of formal organizations (1975: chapter 6) and of geopolitics (1978).

3. Durkheim (1893; 1912). The conception of moral force which circulates through social interactions was developed most explicitly by Hubert and Mauss (1902; Mauss, 1914). These authors find it in the collective emotion symbolized as “mana” in the phenomenon of magic, and the confidence of repayment which circulates with the concrete symbols which make up a system of money.